

SOCIAL INITIATIVE

# SHELTER FROM THE STORM

MARY THOMAS







21 years and still beating strong... This heart that yearns to serve has not slowed down yet and looking at the steam at which it is going, there is no sign that it would, very soon.

It was in the late 1980's that an active journalist Ms. Shyamala, heavily sensitized by the injustice caused to women, particularly sex workers, waged a legal war to bail out more than 1200 women. Just 4 years from the victory that she earned with the aid of Late Lawyer Govindasamy, she welcomed into her fold an HIV-affected person named Selvi.

Selvi, one among the victims she had saved, had a friend named Meera (now known as Mary Thomas), also a sex worker. She walked into Shyamala's patio one day, ugly bruises adorning her from unjustified police assaults on her arms and thighs. She demanded help from Shyamala in revolting against this injustice, but Shyamala chose to engage her angry motivation to fight for a bigger cause.

Selvi, slowly being eaten up from within by the growing effects of the HIV virus in her, became bedridden and had only one person –

Mary at her side throughout her last days. With a certain love that makes motivation that arises from passion look nimble before it, Mary went on to taking care of Selvi till her last days. Where nurses would hesitate to even come close, Mary went ahead and did everything she could. Her hands knew no pain, dirt or disgust, for all they felt, were the magic she mended into Selvi's dying body. The anger ceased, pity grew and love blossomed, turning Mary into what she is today.

Shyamala helped Mary Thomas set up Selvi Memorial Illam Trust (SMIS) to champion for the cause of AIDS awareness, eradication of social stigma and rehabilitation of the affected people. Through her own organization - SIAAP (South India Aids Action Program) and help from a friend Mr. Ranvir Shah of Prakriti Foundation, Shyamala provided the technical and financial foundations for Mary's cause. This care facility was established in response to a study conducted in 2003 among 250 people seeking treatment at the Govt



Hospital for Thoracic Medicine, Tambaram. Their main needs included an affordable, clean and safe place with basic living amenities and urgent needs in close proximity to the hospital and providing opportunities to meet with other family members in similar circumstances.

In 2004 January SMIS set up the Short Stay facility that provided an affordable, clean and safe place for people living with HIV and AIDS (PLHAs) and their attendees in Chennai. Selvi Memorial Illam Society (SMIS) is named in memory of Ms. Selvi who was among the first to be diagnosed with HIV in India in 1986, who advocated for the rights, dignity and well-being of the People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLHAs). Mary's enthusiastic service out of her own facility coincided with yet another paramount recognition for her mentor - Shyamala, who became a nominee among 1000 people globally for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

Her spirit has only become bigger with every hurdle that Mary faced in her almost 3-decade career of service. Beginning with just AIDS awareness drives across Tamil Nadu, today she caters to the well-being of so many people with different issues that run from physical health to psychiatry. She was sensitive to pain wherever it occurred and did her best to alleviate it even if it meant a drain on the meagre resources she would need for her family. A small incident that illustrates this comes from how she volunteered to sponsor all phone calls for patients at Tambaram TB hospital when she realized that an important antidote these people needed and were unable to afford was a reassuring phone call to their families.

With funds from different NGOs, various countries and occasional crowd-funds Mary has been stretching across the service spectrum while managing two homes, one each for men (at Saidapet) and women (at Chamiers Road), assigned to her

by the Health Secretary Mr. Umanandham. Currently the women's shelter houses around 35 inmates and the men's shelter, around 30 inmates. Some of the inmates are quite old and /or sick, but those who are physically healthy go out for odd jobs close to the shelter. Women work as maids, cooks, cleaners, shopkeepers and men as cobblers, fitters, luggage bearers, rickshaw pullers etc. They are out for work during the day and are back in the shelter in the evening.

Mary travels extensively raising awareness on AIDS, STDs and TB amongst sex workers, lorry drivers, auto drivers, eunuchs and others who are likely to get affected by these. She also creates awareness on safe practices of sex and methods to identify symptoms early. For those who come to her for counselling and rehabilitation, she further takes efforts to refer them to dependable NGOs or goes all the way to their hometowns to convince their families to take them back in if cured. She would conduct counselling drives at factories with a sizeable population of working women from poor backgrounds and educate them on their private parts and create sensitivity towards one's health oriented difficulties.

Outside of this, Mary helps rehabilitate rape victims, psychiatric patients and those with varied sexual orientations. She manages things end-to-end, starting from awareness and identification to counselling and treatment and goes further to fight against exploitation and social stigma on these causes. Mary lends her helping hands to several services that include homeless women shelter, homeless male shelter, family re-integration, food and clothing supply and finally medical camps for care and cure.

At 51, she stands as a beacon of hope and anchor amidst several independent bodies. To all these people - the police who identify victims, trusts like Banyan who rehabilitate patients, hospitals like KMC who treat, the pathology labs, courts,



government offices, public helplines, larger NGOs and active volunteer groups like CEG's NSS, Mary Thomas is the gravity that facilitates their cause to amplify. She stands at the epicenter of a lot of action, seeking fulfillment and making sure the experiences are used to educate and sensitize others.

Trying times hasn't killed her perseverance. A minimal aid of Rs.25 per person per day is what the Government sanctions for her inmates staying at her 'home'. Yet she manages to cater to 3 meals, snacks, refreshments and stay for all her inmates. She continues to fight the neighbors who are drowned in misconceptions about patients she counsels spreading diseases even though they are non-communicable.

She has lost a piece of land gifted to her organization in the outskirts of Kanchipuram due to land grabbing/ political forces and sluggish enforcement officials. She even had to shut down her home at Tambaram due to pressure from the surroundings and move on to a different place with evaporating finances. Yet, no hardship has been able to compel her to lower her will to serve. She is, in fact, ambitious amidst the harsh reality she is exposed to every day.

She wishes to feature in a commercial autobiographical film, earn through its distribution and use the earnings to purchase a land to build her home again. Through this film and with the aid of helping hands she wishes to extend the extent of her service.

Mary Thomas, is a shining example of a true fighter, an epitome of selfless service and compassion, a savior for the homeless and the disadvantaged - Chennai salutes Mary Thomas and hails her as a champion.

- *Subashini Komeswaran*