

Soundaram – The Universal AMMA

If ever a person with limitless, kindness, compassion, sympathy and ever- helpful nature walked on the earth, it was *Soundaram Ramachandran*. She was loved, admired and almost worshipped universally as mother – *AMMA*.

Soundaram belonged to an affluent family of transport operators. The name *T.V.S.* was well known throughout *Tamilnadu* for efficiency, punctuality and courteous service. The Head of the organisation *Shri T.V. Sundaram Iyengar* was a progressive nationalist and supported the national movement of the *Congress*. Even in her younger days *Soundaram* used to wear *Khadi* and lead *Congress* processions.

Soundaram married her Cousin (Mother's brother's son), a Doctor by profession. Unfortunately, the young doctor while operating a patient affected by plague, got infected and died. *Soundaram's* life looked bleak, dark and finished. But *Soundaram* was made of sterner stuff. Unlike others in the same predicament, she did not want to be cloistered.

She thought that the best tribute to her lost husband was to follow his path and serve the people valiantly as he had done. So she resumed her studies and after matriculation, joined the Lady Harding Medical College in Delhi.

Providence compensates for calamities. *Soundaram's* grief was to some extent mitigated by a friend she got in the Medical College. *Sushila Nayar* joined the Lady Harding Medical College when she was a very young, shy and very reserved. She and *Soundaram* were the only two persons who wore *Khadi* in the medical college. *Sushila Nayar* was the sister of *Pyarelal*, the renowned Secretary to *Gandhiji*. Such a life long friendship developed between *Soundaram* and *Sushila Nayar* that they were as close as sisters. *Soundaram's* parents also treated *Sushila Nayar* as one of their family members.

After completing her medical education, *Soundaram* returned to *Madurai*. She married the veteran *Gandhian* *Shri G. Ramachandran* and went over to *Kerala*. Soon the Quit India Movement started, *Shri G. Ramachandran* was arrested. *Soundaram* went about doing propaganda for the Movement. The *Tranvancore* State authorities took her to the border of *Tamilnadu* and served her with an externment order from the State.

Soundaram went to Chennai and along with the eminent Social Worker and leader of the All India Women's Organisation *Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy* started medical relief to the poor. They started the *Avvai Rural* medical service. A number of eminent doctors also joined the endeavour and made it immensely popular.

On the demise of *Kasturba Gandhi*, *Gandhiji* organised the *Kasturba Trust* with the object of serving women and children with education, health, self-reliance, etc. *Gandhiji* wanted that the Trust in each Province should be managed by a competent woman. *Dr. Soundaram* who was appointed *Prathinithi* of *Tamilnadu*, did a marvellous job with her *Gram Sevikas* recruited mostly from freedom fighters' families, young widows, destitute and abandoned women, harijan girls, etc. and won the appreciation of the entire India.

I had earlier said that *Sundaram Iyengar* and his wife were progressive and forward-looking persons. They gave to *Soundaram* an equal share of their wealth along with her brothers.

In 1947, *Soundaram* started the *Gandhigram* with an ambitious programme of meeting all the needs of women, children, the destitutes, the orphans and employment of rural folks. A *Gandhian* freedom fighter and philanthropist *Shri Lagumiah* offered to donate his 20 acres of land at the present site of *Gandhigram* and placed his house at the disposal of *Soundaram* for construction and other uses. The TVS boys are well known for doing manual work in the workshops. *Soundaram* was no exception. She also did physical labour in the construction activities. She set an example to others in every walk of life.

Soundaram's main concern was children and women. Within a year of her starting the *Gandhigram*, *Soundaram* started the children's Home also called *Sowbagya Illam* in 1948 with three foundlings. Orphans, destitutes, and poor children have been given shelter, food, education and training and made into useful members of the society like nurses, village health workers, tailors and other useful avocations. It is these children who clung to her and called her *AMMA*. Since that day *Soundaram* became *AMMA*.

For the widows who were treated as outcastes, women discarded by their husband, destitutes, etc. *Soundaram AMMA* started *Kasturba Sevikasramam* and trained them as teachers, doctors, nurses, clerks, typists, gram sevikas, khadi and village industries workers and gave them an independent and respectable place in society.

The handicapped did not escape *Soundaram AMMA's* care and attention. A *Santhi High School* was started in 1956 for the Deaf and Dumb. The handicapped were taught by modern aids from 1st to 10th standard.

Medical care has always been *AMMA'S* first love. She realised that limited family is not only economically advantageous but indispensable for Health of Women folk. The *Kasturba Hospital*, which was started with small beginning, has grown into a 250 beds institution and meets the needs of maternity and child health services in the neighbouring villages. Later an *Artificial Limb Research Centre* has been started and amputees are fitted with *Jaipur Foot* manufactured in the unit.

Other important institutions in *Gandhigram* are: *Thambithottam Higher Secondary School* with more than 1500 students and *Lakshmi College of education* providing B.Ed., M. Ed. and M. Phil academic courses.

On employment, *Gandhigram* has done spectacular service. *Khadi* spinning and weaving provides dispersed employment in the rural area. The preparation of *Ayurvedic* medicines affords direct, secondary and tertiary Employment. In the early days *AMMA* used to take number of *Thaklees* (single spindle spinning device) and give it to the poor people to enable them to earn small amounts.

The *Lakshmi Seva Sangam*, which was started in 1977 with the help of an expert *Ayurvedic* doctor is manufacturing a large variety medicines and providing employment to men and women. The quality of *Ayurvedic* products is appreciated by the consumers and its activities are expanding. Besides a number of village industries like hand-pounded rice, hand made paper, knitting and palm leaf products have got good sales.

By far the most important contribution of *Soundaram* and *G. Ramachandran* is the establishment of *Gandhigram Rural Institute*, which has blossomed into a Deemed University with a five star status for excellence. In order to translate into reality the *Gandhian* concept of rural development, Government of India sanctioned the establishment of about a dozen Rural Institutes in the country and *Gandhigram* was one of them. In 1956 *Gandhigram Rural Institute* was started. The Institute functioned so effectively that it was awarded the status of a Deemed University in 1976. All credit should go to *Dr. Soundaram* and *Shri G. Ramachandran* who toiled patiently and persistently to achieve the status of Deemed University.

Today the institute is an unforgettable edifice to them. *Dr. Sushila Nayar* who was close to *Dr. Soundaram* wrote:

“The Gandhigram Institute stands as a living monument to her (*Dr. Soundaram*’s) memory and will continue to inspire coming generations”.

The foregoing sketchy narration reveals what a multi faceted and multi splendoured personality *Soundaram AMMA* was. While most affluent people spend a life of leisure and enjoyment *Soundaram AMMA* toiled for the upliftment of poor, hungry and destitute sections of the humanity. *Soundaram AMMA* will continue to live as long as the *Gandhigram* and allied organisations live.