



Selfless service

S. VIDYAAKAR - SOCIAL INITIATIVE



The purpose of life is to contribute in some way to make things better. What you do makes a difference. And you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make. Vidyaakar perhaps never even thought of these when just compelled by an innate, instinctual need to do the right thing, he brought a new-born baby abandoned in a movie theatre to his own hut. He knew what it was like to be abandoned, to not be cared for and he just wanted to give that child a home. He himself was living in the slums with no resources or plans on how he was going to help but all he knew was he had to do it. And there, was born, what he had been carrying deep inside, a purpose! Caring for those who had no one. The people in the slums helped him and he himself went around with a hundi-box, in the electric-trains, the Marina beach and the parks to collect money to care for this abandoned child.

Born in Mysore, in a dysfunctional family himself, he knew what it was like to have no one. It was a kind-hearted gentleman

named Ramakrishnan, who took him in and cared for him. To Vidyaakar, the seeds of what he would go on to be were sown there. Armed with a degree from Madras School of Social Work and an M.Phil from CMC, Vellore, he knew this was the area he was destined for. Plus, the kindness and the compassion, he received, strengthened the resolve to do the same for others. One rescued baby led to many more and there was born – Udavum Karangal, a social service organisation with an objective of caring for abandoned babies. Apart from an orphanage, it now extends help and support to the elderly women, the mentally-ill and the old, dying destitutes. It runs a school for 2000+ students, a creche for daily-wage workers, a tailoring unit for women, and apart from it all health-care, rehabilitation, ambulance and mortuary care services, and a crematorium.

Vidyaakar, an unassuming man, with a passion to help says, he never planned any of the things that he has gone on to build. They were based purely on the burgeoning



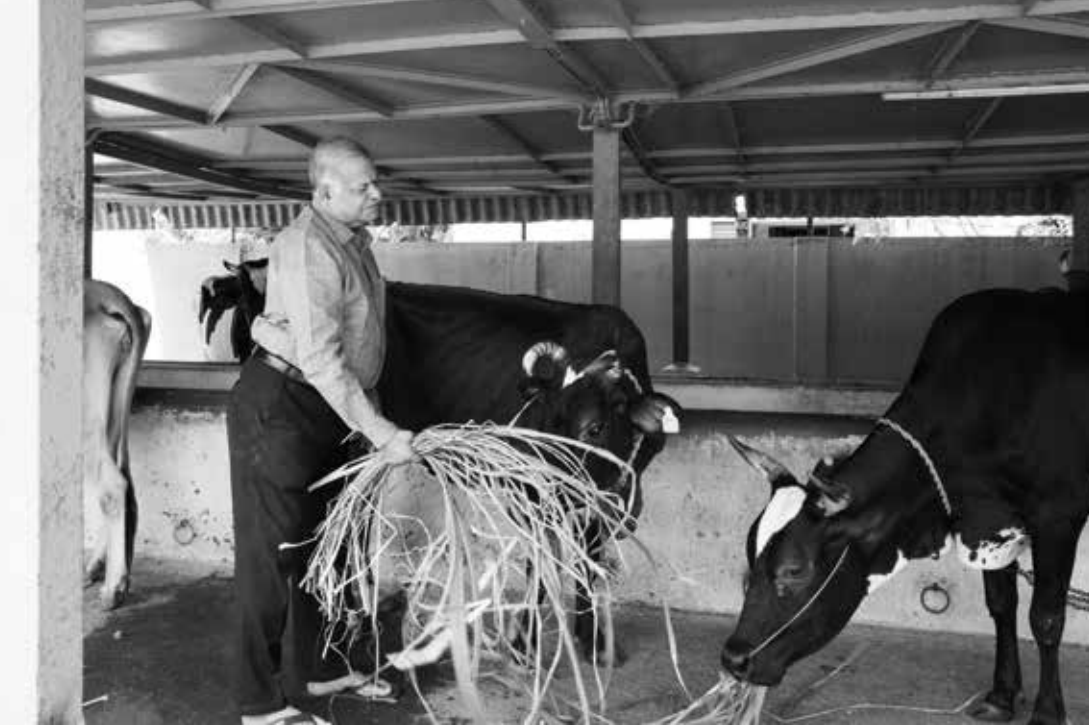
needs of the community and his only focus was on creating a community and a next generation of secure people, amply equipped with decent education and skills and return them into the mainstream society that rejected them in the first place.

Vidyaakar started the Udavum Karangal as an orphanage for babies who were abandoned as soon as they were born. The parental and emotional bond that is so crucial for the normal development of a child was what he wanted to give as a nourishment to enable them to grow up to be strong and independent, yet compassionate and empathetic members of the society. This was the primary objective of the

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organization. He also wanted to destigmatize these children as “orphans” and show that they too can be equal functioning members of society. One method taken up to do this is the promotion of adoption. Having started various initiatives for the same, he hopes for good outcomes for these children.

Having started an orphanage with 40 children, understanding that to enable these children to become upstanding pillars of the future, empowerment through education was the key, he realised. It was this need to educate that led him to start a school. He realised that these children should know the outside world, develop a sense of self-preservation and find the confidence and courage to become independent, contributing individuals to survive on their own. So, the school included children of outsiders too which would help integrate his own children into mainstream society. The school, named after his mentor, called Ramakrishna Vidyalaya, now has a strength of 2000+ students and has classes 1 -12. Now, the school even has a section



for specially-abled children, offering many vocational training courses in addition to the regular school routine. Even after the students pass out of the school, Vidyaakar makes sure to help them get higher education, or job opportunities through his extensive network of contacts and scholarships. He truly feels that education can empower the populace, irrespective of their background. With the help of teachers, social-workers and psychologists he opened up the outside world, helped create good, strong foundations which he knew would have healthy long-term effects. He says in the past, people with purely altruistic motives pitched in to help. These volunteers were then trained to become social workers. This, he mentions with a tinge of regret is sadly missing in people now.

Vidyaakar says he also facilitates marriages for his children. So far 224 girls have been married off, and he claims to be a proud grandfather of 330 children. He ensures regular follow-ups to make sure his children are doing ok. In fact, he has even lent his last name 'Vidyaakar' to many of them for the official documentation. Even so, every one of them always return to help out at the campus and continue to call him "Appa". His sensitivity in any and all situations are what unquestioningly make him truly a father to every single one of these children. He takes the cause of the girl-child especially very seriously and is very protective of them.

Vidyaakar wishes to give mental-health its true due. Having worked for a brief time in Kilpauk Mental Hospital he knows how challenging psychiatric care is and has immense respect for the same. Talking of mental health, in the past, he says, it was as an outcome of poverty, genetic factors, personality disorders and improper family structures. Now additionally, one has to deal with issues like substance-abuse, maladjustments, aggression, bad interpersonal relationships and the basic



inability to think of consequences of one's actions. The dynamics are different and require different kind of handling. Rehabilitation of people with mental-health issues is also one of his noble works. During COVID-19 times, Udavum Karangal provided relief to major parts of Chennai and did their best to control the epidemic. Due to the increasing number of deaths at the time, he decided to do something about the lack of sufficient morgues and crematoriums. Thus, a plan was created to build a crematorium which was soon completed thereafter.

As far as the future plans are concerned, he humbly states that what he will go on to do will be based solely on the needs of the community at that time. It's not a choice of what he wants to do next but the choice of those who are in need. He believes no one asked him to do what he does. He simply says he does it because it's what had to be done. His grit, persistence and willpower are what have held him in good stead and helped him overcome the adversities he has had to face to travel to where he is now.

In the words of Oprah Winfrey, 'Your legacy is every life you have touched!' Vidyaakar's is not just the lives he has touched but the way he continues to make a huge difference to a society that badly needs it. He is a typical example of what one man can do if he so wishes to bring in the change. In the true spirit of a Champion that he is, his legacy will continue to touch many more lives!

Raghavendra Ravi Raman