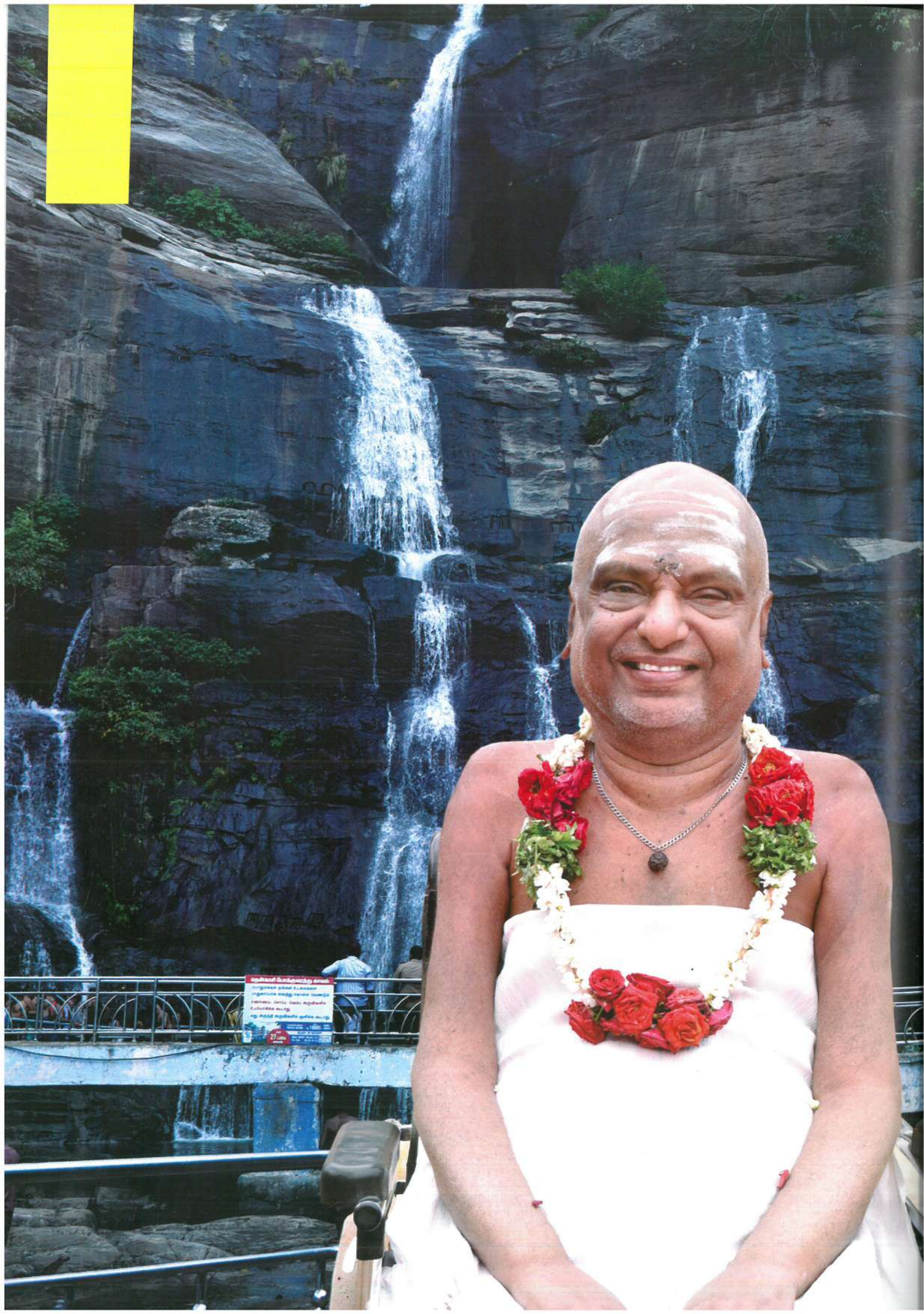




Mr. S. Ramakrishnan



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During the physical fitness tests, I fell from a tree and suffered multiple spine injuries. Though the accident made me a quadriplegic, I did not lose courage and enthusiasm for life.
”

American country musician Jimmy Dean once said, “I can’t change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination.”

As a young man of 21, Mr. S. Ramakrishnan had dreams of becoming a Naval officer and had gone to Bengaluru for an interview and physical fitness exercise. But little did he know that on that fateful day of January 10, 1975 his life would completely change and he would have to ‘re-adjust his sails to reach his destination’.

“During the physical fitness tests, I fell from a tree and suffered multiple spine injuries. Though the accident made me a quadriplegic, I did not lose courage and enthusiasm for life,” says Mr. Ramakrishnan. His will-power and determination laid the genesis for Amar Seva Sangam in 1981, an organization that has been like a lighthouse, guiding the differently abled towards a brighter tomorrow.

“During hospitalization, the treatment did not work out and a gruelling scull drill

traction was performed to hang a weight, so that the spine could be set right. It was all a 'trial and error method' with no success. From January 10, 1975 to May 5, 1975 I was treated at the Air Force Command Hospital, Bangalore and subsequently at the Military Hospital, Kirkee, Pune from May 6, 1975 till September 14, 1976. I was in bed, but the hospitals took good care of me so that I avoided getting bedsores and other complications," recounts Mr. Ramakrishnan with full gratitude to the hospitals, especially the nursing staff.

Live to Serve

Born on May 6, 1954 at Salem in Tamil Nadu, Mr. Ramakrishnan's formative years were mostly spent in Ayikudy Government schools. He pursued his Pre-University Course in Sri Paramakalyani College, Alwarkurichi and Bachelors of Mechanical Engineering from the Government College of Technology in Coimbatore and was all set to join the Navy.

"After discharge from the hospital, I was totally idle. As they say, an empty mind is the devil's workshop. So, it's important to keep yourself busy ... and that's what I did," he emphasizes. In 1981, Mr. Ramakrishnan founded Amar Seva Sangam.

"The signs were all there – the United Nations (UN) declared 1981 as the 'International Year of the Disabled' and the airwaves on All India Radio were full of encouraging and informative programmes on the topic. I was fortunate that a lot of people came forward with moral and financial support and my dream of forming this organization reached fruition," he relates. This humanitarian's motto became 'Live to Serve' and that's what he continues to propound till date.

Mr. Ramakrishnan always respects everyone in society, and he remembers with reverence his teachers, who helped widen his wisdom and knowledge.

📷 *Happy to be of help to all*



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”



📷 Moving everyone forward in life

Do your duty without expectations

Though disabled for life, Mr. S. Ramakrishnan did not let this deter his quest for betterment of society. “My journey has been pleasant and thrilling, though very challenging. The organization, which was named after my doctor and mentor, Air Marshal Amarjit Singh Chahal of Defence Hospital, grew by the day and it provided me with an opportunity to meet many personalities from various walks of life. The chance to learn was abundant and I could understand the sufferings of many deserving people,” he said.

This relentless pursuit to do good also took Mr. S. Ramakrishnan closer to the core philosophy of the *Bhagvad Gita* – ‘Do your duty without expectations’. “This has given me an opportunity to understand the truth behind the *Bhagvad Gita* and also the teachings of the famous couplets called *Thirukkural*,” he points out. Interestingly, the *Thirukkural*, which consists of 1,330 couplets, is considered one of the greatest works ever written on ethics and morality and is known for its universality and non-denominational nature. It was authored by Valluvar, also known as Thiruvalluvar.



📷 Mrs. Lakshmi & Mr. Ramakrishnan

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”

Priceless family and community support

Over a span of 35 years, Mr. Ramakrishnan has received tremendous support from not only his near and dear ones but also from the community at large. On every occasion he never fails to acknowledge this and says that it was because of this circle of support that he could reach out to so many people via his organization.

“Immediately after the accident, the Defence Forces took care of me. My parents and siblings supported me both physically and financially till 1985. Thereafter, the staff and students of Amar Seva Sangam took on that mantle,” he says.



📷 Giving a new ray of hope

When the intentions are good, good people join in...

During 1985-86, while Mr. Ramakrishnan was planning to expand the activities of the Sangam he met his life-partner, Mrs. Lakshmi (Chitra), who joined as a teacher in 1985 in Sangam's Nursery School. He proposed to her in 1986 and the marriage eventually took place in 1994. In his wife, Mr. Ramakrishnan found nobility, hard work, sincerity and dedication to whatever she was doing. She effectively helped him in Sangam activities, besides burdening herself with the domestic chores. Her organizational skills, coherent understanding of complicated issues and her method of gathering information were all very useful for the Sangam and Mr. Ramakrishnan's life. This made his life very easy and encouraging.

A chance meeting with Mr. Sankara Raman (*see page 132*) in 1991, was a major turning point in the development of Amar Seva Sangam in many ways. "Being wheel-chair bound due to Muscular Dystrophy, he provided great impetus as both of us embarked upon creating a Valley for the Disabled in this region," Mr. Ramakrishnan fondly recollects.

Media helped Mr. Ramakrishnan achieve his objectives. More than 100 magazines have written about him since 1985. TV channels, newspapers and magazines have covered Sangam's activities regularly. He humbly says: "People started supporting me by wide coverage, more than I deserved." Awards started pouring in continuously for the valuable service to the differently able persons. Over the years, it has been a motivating factor even to the donors, who feel they are supporting the right cause.

No limit to helping others

Today, Amar Seva Sangam has an impressive array of work that it does in the field of management of disability. At the 'Home', physically challenged children are provided free shelter, food, clothing, medical aid and appliances so that they can pursue their education without any financial hitch. Higher education outside the campus and special coaching are also encouraged.

With the aim of helping special children integrate with the mainstream society better, *Sangamam School for Special Children* equips them with skills to improve their health and intellectual ability.

"Taking this idea forward," points out Mr. Ramakrishnan, "an *Early Intervention Centre* was established with the motto of 'Catch them young to rehabilitate them fast'. Children till the age of 5 are given individual attention, besides intensive therapy."

Amar Sewa Sangam's line-up of wonderful initiatives does not end there. At the *Orthotics Centre* mobility aiding appliances are manufactured and repaired. So far, thousands of appliances have been manufactured/repared and distributed free to deserving people.

At the *Spinal Cord Injured Post Acute Care Centre* those who've suffered spinal injuries get relief by way of indispensable services. This Centre has proved to be a boon for many from the disadvantaged sections for getting due care and treatment. In an effort to provide vocational training to the disabled youth, staff at the *Disabled Youth Trainee Students' Hostel* help them get gainful employment.

"We also have a Village Based Rehabilitation Initiative (VBRI) under which we cater to the needs of nearly 15,000 differently able persons in Tirunelveli District, involving the community and working with stakeholders," informs Mr. Ramakrishnan with a satisfied look on his face.

Setting an example for others

The fantastic work being done by Mr. Ramakrishnan has not gone unnoticed. In appreciation of his service to the differently abled, he has won several awards, including many honours by the State and Centre. Bharat Ratna Late Shri C. Subramaniam described him as a 'Human Wonder'. Our past President, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, donated Rs. 25 lakhs to Amar Seva Sangam out of Rs.1 crore he received for his service, a testimony to the respect and admiration Mr. Ramakrishnan has in society.

In January 2016, Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi presented the 'Amazing Indian Award' to him.

Focus on efforts, not fruit of labour

"My basic advice to the youth is: Be good, do good and do it without any expectation," Mr. Ramakrishnan says. Not letting disability stop him in his tracks, he is a shining example of the crucial role played by perseverance and hard work. "Don't sit idle," he reiterates, leading by example.

Talking about the society's attitude towards the physically challenged, he says



📷 Overcoming all hurdles

“
*My basic advice to the youth is:
Be good, do good and do it
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”

empathy, and not sympathy, go a long way. “Do not pity, but support them,” he pleads.

Encouraging the youth to rise to the occasion, Mr. Ramakrishnan says they should play a greater role in society building. “It’s heartening to see that the young play a more active role. They are our hope and can help us embark on our futuristic plan of establishing a 1,000+ acre campus, which will house many service organizations and where all services will be available without any hassles. We welcome everyone who would like to join us, in whatever way they are comfortable with. No help is too small or big for us,” he says. He strongly advocates disabled friendly environment such as ramps, lifts, toilets etc. at all public places. More than financial support, what helps the disabled persons directly and immediately are these basic facilities, voices Mr. Ramakrishnan.

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