

SANKARA RAMAN SRINIVASAN



CHAPTER SIX

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GENIUS ON WHEELS

You have heard of Stephen Hawking, the brilliant physicist who lived out of a wheelchair, struck as he was by a form of motor neuron disease. Much to the surprise of doctors who gave him five years to live, he lived long, and he lived a remarkable life.

It is often something as small as a blister or a finger cut that makes us realize the importance of a fully functional and healthy body that most of us take for granted. But what if one had, say, muscular dystrophy? It's a condition that leads to a progressive weakening of the muscles, and most people eventually aren't able to walk. Imagine life with such severe mobility restrictions.

Meet S Sankara Raman (aka Raman), a chartered accountant who believes that disability is merely a condition, not a constraint. The Secretary of Amar Seva Sangam not only has created a large home for such challenged people but has proved himself an outstanding individual by making muscular dystrophy the last of his many identities. He is a successful CA, a leader of an organization, a mentor to many, a loving and caring husband, and much more.

His is a story that is about climbing mountains and crossing oceans.

RAMAN WADES INTO TROUBLE

In 1962, the year China went to war with India, somewhere in Pattukottai, Tamil Nadu, Sankara Raman was born to a middle-class couple. S Srinivasan, an actuary with the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) and his wife Thailambal, already had three daughters: Sulochana, Sumathi, and Gomathi.

When Raman was three years old, his parents realized he had difficulty in walking in addition to multiple delayed milestones. He then underwent several tests, which finally led to the diagnosis of muscular dystrophy.

Srinivasan, with his limited means, sought help through everything under the sun: allopathy, home remedies, ayurvedic, and natural therapy treatments were all tried on the little boy. On one occasion, his body was covered with hot banana leaves because someone told that it would simulate the muscle to work. The body responded to none of these, and so the parents turned to prayers and sought blessings from great sages. Raman was taken to Guru Gnananand for his blessing, and was asked to stay with the Guru for a year. This experience and exposure to a great saint mostly molded his future.

Despite his condition, Raman was a bright student and used to be the class topper until his 8th standard. That was when his condition worsened. His muscles got fragile, he began to fall down often, and physical activity became less and less possible. What was possible yesterday became impossible the following day, making him dependant on others. He was getting weaker, both physically and mentally, lost most of his friends, and felt he was being looked down upon by people. Raman was at a stage where he had written himself off. It was the worst thing to happen; the loss of self-belief. That year he started using a wheelchair, and his family moved to Chennai for better facilities. Those days Raman was unwilling to come to terms with the disability and refused to accept help from anyone. Slowly his

MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY HITS THE FAMILY

Sankara Raman has three sisters.

His eldest sister Sulochana got married in 1971 and moved to Canada the very year to pursue her higher education. In the years ahead, she would work as a research associate. When Sankara Raman joined Amar Seva Sangam, he inspired her to get involved with the charitable work of giving hope and life to kids with disabilities. So it was that in 1992, she resigned her job to start Handi-Care International, a Canadian registered organization. Twenty-seven years on Sulochana is still its president and has raised over six crores of money. She has implemented a slew of projects at Sangam.

Dr. S. Sumathi, the second sister, also suffered from muscular dystrophy, which rendered her in a wheelchair by the time she was 35. But it would not deter her. With the same zeal and optimism as her siblings, she completed her doctorate in commerce. She served as a Professor and Head of the Dept. of Commerce in Seethalakshmi Ramaswamy College, where incidentally, the current Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, was then studying. When she turned 55, she took early retirement and dedicated her services to Amar Seva Sangam. She developed the entire higher educational and vocational training programs at the campus.

The 3rd sister Gomathi finished her masters' degree in India, got married, and settled in Canada.

dad helped him appreciate the support of others, wherever practical.

One day, sometime in Class XI, he realized there was no point in being sad and causing worries to people around him. So he decided to prove himself by clearing his Class XI exam. He shocked everyone, including himself, by scoring exceptionally well: 1150/1200. This became a turning point, and he chose to stay positive to return to being the bright child that he used to be.



With mother Thailambal

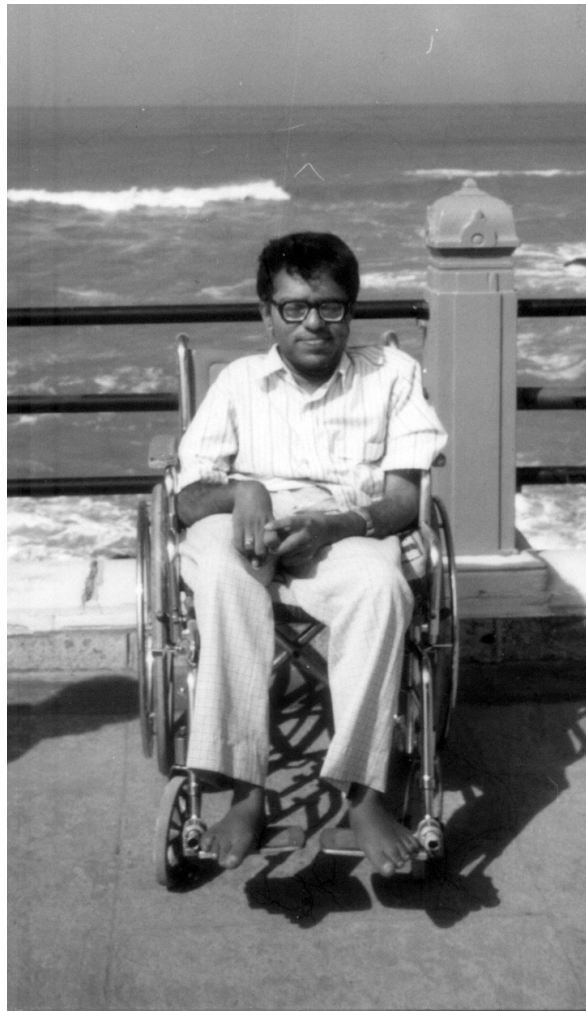
ROAD TO CA

The little boy in Sankara Raman wanted to become a chartered accountant from an early age. In Class 5, when Lakshmi, his class teacher, asked what he wanted to become, he replied, “an auditor.” Of course, he didn’t know the meaning of the word. And of course, he knew nothing about CA.

The credit for igniting the interest goes to his sister Sumathi, who was then pursuing B.Com. She used to speak a lot with him about the knowledge and expertise an auditor possesses. Sumathi, herself a wheelchair-user, was the highly respected HoD of Commerce at the Seethalakshmi Ramaswamy College in Tiruchirapalli and was the one who started the post-graduation course in commerce in that college.

When Dad Srinivasan learned about his son’s desire to pursue CA, he took him to the Chennai based auditor, TAP Varatakutty. Kutty, too, was a person with a disability, consequent to polio. The auditor encouraged Raman saying, “If I can do it, so can you.” Touche.

After completing his Entrance examination, when Raman wanted to join internship, firms turned him down. But Srinivasan was not the one to give up. He wrote to the then-president of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) asking the latter to create a unique vacancy for his



In Pondicherry

KNOW SANKARA RAMAN



Name	S Sankara Raman
Date of Birth	19-05-1962
Place of Birth	Pattukottai
Parents	Srinivasan and Thailambal
Wife	Ramani





ALUMNI	Class XI MKU Correspondence. (1978) B.Com Correspondence Ranchi University. (1983) Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (1982-85)
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ARTICLESHIP	
Firm	Shivaji & Rao (1981-85)
Major Learning	



ROLE MODELS	American tennis player Arthur Ashe. The winner of three grand slams when detected with AIDS said, "If I were to say, 'God, why me?' about the bad things, then I should have asked, 'God, why me?' about the good things that happened in my life."
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	FAVORITES	
	Author	Arthur Hailey (The Final Diagnosis) and Kalki
	Books	The Yogi
	Music	Carnatic
	Games	Cricket, Football, Chess and Bridge
	Sportsmen	I like anybody in any sport
	Movie stars	Anthony Quinn
	LIKES	Challenges
	DISLIKES	None



HAPPY MEMORIES

1985:

Passing the final examination of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India and bagging the Best Paper in Financial Management.

1992 onwards:

Each time an inmate goes out of the Sangam and starts living a reasonably independent and fulfilling life.

son by quoting that 1981 was the “International Year for Disabled.” ICAI responded with alacrity, by not only creating an opening for Raman but ordering additional vacancy in all firms across India that could be filled up only by the disabled. Father and son were thrilled by the Institute’s gesture.

The three-year internship was under the watchful eyes of the firm Shivaji and Rao, where Raman had barrier-free access in the office, and no discrimination in audit assignments. Although he was passionate about accountancy and auditing, his favorite remained financial management. The subject, with its focus on capital budgeting, leasing, and trendy ideas such as sunk cost and opportunity cost fascinated him. Today, he practices these in his workplace. He loved linear programming. His CA teacher taught him that if a matrix can be converted into an identity matrix, the in-between solution is the final answer. “I found the way of doing it in my inimitable style.”



Guru Ramakrishnan and Sankara Raman

CHATTING UP

WHAT WAS YOUR WORST MOMENT?

I used to be the class topper until my 8th standard. That was when his condition worsened. My muscles got fragile, and I began to fall down often. What was possible yesterday became impossible the following day, making me dependent on others. I was getting weaker both physically and mentally, and lost most of his friends. I felt that others were looking down upon me.

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR BEST MOMENTS?

People who have come with total deprivation not knowing what to do in life have seen life, married, and moved on. Mothers rejoice in seeing her child's change is the biggest gain. For example, a girl came in 1992, in hapless condition, is now married, works as a teacher, and is no longer below the poverty line. The turnaround in a child helps parents focus on the outside world.



Raman credits the CA course for enhancing his intelligence, his quick math skills, and professional skepticism. He is fast at numbers, even without the help of a calculator. That quickness helps him analyze the figures for the budgets of Amar Seva Sangam.

The day he qualified as a CA, was a turning point in his life. If he could crack the country's second-toughest professional examination, in the very first attempt, he could crack anything.

LIFE AT AMAR SEVA SANGAM

Sankara Raman completed his CA with a gold medal in his favorite subject of financial management. After qualifying, he was on the horns of a dilemma: "should I join the well-protected corporate sector, or should I start practice?" He was realistic in recognizing that corporates would see his condition as a limiting factor, and so decided to commence professional practice. He hasn't regretted that decision.

In spite of his mobility restrictions, Raman managed his practice and built an excellent reputation for himself. However, as time went by, he felt a greater urge to put to use his education and experience to serve persons with disabilities. Around that time, he met S Ramakrishnan.

Earlier, in 1981, in Ayikudi, Tamil Nadu, S Ramakrishnan, an engineering student, who injured his spine in his final year while attempting the last round of Naval officers' selection test, had established Amar Seva Sangam. The aim: to change the lives of hundreds of disabled children and youth in India.

Raman began to associate with Amar Seva Sangam for setting up an accounting system and helping them in their resource mobilization.

It wasn't until he met Ramakrishnan that Raman fully grasped the potential of the severely disabled to overcome challenges and succeed in life. Inspired by Ramakrishnan's commitment to the cause despite his condition as a quadriplegic, Raman, in 1992, joined the Sangam



THREE LEADERSHIP MESSAGES

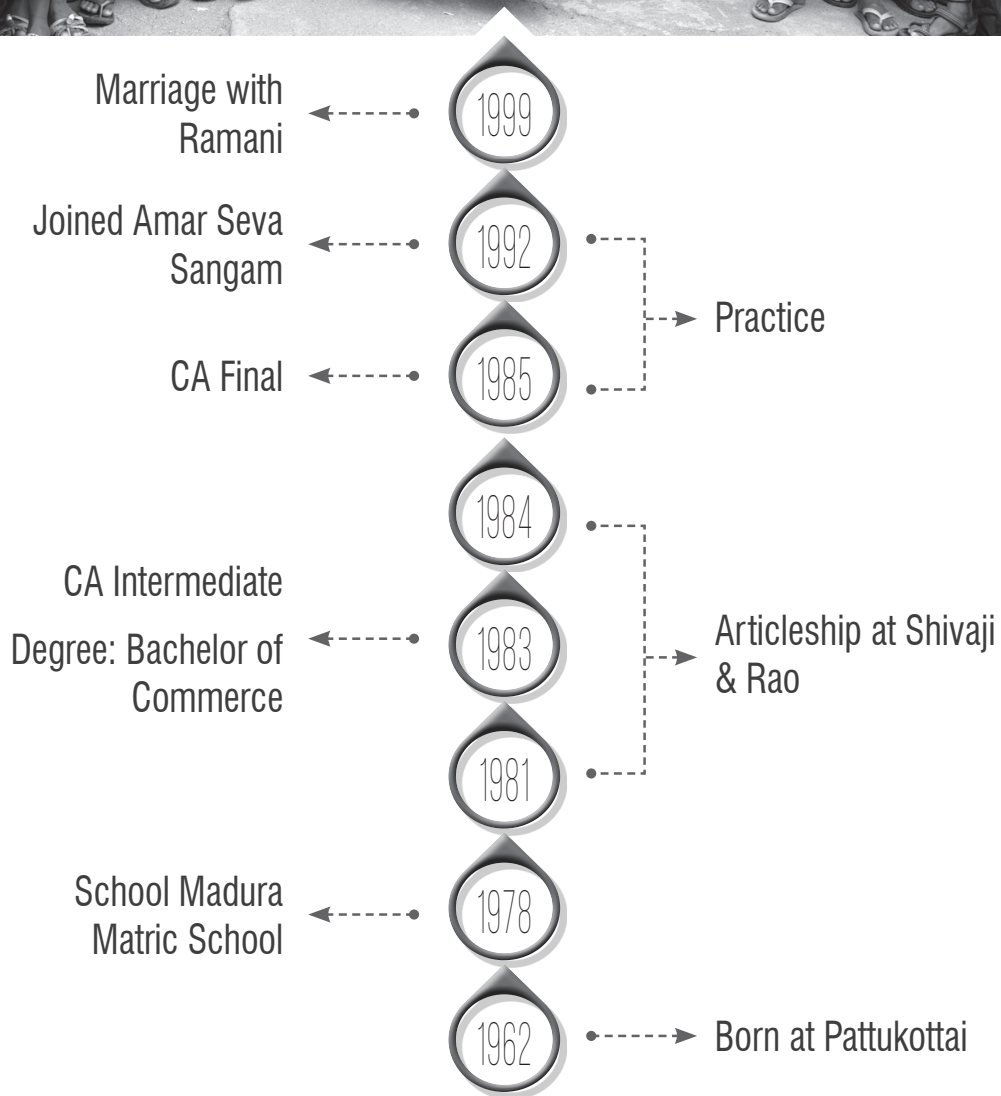
- 1** Take my case. I am a self-motivated person. I don't accept anything as a failure or give up any challenge. I believe in non-acceptance. Acceptance should come only after the 'best try.' In life, there is nothing called failure, as it is either a success or learning. 'Success' takes you a step higher along with learning, whereas if you are not successful, it is 'learning' that gets you go forward to the next level.
- 2** Never dislike anything, If anything happening around this world is not to your liking, it is because of the other person's perception. It is more practical to understand the plurality of thoughts and values. If you strongly disagree, then either try to change the other person or keep yourself in a state of alertness so that you maintain your value systems with confidence.

and shifted base from Chennai to Ayikkudy, where the 'Valley for the Differently Abled' was envisioned.

FAIRY TALE LOVE STORY

Once in a while, right in the middle of an ordinary life, love gives us a fairy tale. It's an exciting story of how Sankara Raman met his future wife, Ramani. In 1997, he gave a television interview on World Disability Day, and the interviewer suddenly asked him if he was married. Taken aback, Raman said, "No, I am not. I haven't thought about it yet." That was chutzpah considering he was 35, and women rightfully had several expectations. Ramani, who saw him on TV, developed a keen interest to meet him and serve the special children along with him. She tracked him down and gave him a call on the 21st of January 1998. After a year of developing love and trust in each other, they got married on Jan 27, 1999.

At Amar Seva Sangam, children are provided high-quality education. There are top-class facilities for physiotherapy, for therapies involving



occupation, speech, and language, and for vocational training so that these children of God could be empowered to lead a life with confidence. They are also continuously assessed to measure their levels of physical, cognitive, and other improvements. Amar Seva Sangam takes pride in its measurement scales, which are globally approved. and so the resulting data is acceptable worldwide.

There are a few who criticize the Sangam for providing top-notch facilities. Their argument is that if people below the poverty line are kept in luxurious conditions, it would be difficult for them to readjust when they return to their homes after rehabilitation. Raman disagrees. “Everyone must know what is the standard so that they can aim for and achieve it. Only when they raise the bar, they can aim high and accomplish high.”

Another criticism is that these expensive facilities are provided free and so needs to be dumbed down. Raman again has the answer. “It is not the fault of the beneficiary that he can’t afford it. We cannot compromise on quality. Most of the equipment for therapy is essential for rehabilitation.”

And then he adds with pithy wisdom, “People who have come with total deprivation not knowing what to do in life have seen life, married, and moved on. Mothers rejoice in seeing her child’s change is the biggest gain. For example, a girl came in 1992, in hapless condition, now married, works as a teacher, and is no longer below the poverty line. The turnaround in a child helps parents focus on the outside world,” says Raman with pithy wisdom. At Amar Seva Sangam, the differently-abled are made future-ready. Today, many of them work in BPOs, software companies, IT companies, manufacturing companies, to name a few.

As per the World Health Organisation (WHO), “If these children are not given early intervention, they will get life-time depression and life long poverty.” Says Raman, “this is why it is important to direct early intervention through various rehabilitation therapies to such children at an early stage in life to avoid a life of long adverse consequences.”



Receiving the Best Organisation Award from J Jayalalithaa. <YEAR>

Receiving the Best Organisation Award from Meira Kumar, Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment. (2008)



Receiving the Dr.Ambedkar Award from Pranab Mukherjee. <YEAR>



Receiving the Exemplary Service Award from Governor K Rosaiah (2013)

Mahaveer Award from President Pratibha Patil <YEAR>



Receiving the CNN IBN7 Award <YEAR>

Raman runs Amar Seva Sangam like a corporate professional. There are budgets, outcomes, and board meetings, not to speak of an ERP accounting system, approval mechanism, etc. There are internal and external audits, plus a Management Information System (MIS). “We are on the cloud and SAP enabled. We can clear documents from anywhere,” he says with justifiable pride. His wife, Ramani, works with him.

Amar Seva plans to register the techniques, processes, and procedures followed by them as an Intellectual Property. ASSA would be ready to share its knowledge assets for free unless the same is used for commercial purposes.

YOU MUST BE SELF SUFFICIENT

Many years ago, Peter Drucker said that there is no such thing as a non-profit organisation. There are only profit making entities and loss making entities. The underlying message was that organisations must make profits if they want to deliver value through quality service.

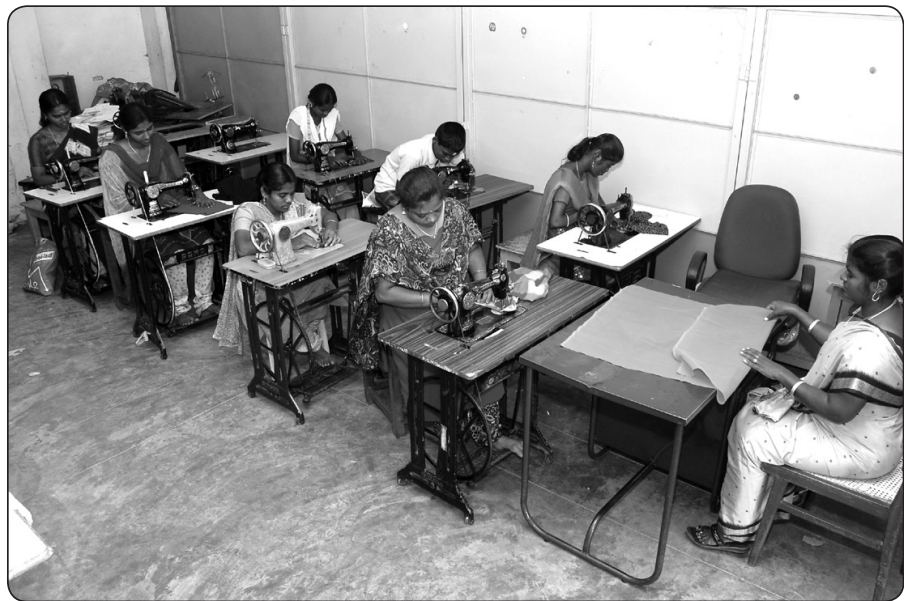
The former Governor, C Subramaniam, echoed much the same sentiment when the Sangam went to him seeking a corpus of Rs 10 crore. Subramaniam told them, “A corpus makes an institution idle. You must earn on your own. Price your products at what you wish, but always know and pay the full cost. Subsidies won’t work.”

Raman agrees. “Even a charitable institution must deliver value and build a team of good professionals. It must run like a business, be result-oriented, and have accountability. We do impact measurement of projects and study the social Return on Investment.” Wow. The Sangam has an ‘inclusive school’ up to Standard 12, where 1000 kids are studying. It’s an equal opportunity institution where all kinds of children, including the abled study.

The story of the change is now going global. Recently, at the United Nations, CA Viswanathan, a Sangam board member, and Dr. Dinesh,



Computer Training



Tailoring Training



Note Book Making



With wife Ramani

Raman's nephew, presented a paper on the changes brought about at Amar Seva. Presentations were made in New York and Sao Paulo, and Amar Seva Sangam today is globally recognized. In the next six months, talks are to be delivered in Dubai, Vienna, Cambridge and Boston. An International Conference is scheduled in February 2020 when national and international dignitaries will congregate alongside hundreds of medical and social care professionals.

The story of Sankara Raman is a perfect example of how challenges can bring out the best in you.

We salute the man and his mission.

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