

INCREDIBLE CHAMPIONS



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ISBN:	Hardcover	978-1-4828-2214-4
	Softcover	978-1-4828-2213-7
	eBook	978-1-4828-2212-0

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CHAPTER 24

Fighting challenges with dignity and determination: Sankara Raman, Honorary Secretary, Amar Seva Trust



Introduction

One often comes across humans who have disorders derived from hereditary factors. Muscular dystrophy, which refers to a group of hereditary disorder, each with unique phenotypic and genetic features, can cause physical challenges. Congenital muscular dystrophy often appears at birth with hypotonic and severe trunk and limb weaknesses. Obviously, afflicted persons find it difficult to lead a normal life, as they are confined to wheel chairs. Like many other physically challenged people, they also tend to give up enthusiasm and the hope of being a normal human being due to the pains they undergo. This is an undesirable consequence, as they too have the right to lead a normal life.

This is the saga of Sankara Raman, who fought this kind of a physical challenge with courage, determination and intellect.

Early days

Sankara Raman understood his limitations early in life, but did not let it deter him. He always wanted to face the world and lead a complete and independent life. He was afflicted with a hereditary disorder and had a sister who was also crippled. He came from a middle class family and wanted to make a difference to the world, just like any normal youth. The challenges were in getting the right mentor and peer group that would help him fight the limitations imposed by his disorder.

From his earliest days, Sankara Raman was studious. After completing his high school he actively pursued the idea of qualifying as a chartered accountant (CA) so that he could find gainful employment and support his family. He took up graduation in commerce and chartered accountancy. He did the three years articleship under auditor Shivaji in Shivaji and Rao Associates, where he was provided with barrier-free access in office and opportunities without any discrimination in audit assignments. He was never treated as a disabled person and no special privileges were offered which was an eye-opener for him to realize his capabilities and gain confidence. This is a real-time example as to how an employer/senior can motivate a person with disability. He qualified as a CA with a meritorious record and started his practice. He was sure that he wanted to live his life with dignity and contribute to the world by serving other people with similar physical challenges.

During the initial stage of his life, he was unwilling to accept help to overcome his challenges. If anyone offered him support, he was furious. However, his father, who understood him well, helped Sankara Raman to appreciate and accept the need to take others' help whenever it was practical. Once his attitude changed in this manner, Sankara Raman was not only pleased with himself but also made other people around him happy and cheerful. This clear "transformation" laid the basis for what he was to achieve in the later years of his life.

Financial sustainability

We have already mentioned that Sankara Raman did not come from an affluent background. After qualifying as a CA, he faced a further dilemma in deciding just how to pursue his career. One option was to join a corporate and take up a protected life with assured economic status. However, he felt that the corporate sector would see his physical challenge as a limiting factor and would not use him for challenging assignments at work. Hence, he decided that he would not opt for this option, even though it promised financial security.

His father encouraged him to start his own practice as a CA. Sankara Raman faced severe obstacles given his restricted mobility. His professional duties dictated that he travel out of Chennai to towns like Trichy and Salem. He was always dependent on escorts who would accompany him to these places. He had to go through this phase of his life because both financial independence and stability were important necessities at that point of time. He was convinced that being on his own reflected his dignity and his respect for the knowledge he had, which he demonstrated through his commitment to work. From his early stages of life, Sankara Raman held the firm view that a physical challenge can be a limiting factor, but not an intimidating factor that stops someone from leading a normal life.

Ethical values

He had imbibed strong ethical values in his childhood. In professional practice, he faced the normal challenges of society, such as corruption and disability abuse. He felt the best way to handle these challenges was to fight them: abstain from corruption and not allow himself to be marginalized because of physical challenge. On the other hand, he did come across very understanding income tax officers and professionals at the office of the registrar of companies. As time went by, he developed the conviction that his knowledge and ethical values could one day become the key factors that allowed him to pursue his ambition of serving physically challenged fellow beings.

Connecting with peers

Sankara Raman joined the Tamilnadu Welfare Association for Physically Handicapped. He felt the association would not only give him the strength to fight his disorder, but would also enable its members to use different institutions and departments in supporting the community of the physically challenged. At this point, he held the very clear notion that for the physically handicapped, the best way to demonstrate courage would be to fight the negative influences of their handicaps and achieve an independent life. It was preferable to talking on and on about their misfortune and claiming support from private institutions and the government. He also observed that many physically challenged people were refusing to mix with society and were confining themselves to a small circle, cursing their destiny. The obvious reasons were guilt, shame, self-pity and reaction to social cruelty. He felt strongly that these people needed to get over their mental hang-ups, and that they should be given enough encouragement to attain an independent life. Further, physically challenged people needed to adopt a kind of self-confident approach to achieve a normal life, even when using the help of others.

The initiatives of the association were taking shape in the early 1990s. The government allocated some land near Vandalur (a suburb of Chennai) for the association to set up a rehabilitation center. Dr. Varadakutty, president of the association and a few others were having thoughts similar to that of Sankara Raman. He used to spend much of his time with them, working on disability rights, while pursuing his professional practice.

Often, it is hard to make out whether a particular turning point in one's life is destiny, the hand of God or just a random pattern! A turning point came up in Sankara Raman's life. His parents had an opportunity to meet Ramakrishnan of Amar Seva at the residence of Dr. T.S. Chandra, a professor at IIT Madras, in 1991. They were happy with the social service efforts of Ramakrishnan. They encouraged Sankara Raman to meet him. After a few meetings at Chennai and Ayikudy in Tirunelveli district, Sankara Raman was convinced that it would be a good idea to join forces with Ramakrishnan, who was then working on developing his social service organization, Amar Seva, and in setting up a rehabilitation center.

Challenges

Moving to Ayikudy from Chennai was not an easy decision for Sankara Raman. Ayikudy was a small village, and Sankara Raman had to compromise on his professional practice. He had clientele he could not serve from Ayikudy. However, his nature was such that new challenges always attracted him. The best in him comes out when he is most challenged. He accepted the personal challenge of moving into community-based living at Ayikudy. Initially, he shared his time between Ayikudy and Chennai. During this initial period, he had many opportunities to improve the quality of life of the physically challenged, which formed the basis of his ambitious approach to social entrepreneurship in later years.

Sankara Raman always had a thirst for professional knowledge and the gut feeling that knowledge must be used for a decent and respectful lifestyle. Furthermore, one needs to deploy knowledge to enhance the quality of life of the brethren in his community. Whenever there was a need in his community, he never hesitated to take the steps required using the knowledge and momentum he had gained from his interactions with experts in various fields.

Recognition

Sankara Raman was instrumental in incorporating a number of efficient systems into the operations of Amar Seva. These systems helped him considerably in implementing the ideas of the committee members. He recognized the need to demonstrate leadership at operating levels for optimum contribution to social causes. In various ways, he used the experience he had gained with corporate clients when he practiced as a CA. He seized on every opportunity to connect with professionals and associations for improving the programs at Ayikudy. Sankara Raman's zeal and vigor in bringing a structured approach to work is worth emulation by all youth. Sankara Raman says, "Though at the outset it might look compulsive, fighting all odds while depending on physical support from fellow humans to move around is challenging. I always think for what purpose I am doing all these things. If it is purely selfish then it is

limiting. If you want to achieve something, you must bring extra energy and spirit to overcome all deterring factors”.

Sankara Raman received a lot of support from his family. We have already talked about the major way his parents supported him. His siblings also demonstrated courage and the willingness to fight limitations. His eldest sister had gone trekking in the Himalayas. She went to Canada in 1971 to pursue higher studies and find ways to help the family. She was a great motivator for Sankara Raman. He also has another elder sister, Dr. Sumathi who is afflicted with the same condition, muscular dystrophy. They always thought it fit that they demonstrate extraordinary spirits and individually and jointly contribute to their family and to the larger society. It is worth mentioning here that in fact, Dr. Sumathi is a PhD holder in commerce and plays an active role in the activities of Amar Seva community. She served as a professor in a college at Trichy.

At some point in his life, Sankara Raman felt that he should marry and fulfill his family obligations. He has been married for the last 14 years. He manages to balance the demands of his personal life with those of his developmental work. He encourages his wife to pursue activities of her liking, and likewise, she supports him in his endeavors. My youth readers may note here that it is not just internal understanding that helps harmony, respect for each other's external roles and commitments to those roles matter just as much. Leaders must ensure such practice at home and in the community to achieve a balanced growth.

Conclusion

Sankara Raman has won a number of accolades and awards from national and international organizations. These awards have never swayed him from his purpose. His dream is to spread the loud and clear message that humans who are confined to a wheel chair and dependent on others' help for physical activities can still contribute meaningfully to uplifting their brethren who suffer from similar physical challenges. He is convinced that self-respect and pride in independence in thought and

action are vital for fighting physical challenges. So much of the misery on this earth would be mitigated if other people suffering from hardships thought similarly spread awareness! We need more thought leaders like Sankara Raman.