



Bringing To Life Lord Ganesh

Raman Vartak's fingers work magically to create none other than God himself. This award-winning Ganesh sculptor believes in a humble life dedicated to the cause of humanity, writes **Moni Bhushan**.



*W*ith the end of Ganesh Churthi this year, Raman Raghunath Vartak can sit back a little and relax, but just till the next season's Ganpati. He is going to be a busier man, once again then. Raman Vartak, 67, is one of the better known among Ganesh idol sculptors in Mumbai, and perhaps the most sought after. A matriculate, yet multi faceted man, Vartak has been making Ganesh Idols since 1959. Born into a humble middle class family Vartak's father was a court clerk and mother, though illiterate, was a virtuous lady who taught Vartak the beauty of charity and service. Raman Vartak won the Zee Alpha Award for Best Ganpati and Best organizers (Mandal) in 2003 and 2004, and a few other accliams in 2002. The mandal (Khattarwadi Sarvajanic Utsav Mandal) of which Vartak has been the President for last 25 years is doing lot of applaudable work apart from just celebrating Ganeshotsav. The mandal believes in silent service. Vartak says that every year the collections exceed Rs. 75,000 and all this money is pooled together to keep running one or the other social service camps in Maharashtra. These charity programmes are not seasonal says Vartak, they have been rolling through the year for the last 25 years without stopping, "we are a group of social workers who also celebrate Ganesh Chaturthi!" says he.

Being President of the mandal Vartak emphasises they have never publicised their work. "We all believe in silent service to humanity. In our own small way we want to do something for others," says he. The mandal organises regular health and blood donation camps giving around 250 blood bottles to various hospitals, and doing necessary tests at one-fourth rates—including blood and urine cultures. These programmes are for those who cannot afford the cost of their own living, leave alone affording medication, especially the elderly. Every few months the mandal chooses a remote village and sends a team to assess their needs.

Each household is provided with basics like ration, blankets, shoes, medicines and utensils. They have been organising trips to Shirdi for the senior Citizens who can't afford it. Picking them up from their homes to dropping them back and taking care of them with love in between—the mandal does all this with a desire to serve people selflessly. The team endlessly surveys villages and sends them a year's stock of stationary, uniform and shoes to schoolchildren. Working for Mumbai flood victims they managed to pull in 8-10 other mandals and together supported about 100 families in Panvel's interiors by buying them necessary rehabilitative items with a collected sum of Rs. 2 lakhs. The exemplary fact is that all the money that Vartak himself has won by virtue of awards every year has also been donated to the mandal for service to the needy. He sustains on a yearly bank balance of a few thousands—Rs 400 per day for six months during Ganpati is all that he keeps for himself. Though Vartak is an award-winning sculptor, he works for someone else. He only makes one Ganpati idol for his mandal (which has won awards) and the rest are all sold through the owner of his shop. Vartak says the job requires lot of space and attention—"I am happy with the amount of work I do. I spend the rest of my time, six months, serving others" he says.

Vartak is an environmentally aware man too. He is aware of the extent of pollution every year due to Ganpati idol immersions in the sea. "This is because idols are generally made of plaster of Paris, instead of clay, these days. Plaster of Paris does not melt easily, as a result of which it causes large scale pollution and destruction inside the sea. The fishes and plants die due to the intensely polluted water. However, my Ganpatis are always made of clay, because clay is natural and environment friendly, and melts immediately once inside the water," informs Vartak. He doubles up as a community matchmaker too. His unblemished credibility and respect within his community makes him travel far and wide when people approach him to settle marriages of their wards. As a policy Vartak only negotiates marriages that are dowry-free. And for all this he takes nothing. Unmarried and a teetotaler, Vartak is an old world man who loves to watch 'Dramas' and 'Cinemas'—chronologically maintaining the names with dates of the 'first day first shows'. "First day first show nahi dekha to maza nahi", he informs innocently. All that this gifted man says is that he has to serve 'Saraswati' —the Goddess of knowledge and skills—and does not want anything from life except offering 'seva' to people who need his help. ❖

'Vande Mataram', says Dignity Foundation

In a national solidarity and unity rally to celebrate centenary year of the Indian national song, Vande Mataram, celebrity fashion designer Shaina NC invited **Dignity Foundation**, to participate in a rally at Azad Maidan, Churchgate, on September 7.

Participating on the occasion were Dr Sheilu Sreenivasan, Neha Dalal, Moni Bhushan and Neeta Khajuria from Dignity Foundation, along with a number of its volunteers and members who had all gathered to pledge their support to Vande Mataram.



Patriotic songs, including Vande Mataram, marked the programme, followed by a few words by the invited guests. Speaking on the occasion Dr Sreenivasan pledged her support to the national song and said it would be wonderful if all of us could remember to sing Vande Mataram at our important official events.

The event saw the participation of children of Spastic Society, coolies of Mumbai Central station, well-known personalities from the world of sports- Dilip Vengsarkar, films- Raveena Tandon, Madhur Bhandarkar, television- Smita Jaykar, Maya Alagh, Music- Illa Arun, Durga Jasraj etc. This was clearly an effort to assimilate different sections of the society for a nationalistic awareness.