

## Her Melodious Mission

Padmashri Sudha Ragunathan talks to Marie Banu about how she uses music in social work

One pictures Sudha Ragunathan as the lady with the awesome voice, wearing a silk saree and jasmine flowers, busy performing at live Carnatic music concerts all over the world. That is a whole lot, but that's not all of her.

This beautiful nightingale has another side to her personality – that of a passionate social worker.

I reached her residence earlier than scheduled for the interview, having learnt that she was disciplined about her appointments. While waiting in her living room, I admired all the award certificates, including that of Padmashri, Kalaimamani, and Sangeetha Choodamani. The ambience was divine, even the silence felt melodious.

Sudha entered the room with a gleaming smile and wished me 'Happy Republic Day!' She added, "I think that patriotism is very important. It gives you that moral responsibility." We soon slid into a discussion about how she used music to fulfill her desire to serve the deprived.

### *What inspired you to start Samudhaya Foundation?*

It was a time when we were reading so much about the Kargil war – about families who had lost their sons, some newly weds having lost their spouses and many who lost their fathers. I was deeply moved and wanted to do something for the families who had lost their loved ones. I wanted to somewhere get connected and tried to contact a few organizations who were mobilizing funds to support these families.

I wanted to do it with my music.

Even prior to 1999 I was involved in social activities and sang for music concerts to raise funds for charities outside my organization. But I was singing for others and for the cause they chose. I realized that I wanted to have the individuality and the independence to do what I wanted and when I wanted, with nobody questioning it.

I spread the word around. A lot of my friends were passionate but did not have the time or the inclination to start an organization. Some friends wanted to contribute but did not know whom to give to.

I reflected on this and told my husband Ragunathan, "We must do something about it." He encouraged me. We decided to launch a trust.

I sang on behalf of all the organizations who



were contributing for the Kargil Relief Fund. Mr. C. Subramanian, former Finance Minister of India, inaugurated the event and Mr. T.T. Vasu, trustee of Samudhaya Foundation, was present. We raised Rs. 5 lakhs and contributed it to the State Relief Fund for the Kargil defence personnel.

The first project gave us the motivation to do more. The same year we had the Orissa Super Cyclone. I performed Hindustani along with Aparna Panshikar at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. It was a one and a half hour concert and we raised a small amount of Rs. 1 lakh and gave it to the Governor of Orissa.

This was followed by the Gujarat earthquake relief. I asked Shri. O.S. Arun, senior Carnatic vocalist, "Can you do it for us without your usual professional charges?" He was kind and obliged to sing, while Smt. Urmila Satyanarayana performed Bharatanatyam. We raised around Rs. 4 lakhs and contributed it to the State Fund.

This was how we started our work in Samudhaya Foundation in 1999.

### *What are the key social causes that you are involved in?*

While I was mobilizing support for national level disasters and calamities for the first few years, I realized that I should do something for our own city, our own states, and for our own causes. And somewhere children have been always very close to my heart.

In Tamil we say 'kann parvai pattalae pothum' which means, 'It is enough if we just look at them', this would make them happy. We supported organizations like Sri Arunodayam, Banyan and Kakkum Karangal. We also started distributing Sadhana awards to recognize

those who have made a mark.

Most of our projects were connected with children. We donated Rs.10 lakhs to the Cancer Institute to support poor children affected by leukemia.

I woke up one morning and called my friends and said that I wanted to mobilize a donation of Rs. 25 to 30 lakhs. I spoke to my contacts in Singapore who spread the word about the concert. The program was scheduled on 23rd August 2008 and by the 15th we had raised only Rs. 30,000. I got a little nervous and started looking at my own finances. We had already identified an organization to support children for free heart surgeries through Ramachandra Medical Hospital. We kept receiving cheques in dollars and by the 22nd of August we had already mobilized Rs. 26 lakhs. We gave the funds through Shri. S.M. Krishna, former Governor of Maharashtra, at a formal event.

We gave Rs. 25 lakhs and enabled surgeries for 100 children. We also gave Rs 5 lakhs to Sri Arunodayam to help them build infrastructure. This year being the tenth year of our Trust, we have decided to identify ten different organisations and contribute Rs. 10 lakh each. If God is kind, we would be able to mobilize a total of Rs. 1 crore to contribute to these organizations.

### *Who is your role model in social work?*

Mother Theresa. There is no match for her compassion, sacrifice and selflessness. She is a saint. When we go out and meet people there are many social workers working with a lot of passion and compassion. You realize that what you do is just a drop in the ocean. All the different social workers who have lived or are living are also my source of inspiration. I am especially touched by women social workers.

### *Do you think that Carnatic music can be taught to underprivileged children through recordings?*

It is very difficult to teach Carnatic music through recordings. It is simpler to teach devotional music or patriotic songs like 'neeradam kadal muzhathu' or 'senthamizh naadu'. Carnatic music is more like a language. It has its grammar and parameters of rhythm and each raga has certain limitations. Like a person, it has an identity of its own. So to get that flavor, I do not agree to people teaching music on Skype. It should be live and taught one-on-one.

### *You are a singer, social worker and home maker. How do you manage to juggle all these roles?*

I believe that if you have the attitude, you can find time for everything. I do not believe in delegation. I like to give a personal touch right from planning the backdrop to the invitations and to whom the invitations should go for each of my events.

### *Your advice to social workers?*

The younger generation should be influenced to take up social work early in life. It should start in schools and colleges.

When a child is one-year old, he recognizes another child and smiles at him even though he is in the midst of a large group.

There are many organizations waiting for support. Schools in that locality can look for organizations in their area and extend support through their students. In old-age homes, there are those who just need people to visit and listen to them.

My daughter Malavika is involved in events organized for Samudhaya Foundation and so is my son Koushik. You give them the opportunity, they will do it. When they do it, they experience joy and their commitment becomes a virtue. It is all linked

I regret having wasted 30 years not doing social work. I would have done much more if I was exposed to social work during my school days. Today, I am satisfied that I am able to do something.

For more details about Samudhaya Foundation visit <http://www.sudharagunathan.com>