

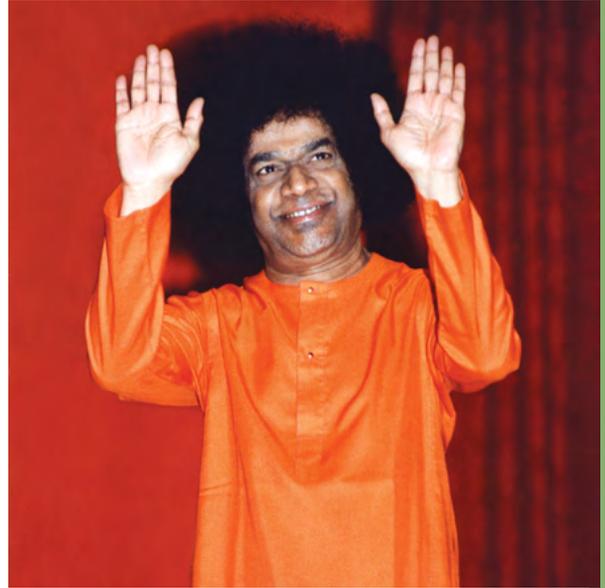
Sathsang with People of God and Refuge in God

Jagat N. Prasad

I WAS BORN IN MUMBAI AND brought up in Hyderabad; I spent my academic years in Hyderabad, and it was in college that I picked up the vice of smoking cigarettes. I settled in Mumbai from 1996 onwards and started involving myself in the activities of the Sai Organisation since my extended family with whom I lived, was into it. I saw myself being dragged into it very deep at a fast pace. Having said this, I was still a smoker and had also picked up the liking for drinking alcohol. Even amidst organisational activities, I used to find a corner and have a quick smoke. We used to be a group of youngsters all well qualified, always moving around in the Samithi and the bigger organisation in whites.

My First Darshan of Swami

In July 1997, my entire group went to Puttaparthi for the First World Youth Conference. We reached a couple of days before the conference started. One day, my Sai brothers and I went to this “tea kottu” (tea shop under a thatched roof) opposite to Prasanthi Nilayam just before going for Darshan for a quick cup of tea and me additionally for a smoke. As I smoked, I could see that my Sai brothers were feeling embarrassed and perhaps even ashamed of having me with them. We were all dressed in pristine white as is required by the rules and were standing right opposite the Mandir. My Sai brothers did try to persuade me to quit smoking. I kept telling myself, ‘yes, yes, I will’



but did not have even a bit of determination to quit. That day, we got token no.1 for the Darshan line and sat in the first row in the Mandir. The excitement to see our God was mounting; the one whom we kept talking about everyday in Mumbai, whose name we kept using during our group work, whom we kept calling during our Bhajans and also whom we kept blaming for putting us through troubles!

After a long wait, the music started playing and the beautiful divine moment arrived when Swami started walking from His Poornachandra residence to Sai Kulwant Hall. After showing His beautiful form on the other side, He walked towards us and my heart started beating faster in anticipation of speaking to Him or that He might call us for

an interview. A few moments later, He came and stood right in front of me. I had my first and one of the best Padanamaskars, such soft feet just like rose petals. Swami stood there for about half a minute or more. I felt a silence within me. I loved those moments of looking at my dear Lord in the shining orange robe. It is after that first Darshan that I have never felt the urge to smoke again! Swami's love gave me the will power and I have never looked back.

Opportunity to Sing in Swami's Presence

In 1997, when I was one day practising Bhajans with my cousin, who is a Bal Vikas student and has had many opportunities to be in the physical presence of Baba, mentioned to me, "Jagat, you better stop singing since you are so flat with no Bhava (feeling)". It was not that she told this to an accomplished singer but to a novice. So, I decided from that day that I will stop singing as a lead singer. But I continued to put efforts to sing in chorus to please Swami who is Om Sri Sai Sulabha Prasannaya Namah (I offer salutations to Sai who is easily pleased).

A few months passed like this. Occasionally, I would get a chance to lead Bhajans in the Samithi. On Sivarathri that year, I had been to Dharmakshetra. While going, I had this clearly in my mind that I would sit behind. But having learnt Mridangam for 5 to 7 years in childhood I got a fancy of playing tambourine. It was midnight when my Bhajan Guru Suresh Mavinkurve uncle called me and asked, "Which Bhajan are you going to sing"? I smilingly said, "Uncle, I will only give chorus". Then he said, "Nothing doing, you are going to sing". Now I was both confused and thrilled. To sing in Mandir (Dharmakshetra)

was a great fortune coming my way. I did not know what to do, but said 'yes' to uncle. When my turn came, I sang one Bhajan with a lot of fear, praying to Swami all the time. After this, I said to myself with a sigh, "Now that I have crossed the bridge, let me go and sit behind and be at peace". The moment I started to get up, Suresh uncle said, "Arrey! where are you going? Sit here itself". After another half an hour, he asked me to sing one more Bhajan. I said to myself, what is happening! Is it raining Bhajans on me? So, I sang a second time. I thought it was pure luck. But it did not stop at that, I was given one more chance that night. It was amazing on one side, but confusing on the other.

Now, very little did I know about Swami's plan. But I started involving in regular practices and became an integral part of the Samithi Bhajans as a participant. Then in 1999, the biggest news of my life came that Swami was expected in Mumbai in the month of May and everyone in the city started preparing for His arrival. Now Narayan Swami uncle and Suresh uncle started calling people for Bhajan practice. I was also called and started attending Bhajans in different locations. It was an amazing experience even to be a part of this. I thought at least I will get a place in the chorus in the front, have Swami's Darshan and give a letter. Just before a day or two before Swami's arrival we were told where we had all to come, in terms of venues apart from Dharmakshetra. As the day came closer I started feeling anxious to see Swami. On the last practice day, it was decided that Shailesh Nayampally and I would be singing in lead during Darshan in Dharmakshetra and Goregaon. Now my happiness knew no bounds, but at the same time, pressure of performance was very



high. Finally, the blessed day came when in the morning Darshan, Swami came and I had a chance to sing Bhajan in His Divine Presence. The Bhajan was “Om Namah Sivaya Sivaya Namah Om”. A Sai brother from Chembur was on the harmonium. As soon as the ladies side finished, we heard the Sruthi and started. Unfortunately, I started on a higher note instead of black 2 and immediately I knew it was higher. I prayed to Swami that even if it was my last Bhajan of life and even if I lose my voice, I will sing with full capacity. Then what I saw was Swami came and stood right in front of me while the Bhajan kept going and people gave chorus. There was a lot of positivity because of the Divine Darshan and devotees were lost in the Bhajan, I could hear my Sai brother trying to catch up the Sruthi off and on with me, but I continued. Even after 80% of the Bhajan, I could see Swami standing right there in front of me and only at the end of it He moved from there. That’s how Swami gave Bhajan singing experience to me and He chose to give me many more chances in Mumbai and in Prasanthi Mandir ... I loved it, but it is like way Sachin says that every match is like a first match. For me, every time I sing a Bhajan is like that first experience involving a lot of preparation and

anxiety. However, Swami has continued to inspire me and has transformed my life from then till now in many ways.

Swami is my only Refuge

One more short encounter with God. One day in January 2014, when my company decided to shut show in India, I knew I was going to be jobless. But I told myself that I would focus on Sai Organisation activities completely, thanks to all my Sai brothers and sisters, especially Mohanraj and Srinii. So, that Thursday after the Bhajan at Khatwari Darbar in Khar West, Mumbai, I came home happily feeling satisfied and fulfilled. After entering my house, I went into my room to quickly change as I was sweating because of participation in singing and playing tambourine. At that time, I started singing a cinema song. The song goes like this – “Jiska Koi Nahin Uska Toh Khuda Hai Yaro ...” (God is the refuge of one who has none else). As I sang “Jiska Koi Nahin Uska Toh”, a photo of Swami came rolling down from the shelf on my left side. Instantly, tears started rolling down my cheeks, with heart filled with assurance that He is with me during my tough times as always ...

– **The author is an ardent devotee of Swami and a Bhajan singer from Mumbai.**