

CHAPTER 23

Relieving the deprived of pain and instilling confidence: Ramakrishnan, Founder President Amar Seva Trust



Mr. Ramakrishnan, President, Amar Seva Trust is receiving
an award in recognition of his service

Introduction: It is a sad reality that some people are born physically challenged. The physical challenges could be deformed limbs, disability in movement or insufficiently developed organs. Physical challenges that come with birth are usually genetic disorders. For the physically challenged, life can be testing, but they usually learn to manage

College, Alwarkurchi, Tirunelveli district, for his pre-university course. He nursed ambitions of graduating in engineering and then serving the country by joining the Defense Services. He joined the Government College of Technology at Coimbatore, where he pursued his engineering studies. In 1975, while he was in the fourth year of his engineering course, he appeared for Defense Services examinations at Bangalore. On the last day of the physical tests, he met with an accident: he fell from a tree. He was rushed to the Air force Command Hospital in Bangalore. After the necessary medical tests, he was found to be affected with quadriplegia—a condition that restricts the ability to function physically, and as a consequence, the person becomes mentally and socially constrained because the spine and other parts of the nervous system connecting the limbs get severely damaged. Ramakrishnan proved this wrong by overcoming physical constraints with extraordinary mental agility and capability to fight in the society for a larger cause.

Initially, Ramakrishnan felt devastated. After four months, he was shifted to the Defense Hospital at Kirkee in Pune for further treatment. He was treated by Dr. Air Marshall Amarjit Singh Chahal; he remained in the hospital until the middle of 1976. When he first came to know of his limitations, he felt miserable and was inconsolable. One can imagine and sympathize with his position. This condition was most unfortunate for a brilliant engineer from a village down south who was aspiring to make a difference in his and others' lives by serving the nation's defense forces and bringing pride and economic well-being to his family.

Incidentally, Ramakrishnan met a Major in the hospital who told him "Once, I had more than 3,000 people reporting to me in a battalion. On a normal day, more than 1,000 people would salute me, but today I am crippled. Instead of looking backwards and lamenting over my misery, I am trying to cope with and face my destiny. I would advise you, Ramakrishnan, to face this reality with courage for the rest of your life".

Ramakrishnan's life turned topsy-turvy, from a brilliant aspiring engineer to a young man confined to his bed, needing support to carry out even the daily routines of life. He returned to Ayikudy intending to spend the rest of his life there.

Return to Ayikudy

Returning to Ayikudy was more a compulsion than a choice. Since the accident had happened during the selection process, he was not eligible for medical support provided to people in confirmed service. He got an opportunity to be at a Red Cross home in Bangalore. However, a Red Cross Sister there advised him that his condition would require a lot of continuous assistance from others even for daily routine, and that as a young man he had to learn to balance his own strong spirit with support from others to fight the disablement. That was when he decided to move to Ayikudy.

Ramakrishnan's physical condition required a separate dwelling unit at Ayikudy. He moved into an old dilapidated house just opposite the house where his family continues to live. One of his classmates from Ayikudy, who had been trained to handle him, became his great supporting pillar. Ramakrishnan had a tough time coping with the reality of his life, as his mind was agile, but his body could not catch up. His constant companion was a transistor, and he spent his time in learning about the world through radio programs.

He used to call out to people who were passing by on the street and chat with them for a while. People often avoided him. To make his life more meaningful, he used to call his three brothers and his sister and help them out with their studies. Slowly, he extended this practice to a few other people in his village. However, for the major part of the day, he felt empty, and his emptiness forced him to feel his helplessness.

Two things happened during this period. One afternoon on a working day, a sympathetic passerby gave him 10 rupees, asking him to buy something useful. This triggered the thought that people empathize with others' inability and help in small ways. He thought, "If my misfortune can make others empathize with me, why don't I create a larger purpose for my life by setting up some enterprise that would benefit other physically challenged people in the region? I see so many of my fellow humans around me who have been affected by polio or have had some disability right from birth through some genetic disorder." It was still like receiving a big favor for a physically challenged person to get

a wheel chair and a suitable bed officially sanctioned, as he or she would have to submit an application and go through a lengthy process. This rubbed the emotions and self-respect of physically challenged persons on the wrong side. Ramakrishnan wants to do away with the tears of such people in his region and bring smile on their faces. Now, if we happen to interact with his beneficiaries in Ayikudy, we will experience their unfathomable joy and pride first hand.

As these thoughts were churning deep in him, he heard on the radio that 1981 had been declared the "International Year of the Disabled". Many programs were announced for disabled people through financial support in the form of aid packages and grants. In 1981, Ramakrishnan and a few friends registered his brainchild Amar Seva Sangam under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, 1975. The organization, named after his doctor and mentor Dr. Amarjit Singh, helps the physically challenged.

Initial years

Ramakrishnan was clear that he would organize polio eradication programs and camps, and provide support for the physically challenged in the region by enabling access to education, skill development and a secured dwelling environment. One can imagine how ambitious such a project was for a wheelchair-bound person who spent a lot of time lying down and seeking help from others for all routine functions. It was not going to be easy to get money to find its way to Ayikudy.

He had a doctor friend who was actively associated with the Rotary Club. This friend had been conducting programs on family planning and health. He offered to help Ramakrishnan. Ramakrishnan also got in touch with Dr. Venkataswamy of Aravind Eye Hospital and Foundation. Dr. Venkataswamy motivated Ramakrishnan to pursue his dreams. He also connected Ramakrishnan to other social activists. Things were not always positive. There were a number of depressing experiences as well. Ramakrishnan recalls how the father of one of his friends coerced him to submit application to five different sources and managed to get paltry support in return. However, this did not dissuade Ramakrishnan as he looked into the positive side of this.

Ramakrishnan decided that he would travel to Chennai to mobilize funds. In Chennai, he stayed at his cousin's house at Valsaravakkam and moved around in a taxi to meet people. He used to leave home by 8 a.m. and had continuous meetings with people until around 3 p.m. After his taxi driver dropped him back home and left, he would freshen up and request his uncles to support him in writing diary and a letter of thanks to all those he met during the day. Many a time, he would not get a hearing from those whom he approached for fund. This never deterred him from his efforts to seek support. This phase lasted 6-8 months in 1990.

A famous author, Siva Sankari, published a five-page story about him titled "Uchi Meethu Vaan Idinthu Veez Kindra Pothilum" in *Ananda Vikatan*. After reading this article, Sulochana from Kolkata sent him a number of letters of encouragement, together with a contribution. She also connected him with the Jindal Trust for further contribution. Ramakrishnan learnt from the Jindal Trust that more than frugality, appropriate utilization is the key to effective use of development finance, and he started using his resources meaningfully. One must understand that he was not an accountant, nor could he afford one. He expanded his tuition centre and Kindergarten to primary school with the funds.

Ramakrishnan got a few introductions and references to great musicians in 1991. He went to a famous Carnatic singer's house, but her secretary advised not to meet as she has become old. However, on seeing Ramakrishnan being moved from his wheel chair to the car, the secretary became compassionate and got an immediate appointment. As Ramakrishnan entered the house to wait for the musician, a female voice welcomed him by name. The lady had heard about him through a known source to her at Ayikudy who used to sympathize with him. He achieved another breakthrough that day when the Carnatic singer and her husband supported him with funds and promised to help him mobilize more funds.

Ramakrishnan used to visit another legendary Carnatic musician. He was not received with kindness, and was given a small amount of money as a token donation. He had to be literally carried from his car to

the place of meeting and back. That day, as his driver was carrying him back to the car, he told the legendary singer that he was the grandson of Ayikudy Shri. A.K. Ramakrishnan, a well-known social worker who got facilities like school and hospital for people in and around Ayikudy. After reaching Ayikudy, Ramakrishnan was pleasantly surprised to receive a more substantial financial contribution as well as a commitment to help his cause.

These great musicians encouraged him to organize performances for fundraising. Another well-known musician, Maharajapuram Santhanam, performed at an event.

Humble beginning at Ayikudy

Ramakrishnan bought an old house and refurbished it. He started running support classes at this place for children in his village by appointing a few teachers. He also took in a few physically challenged persons as residents in the house. He started some skill development activities for those who wanted to earn some money for their livelihood. He had surveyed the region with local support, and tried to connect with physically challenged people to encourage them to make use of Amar Seva Sangam.

He used to dream a lot. Sometimes, his associates thought that he was in an imaginary world of his own, and used to spare time to listen to him out of respect and sympathy. He recalls how passionately vice president of Amar Seva Sangam who by profession a mason used to come regularly after dinner at 7.30 p.m. and listen to him until they retired to bed. According to Ramakrishnan, his dreams were real influences in his activities and helped him to be a visionary.

Though his was a visionary effort he managed with strong leadership, it had its own challenges. He required constantly larger investments and organization capabilities to run his services. This resulted in more fundraising trips to different places. Ramakrishnan recalls the support of his driver Ramachandran at Chennai and the emotional bonding that developed between them. Ramachandran was using a cab painted in the traditional dark black and yellow. Security at certain offices did

not allow the taxi into the premises. One day Ramachandran did not come to work. Ramakrishnan was worried that Ramachandran had been dissuaded by the limitations on cabs in the name of protocol. The next day he saw, to his surprise, that Ramachandran had repainted his taxi black. He proudly told Ramakrishnan that driving on fundraising activities for a noble cause was more emotionally satisfying than running a commercial taxi. This kind of bondage was important for Ramakrishnan as he continued his struggle towards institution building.

Meanwhile, in 1987 a letter to Sulochana returned undelivered, as the addressee could not be found. This worried Ramakrishnan. To his surprise later, Sulochana connected with Amar Seva and visited them. He came to know then that she is the spouse of a nationalized bank's Chairman.

A friend from Tenkasi and another friend who was his classmate introduced Ramakrishnan to a scientist who was active with the Jaycees in Tuticorin. This scientist gave him and Amar Seva introductions to Jaycees members at the state and the national levels.

Meeting of minds

In 1991, Dr. T.S. Chandra, Professor, IIT, Madras requested Ramakrishnan to come for a meeting with a select audience of members of the Tamil Nadu Physically Handicapped Welfare Association. At an event organized by Amar Seva Sangam following this meet is where Ramakrishnan met the parents of S. Sankara Raman, a chartered accountant who had been physically handicapped by a genetic disorder. They were impressed by the work that Ramakrishnan was doing and told Sankara Raman (whose story I have narrated in another chapter of this book) about it. After a few discussion and visits, Sankara Raman decided to join Ramakrishnan.

Ramakrishnan was particular that Sankara Raman must be comfortable at Ayikudy. They all lived in the same premises and created office space that could help them to be independent and work comfortably on their joint mission. Ramakrishnan being the President of Amar Seva Sangam, focused more on connecting with people and

stakeholders, while Sankara Raman worked as the Secretary, with larger operating responsibilities. It may be noted here that even the most professional of organizations often experience severe leadership stress when people of a high caliber and high aspirations come together. One can imagine just how challenging it could have been for physically challenged people with different levels of energy, stamina and agility to come together for a bigger cause. The Ramakrishnan-Sankara Raman team succeeded in overcoming all obstacles because of oneness of purpose.

Family support

Ramakrishnan mentions that everything he achieved became possible only because of the relentless support and confidence boosting given by his parents and siblings. His father always encouraged him to think progressively and face the world with courage. The contributions of his siblings were equally humongous.

Ramakrishnan fondly recollects one particular incident. During the early days of fund raising, he used to reach out to people who were of high standing in society through references. Bharat Ratna C. Subramaniam was a huge supporter of Ramakrishnan's cause. Similarly, he got in touch with a leading cricket star of those days through a reference. The cricketer invited him to Bombay, now called as Mumbai. Ramakrishnan and his brother decided to travel by train to Mumbai. He lacked the confidence to travel far for pursuing this further. He had a temperature and felt sick. His younger brother still wanted him to pursue this journey. His brother had written to his friends at Chennai about their plans. To the surprise of Ramakrishnan, 15 people came to Chennai Railway Station, took him to a hospital and arranged for his treatment. Once he was discharged, they continued onward to Mumbai.

However, the meeting at Mumbai was not fruitful, as the potential donor insisted that the beneficiary had to be a resident of Mumbai. Though Ramakrishnan was disappointed, his brother felt that the experience was a key lesson for them. Building an infrastructure in and around Ayikudy for the benefit of the physically challenged in the region was a dream to translate into reality.

Ramakrishnan is married and his wife supports him strongly. His marriage itself was an interesting turn of event in the life of such an uncommon person. He narrated to the author the first time he heard the voice of his wife in a school music program. He asked her to meet him. Impressed by her desire to teach poor student, he proposed to her in 1986. She asked for time to reply to the proposal, but confirmed her willingness to support him in his endeavors to help the physically challenged achieve independence. Ramakrishnan mentions "She lavished care on me when it was unsolicited! She showed interest in office administration and her contribution was unique in various ways." However, they were able to marry only after a decade.

Ramakrishnan respected the space required for any person to pursue his or her dreams and become independent. He holds the view that it was this attitude that led to his family, friends and the media supporting his endeavors. A number of magazines covered his life story and featured articles on the success of Amar Seva. Awards and accolades are still pouring in. Ramakrishnan does not allow them to sway him away from his goal of helping the physically challenged to live with self-pride and confidence.

Conclusion: Ramakrishnan and Sankara Raman's efforts have culminated in a large organization that touches the lives of thousands of physically challenged people every year. Ramakrishnan's grit and commitment to making a difference to his own life and to those of his fellow physically disabled are phenomenal. The compassion and contribution of good-hearted people in mobilizing resources for a good cause were important in converting his dreams into reality. How much direct help a physically challenged person gets does count, but more important is how much he incorporates social goodwill into his own efforts to become an effective social entrepreneur serving the deprived humans of society. Just think of this: for every Ramakrishnan the society comes out with, the lives of a few hundred or even a few thousand physically challenged people undergo appreciable improvements!