

# A Salute

VOICE OF LOVE

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*"I have come to realise that life is not a question of how you invest your money but a question of how you invest your time."*

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**S. RAMAKRISHNAN**

I couldn't trust my own eyes...

What I experienced cannot be expressed in words...

If I tell you, you will not believe it...

I pinched myself to know if all this was real...

I have heard such expressions from people and always wondered why they have so much doubt about what they perceive and what they trust? Why do people doubt their trust and trust their doubts? ...till life threw me into one of those 'I cannot believe it' experiences that morning!!!

The security guards, with a paradoxical blend of assertiveness and courtesy, opened the gates and I entered a campus encompassing 28 acres of land. Once inside the campus, my eyes refused to blink and my mouth refused to close. I have explained in so many Business Leadership seminars, 'The three-foot-rule in customer care: all staff members, from the MD to the office assistant, should smile and extend courtesy to any customer who passes them within a proximity of three feet'. Here I saw it in action. With almost

every second step that I took, I would be overcome by an inexplicable sadness by the sight my eyes were beholding, only to be neutralised by the overwhelming hospitality and heartening courtesy that was displayed by each and every one I crossed on the campus.

The whole campus had two sets of pathways. I first saw the school which has a strength of over 700 children studying up to the 8th standard, then the public library, the Spirulina Algae Cultivation Centre, the vocational training centre, the computer centre, the typewriting unit, the notebook production centre, the equipment manufacturing unit, the rehabilitation centre, the home for children, the physiotherapy centre, the hostel, the plastic moulding, hand work and knitting unit, the medical testing unit, the IGNOU Special Study Centre, the centre for spastics and then finally the guest house where I was supposed to be staying.

If an ISO certification can be given to a place for its clean maintenance, then this is the place. A supervisor in

charge of campus maintenance clarified, reflecting the culture and attitude of that place, "We have exclusive staff maintaining this campus all the time and they are the backbones of this place. They are called 'Cosmetic Assistants', for they provide the face lift to this place."

The speciality of this place isn't the 28-acre campus or the various units that function within this place. Of the two pathways that run parallel throughout the campus, one is meant for people who move around on their wheelchairs. Most people who extended their courtesy to me did so either from their wheelchairs or leaning on to their crutches. More than 50 of the 700 hundred village children who study in this school are physically challenged. Many of the teachers who teach in the school are physically challenged. Callipers are made in the equipment manufacturing unit, and many of those who make it, themselves use callipers for support. Many of the body parts of many of those people are non-functional or semi-functional; yet, each one of them has

trained themselves to use the other functional organs of their body. What was special was that all of them exhibited exceptional skill in whatever they did. The whole campus looked more dynamic and productive than would a place with all people having all of their 206 bones and 600 muscles in functional order.

I was at a place where people had rendered the word 'physically handicapped' meaningless. I was at a place where people had transcended their physical limitations by the way they used their mental, intellectual, emotional and spiritual personalities. In many ways they were beyond themselves. Their slogan is, 'A flower without a few petals is still a flower'. Their motto is, 'Live to serve'. Their mission is, "Empowering the disabled citizens by establishing a 'Valley for the Disabled' as a Rehabilitation and Development Centre for the region and developing models for self-help initiatives by integrating the disabled individuals with the society for improved living conditions in the village."

The 28-acre-campus is Amar Seva Sangam (ASSA) situated at the foothills of a small mountain range, at the outskirts of a village called Ayikudy, in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India. The campus was acquired and developed over a 12-year period, the money coming from private donations. Disabled children and adults come into ASSA as emaciated, neglected and spiritless individuals and are totally transformed in a matter of months to happy, playful, spirited children and adults, who are so self confident that they are now walking, studying in

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school, displaying exceptional vocational skills and being taken care of medically and emotionally.

Does Amar Seva Sangam have a history? Of course!... The history of ASSA is also the history of a history maker, **S. Ramakrishnan**.

Ramakrishnan was rendered quadriplegic in 1975 at the age of 21, when he met with an accident while trying for the Naval recruitment services. Quadriplegia refers to paralysis from approximately the shoulders down due to damage to the spinal cord. It results in loss of sensation and dysfunction of the body below the shoulders. There is no function or voluntary movement below the shoulders. Bladder and bowel control are lost. As prolonged pressure on a particular area of the body creates body sores, a quadriplegic can never sit or lie down for a length of time in any one particular position. Their position has to be changed at regular intervals.

Even reading about quadriplegia can wreck one psychologically, but Ramakrishnan was meant to walk above the crowd. The Creator frequently sends one of his special creations to adorn the planet and add glory to humanity, and one of His chosen ones is Ramakrishnan. Ramakrishnan asserts, "People like us are worry-free people; wherever we go, God in some human form takes care of us."

Ramakrishnan decided that he would not let his life go waste. After intense self-rehabilitation, he chose to serve the society and invest his life on something purposeful. Supported by his family and friends, he founded ASSA in 1981, the 'Year of the Disabled'. He started with 5 neglected, disabled children. He started teaching them and provided them food and shelter. He realised that **education** and **knowledge** are the only keys to solve the problems of the disabled. From 1981-91, the organisation grew gradually and steadily under his tender loving care.

True to the words of Ramakrishnan, "God in some human form takes care of us," Sankara Raman was one those who made a whole lot of difference along with Ramakrishnan, in developing ASSA from 1991 onwards, into mind blowing and staggering proportions. Confined to a wheelchair from childhood by Muscular Dystrophy, Sankara Raman is a brilliant Chartered Accountant who had a flourishing practice by the age of 25. But being a devout social reformer, he decided to give up his practice and join hands with Ramakrishnan. He has institutionalised ASSA with his astute management and exceptional PR skills, keen insight to tackle challenges, and an inexorable drive to achieve goals. Now ASSA is a million dollar project, accomplished in all areas of rural rehabilitation.

Ramakrishnan was born on May 6, 1954 to R. Siva Subramanian and R. Saraswathi as their eldest son. He did his schooling up to the 3rd standard at Tanjore and then shifted to Ayikudy village where he has been living ever since.

Recalling his childhood days, Ramakrishnan explained, "Organising dance and drama programmes for the youth to celebrate the innumerable village festivals, and the weekly Satsangs developed my team spirit and leadership qualities. My 4th standard teacher, Mr. Balasubramaniam, used to ask us to take classes by placing himself as a student. This developed my communication and oratory skills. Most of our teachers would ask us to run errands for them like walking about two kilometres to get their packed lunches from their homes, doing their post office and bank related jobs, buying tea for them and sometimes even pledging their jewels to the pawn broker. I don't care whether all this was right from the teacher's perspective but all this gave me a lot of exposure. Today, we deny our children all this exposure and they grow up not even knowing how to fill a form. I have such high regards for my teachers that when I got married in 1994, I washed and did puja at the feet of my 5 teachers to show my respect to them."

Speaking of a major influence in his life, Ramakrishnan said, "My grandfather, A.K. Ramakrishna Aiyer used to force me to do a lot of household and administrative work, which gave me added exposure. He used to host anyone who visited the village and would also help people he had never seen or met before. This instilled in me the culture of extending hospitality and helping others."

After completing his SSLC from Ayikudy and PUC from Alwarkuruchi, Ramakrishnan went to Coimbatore to do his Mechanical

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Engineering from the Government College of Technology. Engineering during those years was a five year course. While in his fourth year, influenced by his active involvement in NCC, Ramakrishnan decided to try for the Naval defence services. It was January 10, 1975, when he was asked to cross ten obstacles in three minutes for the final selection. He had to jump from a tree onto a platform and from the platform onto the ground. While performing the jump, Ramakrishnan slipped from the platform and fell upside down, injuring himself in the neck region.

Recalling the accident, Ramakrishnan elaborated, "Few jawans carried me to the nearby room and I said to them, 'My hands are missing. Please go and get them for me'. They raised my hands which were still a part of my body and showed them to me. I realised that I had lost sensation below the shoulders. I was first treated in the Air Force Command Hospital at

Bangalore and then in the Military Hospital at Pune. I was in the hospital till September 14, 1975. More than the treatment that was given to me, that place prepared me to understand that for the rest of my life my body would be dysfunctional below the shoulders and that I would have to live with it. I was also trained to be seated on a wheelchair. On the advice of a Red Cross sister by name Sulochana, I got myself discharged from the hospital and returned to my home at Ayikudy."

Referring to the next 5 years as the most traumatic phase of his life, Ramakrishnan said, "Even to bathe me, they had to carry me to the bathroom and it was such a Herculean struggle for my parents and brothers (all of them younger to me). As my sweat glands do not work, they had to continuously keep spraying water on me to regulate my body temperature. My father used to struggle to get a barber home to shave me. People used to avoid my street as I would call anyone who passed that way to come and chat with me. Boredom was eating me up, for I could not do anything by myself. All India Radio was my only companion. Many a time, I actually wanted to end my life but my helplessness was such that I needed someone's help even to die."

Ramakrishnan continued, "Necessity is the mother of all inventions. In 1981, more out of my necessity to rid myself of boredom and to stop idling away my time, and of course with the encouragement of Rotarian Seetharaman and the financial help of Rajagopalan, Viswanathan and Narayanan, a small kindergarten was started under a thatched roof, with just 5 children, a teacher who was

employed for a salary of Rs.60 and a helper for a salary of Rs.20. I realised that though my body was dysfunctional below the shoulders, I could still use my voice to teach. The project was registered as Amar Seva Sangam, named after my doctor, Air Marshal Dr.Amarjit Singh Chahal, who attended to me at Pune.”

It just takes a spark to ignite a forest; just an idea to build a business empire. ASSA just needed that small beginning in 1981 by this noble hearted man - Ramakrishnan, who always says, “Think good; do good; only good will happen. And if it doesn't, then have this faith that God has some other plans for you.” Looking into my eyes Ramakrishnan added, “All that I have planned has not happened but then I should also recognise that so much of what I had never planned has also happened in my life. All that I have asked for has not been given to me but I should also recognise that so much of what I had never asked for has also been given to me. Today, I have been with President Abdul Kalam, ex-President K. R. Narayanan, with so many industrialists and senior corporate officials, with world renowned musicians, with representatives of so many international agencies, and so many ministers and politicians. I should have ended up as an ordinary engineer. See the way God had planned my turning point through that accident.”

From a mere nursery school, ASSA has grown into a social organisation devoted to lift the standard of living of the villagers. ASSA, in association with the Rotary Club, started conducting Polio and Measles vaccination and awareness camps in the neighbouring villages. In 1984,

eminent writer Sivasankari did a cover story on Amar Seva Sangam in a leading Tamil weekly and that created instant exposure for ASSA. More and more people began to come forward to share their expertise and make monetary contributions to ASSA.

By 1985, Ramakrishnan in association with Aravind Eye Hospitals, started conduction eye camps in the neighbouring villages. Clarifying on the progress of ASSA, Ramakrishnan said, “We grabbed every God given opportunity to work with other associations to promote better living conditions among the rural folk. Rajagopal, an English Professor from Madurai, drafted a brochure for ASSA, and it was only after reading it that I realised what all I had been doing.”

From 1986, Junior Chambers has been continuously involved with ASSA and they have executed over 40 Individual Development programs at ASSA. Again inspired by Sivasankari's cover story on ASSA and Ramakrishnan, Sulochana Srinivasan contributed to ASSA. Out of that contribution, four acres of land was purchased in 1989 and was named Sulochana Gardens. It is these four acres which have now grown into the present 28-acre ASSA campus. Ever since, inspired by the sincerity of Ramakrishnan and the prudence with which funds are utilised, more and more individuals and more and more corporate houses have been supporting the various projects of ASSA. Today, there are over 150 paid personnel working at Amar Seva Sangam, catering to the various areas of rural welfare and rehabilitation of the physically challenged.

Right through my interaction with Ramakrishnan, two words that he frequently used were, Amar Seva Sangam and God. Speaking about the growth of Sangam and the role of God in it, he clarified, “The first time we went to Ratan Tata, we were given Rs.5,000. Seeing the way we deployed those funds, we were given Rs.10,000 the next year and then Rs.15,000... gradually over the years, the funding has increased to a crore of rupees. If we had received this one crore right at the beginning we would have wasted the whole money, for we did not then have the maturity to utilise such funds. Through 5,000 and 10,000 we grew in maturity and today we are ready to make prudent use of bigger funds. People quip, 'I don't know why God is putting me through this'. I want to tell them, because God thinks you can handle this. People complain, 'Why is God not giving me what I want?' I want to tell them, because God thinks you are not ready for it. God neither gives you anything more nor puts you through anything more than what your maturity can handle.”

About his donors, Ramakrishnan said, “I cannot even list all the people who have contributed to ASSA to make it what it is today. With every new source of funding, we immediately start another project which enables us to rehabilitate more people. That is how ASSA has grown. We never did any major advance planning. We have taken one step at a time. No number of births will be enough for me to repay my gratitude to all those people. Through them, God has appeared before me wherever I went.”

In 1985, Ramakrishnan met Chitra, one of the teachers who had come to

teach in the school. Their relationship grew over the next 8 years and they got married in 1994. This simple selfless lady says, "If I can take care of him, he will take care of thousands."

Today Ramakrishnan goes to sleep with a Dictaphone next to him. If when he wakes up, he finds the others still sleeping, he starts dictating instructions and letters, which later in the morning are noted down by his secretaries. Even during his bowel clearance through manual evocation, he either reads a magazine to stay abreast with the world or records letters to be sent, on his Dictaphone. While he is being bathed, he dictates his diary. With a smile he said, "I have a record of all my mistakes since 1981." He then added, "I have come to realise that life is not a question of how you invest your money but a question of how you invest your time. I wonder why people around me are so disorganised."

Ramakrishnan concluded by saying, "So many people would have also thought of what I thought of, but I was fortunate to have the support of my family, friends and well wishers. I created my own luck by grabbing all the opportunities that came my way. So many people say I have achieved so much. I don't consider it to be the truth. I only know that God wants all this to happen and he has moved it through me. Of course, I do not ask, 'Why was I the chosen one?' He has his reasons. My only strength is God's grace. To me, everything is God."

He added, "No person who has achieved any greatness can ever say that he knew right from the beginning that he would reach there. We all do what we can in our capacity. Some

stop halfway, while others go on. Greatness is a judgement cast by others. I am sure no great person ever thought that he was great. A lot of people ask me what the secret behind my achievements is, but I ask them in return, 'What else could I have done?' I cannot do most of what others can

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do... so I just kept dreaming for Sangam, working for Sangam, acting for Sangam... I have absolutely no distractions... Besides, anything you do long enough falls into place."

The most touching part of Ramakrishnan's life is that, though he has been the flagship of Amar Seva Sangam, he believes that all the funds that have come to ASSA have come in the good faith that they will be used for the welfare of the society. So he does not use a single rupee of these funds for his personal use. He operates as an LIC agent. He earns about Rs.3,000 per month from his insurance commission and receives Rs.1,200 from the Navy every month, and he and his wife live out of this Rs.4,200 per month.

This living legend has been awarded by the President of India, was chosen as 'Man of the Year' by the Week magazine, was counted among one of the Ten Outstanding Young Indians by the Indian Junior Chambers, has received the National Award for 'The Welfare of People with Disabilities', apart from innumerable other accolades. Needless to say, above all these awards judged by man, Ramakrishnan's Creator must be so proud of having created him.

After being with Ramakrishnan for over three days, for the first time I understood the Zen expression, "Speak only if you can improve upon your silence." ...for, after having said and written everything, I feel I have said and written nothing at all. I have expressed my thoughts. Is there any technology to express my feelings? Bowing down in humble salute ...

**If you choose to make a difference to ASSA and play your part with Ramakrishnan, visit [www.amar-seva.org](http://www.amar-seva.org).**