

SPECIAL FEATURE

Walk, child, walk

The story of a man and his dream



SANDHYA RAO

IT is such a simple story. The story of a man who saw light.

"Hello," says S. Ramakrishnan, as we walk up the ramp and in through the doorway of a newly-constructed building. He is sitting in the centre of the room, shirtless. The smile is open, the eyes sparkle. "Welcome to Amar Seva Sangam."

We are on the outskirts of Ayikudy, a village some 7 km from Tenkasi, Tirunelveli district, in Tamil Nadu. In the far distance rise the Western Ghats. Tall palmyra trees and small hillocks dot the landscape. Closer by, a few buildings lie scattered. Someone is watering the plants, someone is carrying building material. There is a nip in the air in spite of the bright sunshine. It is quiet and reposeful. Occasionally, the breeze blows in the sound of human voices.

"Push me," says Ramakrishnan. Gently, a young girl – Rukmini is her name – shifts the position of the wheelchair he occupies. "Do you know why I want to sit here?" he asks. "In this window pane, I can see reflected what is happening in the school, in the rehabilitation centre, at the gate... Sitting here in this one place, I try to keep track."

Ramakrishnan is immobile. Someone must put the cap on his head when he is wheeled out into the sun. Someone must cross his hands across his knees when they slip. Someone must help pull him up when he slumps. Someone must always be around to do everything he cannot do for himself.

But nothing confines the chartings of his mind. No fetters chain the rhythm of his heart. From the freeing of his mind from his body was born a dream. And from that dream was born a light that now shines.

As a child, Ramani was no different from other children in his village.

Photographs by Raghavendra Rao

Nothing marked him out as a teenager either, except that he was greatly encouraged by his parents to enrol himself in the Government Engineering College, Coimbatore. In his fourth year, he applied for recruitment to the armed services, with hopes of becoming a naval officer, the pride of his village. As he went through the intelligence and the physical endurance tests in Bangalore, way back in the winter of 1976, Ramani was bubbling with confidence. From the top of a tree he made a perfect leap to a platform 15 feet below, and then immediately to the ground a further 10 feet. In that fraction of a moment was measured the entire purpose of his life.

Ramakrishnan crumbled to the ground and became insensible to any feeling beneath his neck. He was rushed to the military hospital: his spine was dislocated; he had tetraplegia, complete paralysis of the limbs. He was sent to Pune for special attention. "Others came to the hospital, stayed a while, were cured and left. I remained," he recalls.

There was no hope of recovery. He returned home to Ayikudy to a period of intense pain and loneliness. Soon he realised that people's sympathy lasted a day, two days, a month, four months... and then they went on with their lives. "I used to lie in a thatched shed and call out to whoever passed by to stop and chat. After a while I found that people were avoiding me," says Ramakrishnan. He tried to help himself by setting up a printing press, but there were no takers. Nobody trusted a disabled entrepreneur, though his own life hinged entirely on good faith.

That was when the words of Air Vice-Marshal (ret'd) Dr. Amarjit Singh Chahal, a spinal cord injuries specialist in Pune, came back to Ramakrishnan to renew and sustain his spirit. Chahal had been more than a doctor, he had sown the belief in the young man that there was much more to his life than a frail body. And so was established Amar Seva Sangam, in 1981, dedicated to the cause of the disabled and named after the doctor. Its motto: Live to serve.



S. Ramakrishnan...
"I am a dreamer."



"Even in those days," says K. Chidambaram, one of those who stood by Ramakrishnan in his hour of trial, "after the accident when he returned to Ayikudy, he would say: 'I have a dream. I want to do something for the disabled.'" Chidambaram, a mason by profession, is the vice-president of the Sangam.

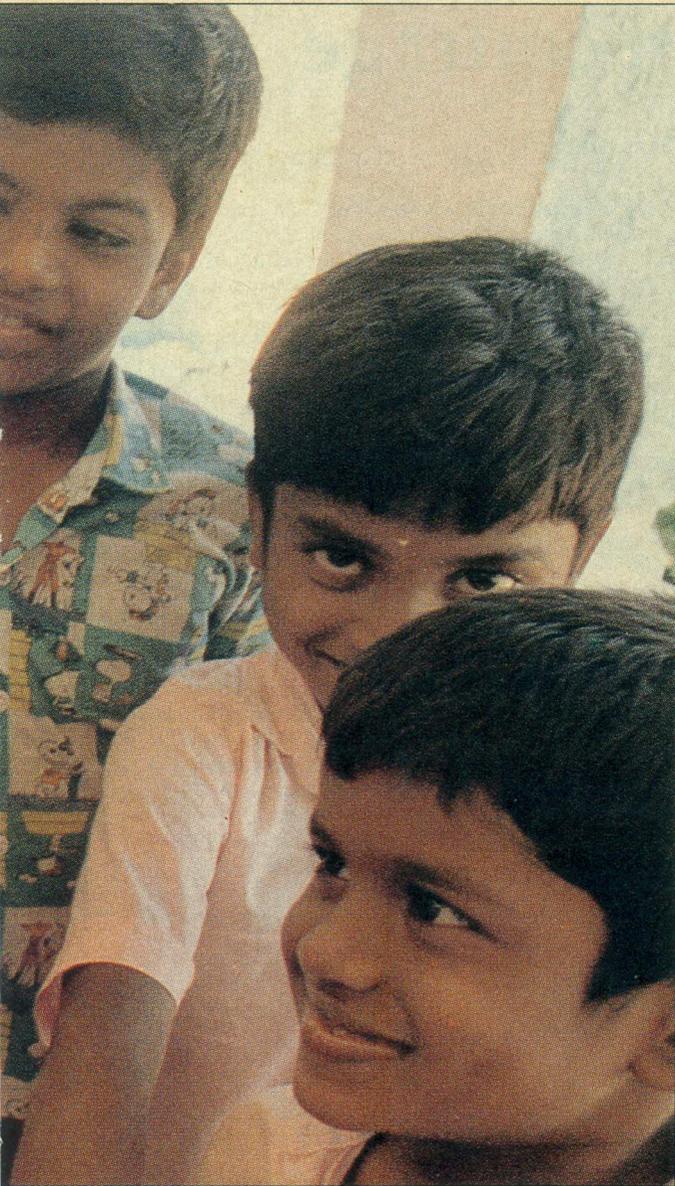
In a thatched hut on a piece of land donated by his parents in the heart of the village, Ramakrishnan launched his school. No one had much faith in the young man and his small band of supporters. Chidambaram and others would go to the disabled children's homes and bring them to school, since the parents would not cooperate. He and Ramakrishnan would teach the children, four or five to begin with. They would also arrange health camps and bring the children over for immunisation. Slowly, the people of Ayikudy began to trust Amar Seva Sangam.

The Sangam has acquired 10.5 acres, in stages. A free residential centre for physically handicapped children is backed up by a primary school with nearly 200 students, and a rehabilitation unit. Until 1992, Amar Seva Sangam was implementing the Rotary International's Polio Plus

programme in several villages in the district. Now, the Sangam is a polio detection centre, and those in need of medical attention are brought over in groups for examination and follow-up by Dr. Ramar and his team. The thatched hut in Ayikudy is now a nursery school with nearly 250 children.

Most of the 40 children in the residential centre are polio-affected. All of them attend the same school as other children. The integration of physically handicapped with other children is not an experiment in Ayikudy, it is the norm. Where in cities and towns rehabilitation is spelt i-s-o-l-a-t-i-o-n, the primary school in Amar Seva Sangam reinforces the fact that physical disability is no barrier to intellectual attainment. In fact, local high schools have shown an inclination to admit these children and provide some conveniences for them.

In this tiny, secluded village, far removed from the impulses and influences of a city, a young man's dream is as tangible as the fragrance of jasmine. These small, white flowers are famed in the region. The lives of children and the attitudes of adults are being transformed radically.



How was this possible?

"You should ask Sankara Raman," says Ramakrishnan. "I am a dreamer. He is the architect."

"Yes," says S. Sankara Raman, honorary secretary of the Sangam. "We see ourselves as catalysts."

Everywhere – in the classrooms, at the centre, in the kitchen, on the playfields – the energy is palpable. And in the evening, when the children sing and dance to celebrate Independence Day, there is poise and purpose. There is empowerment.

Amar Seva Sangam is not about crutches and calipers or even about education for all. What it is, is mirrored in Ramakrishnan's eyes as he watches his young wards; it is in the eyes of Chitra, his wife, and in her hospitality and sense of humour, her devotion. It is the daring to be free from fear; it is the courage to live, not merely exist.

Sitting in the assembly that evening is Murugaraj whose child Jagan, with a problem back and hands, is in the care of Amar Seva Sangam. It was not easy for him to leave his only child, then barely five, in a hostel about a year ago. But Murugaraj, who works on a tea estate in Kerala, is

pleased with the progress Jagan is making. He himself has come down for a day to work on the campus; he has been watering and tending the plants.

This too is part of the Sangam's philosophy. "In the first stage of the rehabilitation programme, we want the children to be here so that they can be given physiotherapy and massage, they can be taught to use and care for calipers and crutches. They can be taught to be mobile and they can continue their education," says Sankara Raman. "But at all times the parents must be involved. We insist that parents come here for a day each month to do some work around the place. Two days in a month the children are sent home."

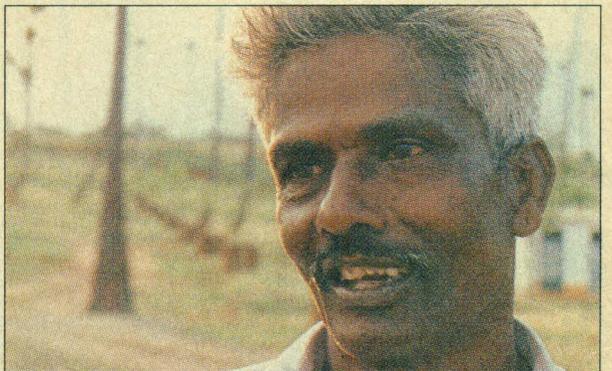
Sankara Raman knows what he is talking about. Though he enjoyed the support of his family after it was discovered that he had muscular dystrophy, a progressive wasting and weakening of the muscle fibres, it required all his mental and emotional strength to face the jibes of schoolmates and a patronising society. Sankara Raman left his home in Madras and a successful practice as a chartered accountant to find meaning in life (see box). He came through depression and desperation to realise that he must always be better than the best to stay always a step behind.

The aim of residential care is to make "crawling and non-moving" children walk with the help of calipers and crutches; to make the severely handicapped mobile and self-reliant; to teach them how to use toilets and infuse them with the essentials of hygiene; to provide a basic education and impart values and knowledge of culture.

The picture flashes of a child weaving adroitly between legs and crutches and calipers, using the hands as a gymnast would. Adapting to physical aids takes time, energy and practice. Facing the world takes longer. It is here that the Sangam's goals assume a definite perspective. It offers a logical explanation for the next stage of its programme built around day care. From living on the campus, the children would move to their own homes. They would then be given vocational training and higher education to the extent required, taught skills for daily transportation, and equipped to work in workshop conditions and office environment. The Sangam also inculcates human values, mutual brotherhood and pride of service and instils a spirit of community living.

"Where the children come from far away, they would have to go to local schools and vocational centres. It will not be easy, but our aim is to prepare the children for this," says Sankara Raman.

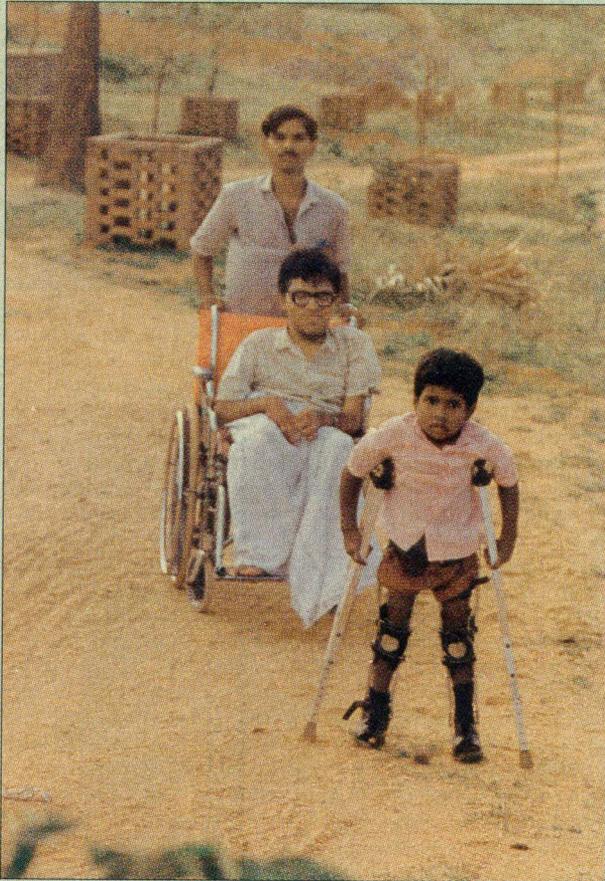
As the incidence of polio comes down, as indeed it is, Amar Seva Sangam sees itself expanding its scope to other handicaps. With this in mind a Rs. 54.2-lakh plan has been drawn up to upgrade the school, to build a physio-



K. Chidambaram... "standing by Ramakrishnan."

A profile in courage

SANDHYA RAO



“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.

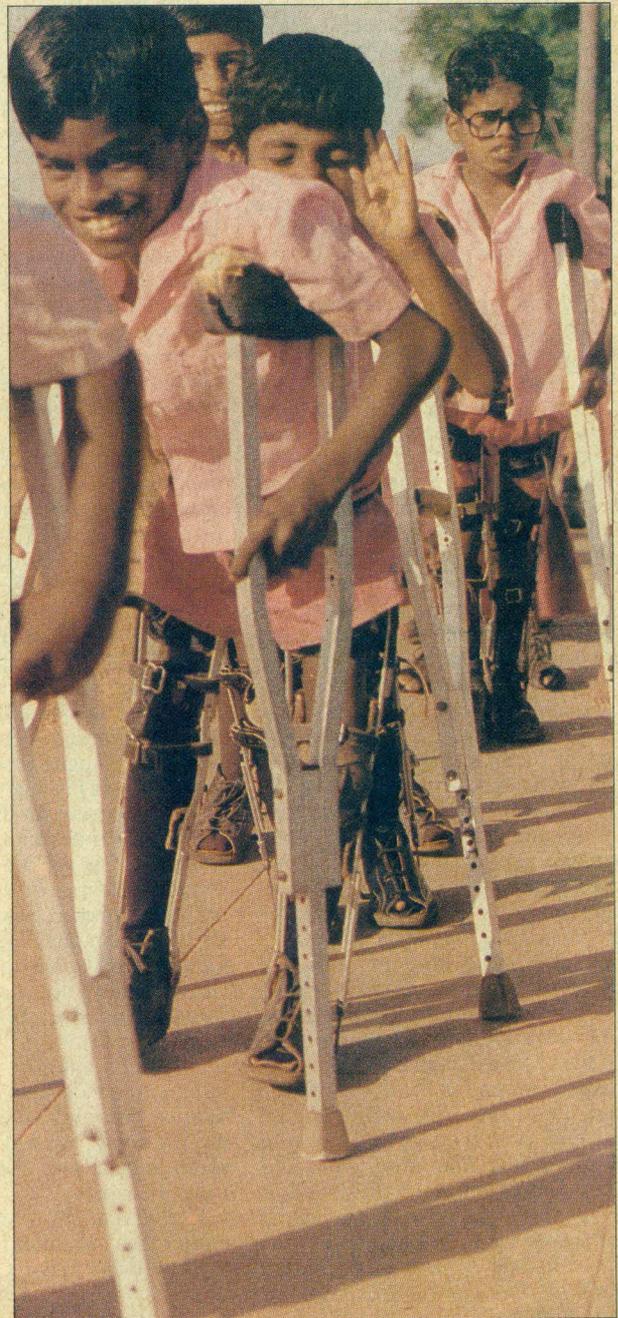
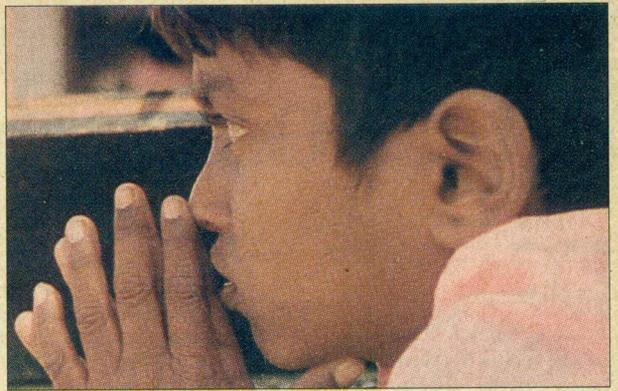
therapy centre with facilities for stay and medical evaluation and a vocational training institute (which the Industrial Credit and Investments Corporation of India has committed to sponsor), to dig open wells and to purchase vans, equipment and machinery. Eventually, Ramakrishnan believes, Amar Seva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