

MRS.JANAKI VENKATARAMAN
1921-2010



The passing away of Mrs. Janaki Venkataraman on 13th August 2010 at New Delhi marked the gentle end to a life of simplicity, fortitude and determination displayed under a variety of situations and places ranging from Burma to Rashtrapathi Bhavan. Her father Krishna Iyer had moved from South India to Burma (Myanmar) where he became a successful lawyer. Janaki was born in Pegu in Burma. She lost her mother Kamala when only five and with her father choosing not to remarry, spent her early years with five siblings in the household, going to a Christian missionary school. Her marriage to Ramaswamy Venkataraman, a budding lawyer in Pattukottai in Thanjavur District marked a total change in environment with the inevitable adjustments to life in a joint family. This posed challenges to her, as it would to any young girl. The couple moved to Madras, where Venkataraman began his practice. She went to Pegu again for the birth of her first child, Shankar; the second child, Padma, arrived in 1942 in India.

Husband Venkataraman spent more time in nationalist activities than in his lucrative practice. Around the time of Gandhiji's call for Quit India, he was arrested and imprisoned for over two years. Imagine the plight of young families of such freedom fighters! Young Janaki, herself an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi, faced the challenge with will power, patriotism and patient capability. Janaki visited her husband regularly at Thanjavur and later at Vellore jails and nursed him, along with the two young children, when he fell ill with typhoid on his release. Her third child, Vijaya, came in 1946 and the last, Lakshmi, in 1952.

Venkataraman's nationalist activities continued unabated, with his spending more time on spreading the trade union movement and later as M.P. That meant more family responsibilities. Venkataraman also started the Labour Law Journal, of which Janaki became a partner. In 1957, Venkataraman was invited to join the Madras Government as Minister for Industries. But soon, the couple were struck with a dire calamity, the passing away of their only son, Shankar. While, with the association of Kamaraj, R.V. plunged himself into the service of the people, Janaki got solace at the feet of the Paramacharya of the Kanchi Sankara Math. She was a constant visitor to the Math and followed the Paramacharya on foot, attended his pujas and listened to his discourses. She did not stop with listening to his discourses but followed them to the letter. She gave up wearing silk, as the making of silk involves the killing of thousands of silk worms. On the advice of Paramacharya, she gathered a hundred devotees to climb the

Tirupathi Hill and do 'angapradakshina' to mitigate the atrocities committed on women during the Bangladesh War. Again, on the call of Paramacharya, she participated in the scheme of a handful of rice being set apart by home makers every day for the poor in the midst of food scarcity.

With Venkataraman assuming more and more responsibilities as Central Minister, Vice-President and President, Janaki's responsibilities too increased. As the First Lady of the country, she was specially known for her simplicity, grace and hospitality. When she accompanied her husband in State visits to various countries, she was really representing Indian womanhood. She requested Radha Silks, the well-known silk saree house in Chennai to produce 'Ahimsa Silk' (silk made from thread after the silk worm leaves the cocoon as a butterfly on its own). This does not involve the killing of the silk worm. She popularized Ahimsa Silk which many luminaries including Bharata Ratna M.S.Subbalakshmi started wearing. For her birthdays at Rashtrapathi Bhavan, the main invitees were street children and spastic children; she showered her love, particularly on the latter.

Janaki Venkataraman was known to be pious and religious but with an open mind. She was very much interested in women's liberation, freedom and self-reliance. Her wish was that her three daughters should perform her last rites. This would be an example and message for women who believed that they must have a son for this purpose, even if it means having several daughters while waiting for the birth of a son. In her own case, she had this wish fulfilled, when she passed away in peace at the ripe age of 89.

