

# A profile in courage

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"I'M sorry I'm in a wheelchair!" To spare any discomfiture, this is how S. Sankara Raman would sometimes greet clients and officials, especially of the Income Tax department, in the course of his work as a chartered accountant practising in Madras.

Sankara Raman is now engaged in mainstream work at Amar Seva Sangam as its honorary secretary. He joined the organisation in January 1992, after turning his back on a lucrative practice.

Why did he make this decision? "There was nothing in my life to hold me back," says Sankara Raman, whose body is laid waste by muscular dystrophy, a debilitating physical condition. "I had some savings, so instead of wasting my talents, I thought it was better to come here."

Reading about S. Ramakrishnan in *Ananda Vikatan*, meeting him, and then coming to Ayikudy, has evolved its own therapy for Sankara Raman and his intense, introspective nature. His story reveals more about us than we would care to know.

When he first realised he could never run the race in quite the manner his classfellows did, Sankara Raman was about 4 or 5 and he simply did not understand. Nor did he understand why he tripped and fell, except that the wounds hurt. It hurt worse when suddenly his ankles gave way and the boys in school laughed at his gait. Soon, mirth dissolved into silence. Nobody would talk to him.

"It was traumatic," Sankara Raman recalls. Rejected by the world outside, he discovered his body too was rejecting him. His bladder, the bowels... so he stopped eating and drinking. But this only made his family suffer. It was a nightmare.

Only the faith and fortitude of his family stayed by







S. Sankara Raman... "society must be rehabilitated with the child."

Sankara Raman's side. They did not make him feel he was disabled. They gave him strength and shared his pain.

Shunned by peers, Sankara Raman devoured books, magazines. He drew. He painted. He tried to forget his physical self in the quest for knowledge. But as his brain grew sharper and sharper, his body grew weaker. At 15 he could no longer be carried to school.

His parents encouraged him to continue his studies by correspondence and at 22, Sankara Raman was a qualified chartered accountant, ready to step into the professional world, a cruel world. The laughter of schoolboys gave way to a greater adversary, pity. There was nothing so dreadful as the pity of those around. But it only made Sankara Raman more determined than ever to prove that he could be a useful member of society.

In the office he found some understanding; he was given a room on the ground floor and gradually he built up self-confidence. Often clients would underestimate his competence and officials undermine his esteem. "But I tried to forget my disability and concentrate on my ability," Sankara Raman says. He is smiling at the memory. "I do not accept I am not normal. It is a prejudice. Normalcy lies in the mind."

And then he asks: "Why do we always want to hide our handicapped? Families will not encourage their hearing-impaired child to wear a hearing aid. Why, even glasses! So many parents will not get glasses for a child who needs

them. These are little things that help a child live a full, normal life."

A small policy decision and some planning are all it takes to give the physically handicapped a chance to live normal lives. "Why can't the government pass an order that all public buildings - be they schools, offices, recreation centres, hospitals - have ramps? Why can't builders and town planners incorporate ramps into their designs?" asks Sankara Raman. "Do you know, I once had my tooth pulled out in the middle of the street because the stairs up to the dentist's clinic were too narrow to accommodate my wheelchair."

At Amar Seva Sangam, Sankara Raman is part of an equalising process that is beginning to impact on society. Indeed, as he says, "it is not the child alone that has to be rehabilitated, it is society that must be rehabilitated along with the child."

For Sankara Raman, this includes the attitudes fostered by the spiritual heritage of India. "Our culture has taken a turn to self-spiritualisation and selfhood," he says. "I chant mantras, I pray, I believe in God. I believe that chanting mantras is a discipline, it controls the mind. But, after coming to Amar Seva Sangam, my priorities have changed. Dealing with the children, making them self-reliant, is far more satisfying, far more gratifying than a spiritual gesture. It is unfortunate we forget that at the core of our heritage lies a simple doctrine: Live to serve." ■





Ramakrishnan and Chitra... the energy is palpable.

therapy centre with facilities for stay and medical evaluation and a vocational training institute (which the Industrial Credit and Investments Corporation of India has committed to sponsor), to dig open wells and to purchase vans, equipment and machinery. Eventually, Ramakrishnan believes, Amar Seva Sangam will become a model township, complete with a polytechnic and an industrial training centre.

It is a lot of money; how will it come? Ramakrishnan is confident. He reminisces about the first major contribution: Rs. 15,000 from Tamil writer Sivasankari, who also wrote the first article on the organisation in *Ananda Vikatan*, a Tamil weekly. As the message spread, contributions came from all parts of the country, the world. Plaques and slabs acknowledge them with gratitude. In his own fashion, Ramakrishnan cherishes old friends and embraces new ones; every phone call he makes is a reiteration of their belonging.

For industries and companies, there is 100 per cent tax exemption under Section 35 AC of the Income Tax Act, 1961 for sponsoring projects approved by the National Committee for Promotion of Social and Economic Welfare.

Amar Seva Sangam is critical to life in this part of Tamil Nadu. "Village-based rehabilitation won't work unless its success is demonstrated," says Sankar Raman. "Our institution has had a tremendous demonstrative effect. Two years ago, parents were dumping the children. Now they are willing to come every week and interact with us. The children win prizes at competitions. They help parents write letters... for the villagers this is magic."

The cities offer alternative systems of education. There is awareness, if largely shorn of sensitivity. But in the villages, the concept of special schools simply does not exist. Sometimes, even a mental handicap is not recognised as being that. The only yardstick is: can the person do physi-





cal work? The Sangam's own survey shows there are many in need of help. There are so many plans and so many children. And so many people willing to give their lives to a cause much larger than themselves. All day long, the children wear their pink and maroon uniforms, yet the ambience is one of informality. Repeatedly they are admonished for being too noisy, yet behind the fingers the tongues chatter away. The passage to school is snail-slow for some, but a ride on a huge tricycle transports them in a trice of delight. Walls crumble before the smiles of the young and trusting.

At the entrance to a classroom is inscribed the lines: "If not I, who? If not now, when?" The children of Amar Seva Sangam are growing in the light of the answers. ■

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