

IN SERVICE OF MANKIND

Sowmya Simhan, Social Worker, Chennai

An old man with paralyzed limbs walking with the help of a stick was doing *girivalam* every day. He could no longer endure the pain and anguish. He begged the Lord for forgiveness as he decided that this was going to be his last round. As he was completing his round, a young lad came to him and asked him menacingly, "You ugly old man, are you not ashamed of yourself? You are walking with this stick. Give it to me!" He pulled it from him, broke it to pieces and threw it down and ran away. The old man injured, lying on the ground wept, "What a world full of such inhuman people!" As he was trying to get up, suddenly he felt some power pass through him. Lo and behold, he found his legs and started walking. He danced in happiness and thanked the Lord. Needless to say the young lad was none other than **Bhagawan** himself.

My mother always believed in such miracles. She had a firm belief that one day some saint would work a miracle on me and cure me of my polio and make me walk. I do walk but it is all a result of human effort. It has all been made possible by my mother's constant encouragement, my father's commitment, my own perseverance, my family's unstinted support and above all, God's grace.

We moved over to Chennai from Delhi when I was in class 8. I can still remember my first day in Fatima Convent. For the ground floor classes itself there were around ten steps and then I did not know how to climb a single step. Contrary to all my apprehensions, my school life was actually pleasant because the sisters were kind and compassionate and so were my friends. It is hard for me to believe that by the time I was in class 10, I had actually started climbing two floors to attend class.

My mother was apprehensive about sending me to college. But I spent the best part of my life at Meenakshi College. A major turning point came in my life when the late Mr. K R Sunderarajan (Founder member of Meenakshi College) gifted me a motorized three wheeler seeing my difficulty in commuting to college. That was about

the time when working women had just started driving mopeds in Chennai. With increased mobility, confidence level also increased. I have not looked back since then.

I am working in a leading cement company in Chennai. By God's grace, I have survived all its challenges, physical, emotional and professional, for nearly 20 years now. With the appropriate mental attitude which took some time to fashion, I am now at peace with myself and contented in this job.

Right from the days I was struggling, I had nurtured one desire. Once I reach a certain level in life I must reach out to my other brothers and sisters who are physically, socially and economically challenged. Thus was born **Sukriti Social Foundation** in 2006 to work for the cause of disabled. **Sukriti** works in the areas of prevention, rehabilitation through distribution of mobility-aids such as calipers, crutches, wheelchairs, tricycles, skill training for employment, empowerment and advocacy. We have brought about minor changes in a few people's lives.

Once a mother with her tall, restless, mentally challenged 14year old son, came to us. She had to carry him everywhere in addition to helping him in his daily chores much to his irritation. He would pinch her, bite her and hit her hard so much so that she would feel dizzy. She repeatedly asked "Why me?" and wept inconsolably. However we assured her a wheel chair. At **Sukriti**, we do not have any yearly grants from the Government or any other funding organization. We have a small donor base whom we approach every time we have a need to be fulfilled. After some time, we sent across a message to her to come and collect the wheel chair. Alas, she no longer had a need for it. Her son had passed away.

There was another orthopedically disabled lady. Difficulty in commuting forced her to take up a residential care giver's job despite being a Tamil Graduate. A scooter would help find a better job. Having experienced the positive changes motorized transport can bring about, I truly wanted to help her though the cost factor was a deterrent. Just as I was debating this in my mind, I got a call from a prospective donor and this was sanctioned immediately.

Every religion preaches compassion towards fellow human beings but we find that orthodoxy, traditions and conventions are more often than not very cruel to a person with disability. I have been subjected to such cruelty and humiliation many times. Temple entry with calipers though legal is yet to gain social acceptance. There will always be people with religious, cultural and physical diversity in any society and all have to be treated equally. Certain changes have to come from the heart and I am still hoping that these changes would come.

In Ramana Gita, Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi has said "Brotherhood based on equality is the supreme goal of human society".

Bhagavan's kindness and compassion to all living beings including birds and animals is just amazing. A new law is now being framed protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. This law includes a provision for trained animals like leader dogs to assist persons with disability. Many, who think it is a new concept in India, may not know that **Bhagawan** already had a dog to guide the Ashram visitors!

I have been an active member of Lions Club International, am on the board of a few other voluntary organisations, manage the affairs of my flat association, maintain a small garden of potted plants. Everywhere there is only one truth that keeps reinforcing itself. Every deed gets done according to the doing. While doing the deed, it is good to remember **Bhagavan's** message of kindness and compassion to all.

A management professional with specialization in Finance, Sowmya Simhan works with a leading cement manufacturer in Chennai. Differently abled, Sowmya has over a decade of involvement in social work. Apart from leading Sukriti, Sowmya is a resource person and a speaker on various issues on disability. She is also the recipient of Ascendas Award of Excellence. She can be contacted on lionsowmya@gmail.com or 9444798474.