

SUDHA MURTY

WISE AND
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to Life*



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Sudha Murty was born in 1950 in Shiggaon in north Karnataka. She did her MTech in computer science, and is now the chairperson of the Infosys Foundation. A prolific writer in English and Kannada, she has written novels, technical books, travelogues, collections of short stories and non-fiction pieces, and four books for children. Her books have been translated into all the major Indian languages.

Sudha Murty was the recipient of the R.K. Narayan Award for Literature and the Padma Shri in 2006, and the Attimabbe Award from the government of Karnataka for excellence in Kannada literature in 2011.

*For the 'shirtless people of India'
who have taught me so much
about my country*

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But readers, ultimately I thank you. You are the best judge and my source of inspiration. Without your support, I cease to be a writer.

Bangalore
March 2006

Sudha Murty

FOREWORD
THE MISSION IS THE MESSAGE

We are heirs to the tradition of seeing human quality as *sattwa*, *rajas* or *tamas*. This is a beautifully Indian way of expressing a metaphysical concept familiar to other civilizations as well: of all God's creations, man alone has a choice between good and evil, and he reaps his rewards according to what he chooses.

Few set out consciously to perform *sattwik* work. Fewer still deliberately desire a life of *tamas*. Some could even start out with *tamas* or *rajas* and elevate themselves to *sattwa*. All this would be attributed to the larger cosmic scheme of karma. Jamshedji Tata appears to have had only a *sattwik* view of life and work—laying an industrial foundation for his country, starting educational and research institutions, and setting up a network of charities when such ideas were unknown. On the other hand, Alfred Nobel spent his genius inventing dynamite and smokeless gunpowder, which would all become agents of mass destruction. Then, perhaps stung by the implications of his life's achievements, he put the fortune he made to *sattwik* use by instituting the Nobel Prizes, as recognition for noble work.

Sudha Murty was not meant to hide her light under a

housewife's bushel. She was born with teacher's blood in her veins, and teaching, she learned early, was a vocation that could help shape the world. But she did not remain just another face in the teaching crowd either. Unseen but clearly felt forces propelled her into unfamiliar territory. For one thing, she married a man with socialist blood in his veins. For another, when the benedictions of capitalism came their way, the instincts of the teacher and the socialist combined to take them into an orbit of public service for public good. While remaining a teacher, wife, mother and very much the woman next door, Sudha Murty turned into an institution.

She has built no edifices. No public announcements accompany her work. No statues or tablets or archways proclaim her presence. She goes into tribal forests, into hamlets ravaged by poverty, into communities devastated by disease. She discovers the deserving on her own. The assistance she supplies meets the demand she sees. Frustrations, obstacles and red tape do not slow her down. Even human greed, a great deal of which she faces in the course of her work, does not dissuade her. Her work is her mission. She does her duty in the style and the spirit of the *karma yogi*.

This book gives a clear account of both her work and her approach to it. An accomplished storyteller in Kannada, Sudha wrote for the first time in English to inaugurate a fortnightly column in the *New Sunday Express*. She focused on her personal experiences, her travels and her encounters with ordinary people with extraordinary minds. The column attracted instant

attention because of its freshness and its directness. Evidently, she was writing not with her pen but with her heart. It was clear from the start that these anecdotal insights into human nature merited a format more enduring than journalism could provide.

It would be a pity, though, if the benefits of these stories stop with the pleasure of reading them. Sudha Murty is nothing if not a message. By turning the success of Infosys into an opportunity to serve the less privileged, she has conveyed an idea to others similarly positioned. Corporate championship of social amelioration programmes on the one hand and intellectual creativity on the other is common in advanced countries, but rare in ours. There is nothing in India comparable to the foundations associated with families of great wealth in the West, such as Ford, Rockefeller and Nuffield. The most respected of them, the MacArthur Foundation, gives out what have come to be known as 'genius awards'. No one knows about this because no publicity of any kind is given to it. Yet it quietly identifies people of great talent—like A.K. Ramanujan—and quietly gives them funds to proceed with their chosen work. Thus is excellence, the true worth of a nation, nurtured by society. Sudha Murty's work will be complete only when the tradition of grand foundations rises in India to help the needy, recognize originality, facilitate intellectual inquiry and generally inspire the pursuit of greatness.

T.J.S. George
Editorial Adviser
The New Indian Express

HONESTY COMES FROM THE HEART

One bright June morning three years ago, I was reading my Kannada newspaper as usual. It was the day the Secondary School Leaving Certificate results had been published. While columns of roll numbers filled the inside pages, the list of rank holders and their photographs took up almost the entire front page.

I have a great fascination for rank holders. Rank is not merely an index of one's intelligence, it also indicates the hard work and perseverance that students have put in to reach their goal. My background—I was brought up in a professor's family—and my own experience as a teacher have led me to believe this.

Of all the photographs in that morning's newspaper, one boy's snapshot caught my attention. I could not take my eyes off him. He was frail and pale, but there was an endearing sparkle in his eyes. I wanted to know more about him. I read that his name was Hanumanthappa and that he had secured the eighth rank. That was all the information I could gather.

The next day, to my surprise, his photograph was published again, this time with an interview. With growing interest I learned that Hanumanthappa was a coolie's son, the oldest of five children. They belonged to a tribal group.

He was unable to study further, he said in the interview, because he lived in a village and his father, the sole breadwinner, earned only Rs 40 a day.

I felt sorry for this bright boy. Most of us send our children to tuitions and to coaching classes, we buy them reference books and guides, and provide the best possible facilities for them without considering the cost. But it was different for Hanumanthappa of Rampura. He had excelled in spite of being denied some of the basic necessities of life.

While I was thinking about him with the newspaper still in my hands, I gazed at a mango tree in my neighbour's compound. It looked its best with fresh bark, tender green leaves glistening with dewdrops and mangoes that were about to ripen in a few days. Beyond the tree was a small potted plant that, I noticed, had remained almost the same ever since it had been potted. It was a calm morning. The air was cool and fresh. My thoughts were running free. The continuous whistle of our pressure cooker broke the silence, reminding me that half an hour had passed.

Hanumanthappa's postal address was provided in the interview. Without wasting much time, I took a postcard and wrote to him. I wrote only two lines, saying that I was interested in meeting him and asking whether he could come to Bangalore. Just then my father, ever a practical man, returned from his morning walk. He read the postcard and said, 'Where will he have the money to come so far? If you want him to come here, send some money for his bus fare plus a little extra to buy himself a decent set of clothes.'

So I added a third line to say that I would pay for his travel and some clothes. Within four days I received a similar postcard in reply. Two sentences: in the first he thanked me for the letter, in the second he expressed his willingness to come to Bangalore and meet me. Immediately, I sent him some money and details of my office address.

When he finally arrived in our office, he looked like a frightened calf that had lost its way. It must have been his first trip to Bangalore. He was humble. He wore a clean shirt and trousers, and his hair was neatly parted and combed. The sparkle in his eyes was still there.

I got straight to the point. 'We are happy about your academic performance. Do you want to study further? We would like to sponsor you. This means we will pay your fees for any course of study you wish to take up—wherever it may be.'

He did not answer.

My senior colleague, who was in the office with me, interrupted with a smile, 'Don't go at the speed of bits and bytes. Let the boy understand what you are suggesting. He can give us his answer at the end of the day.'

When Hanumanthappa was ready to return home, he said in a low and steady tone, 'Madam, I want to pursue my studies at the Teachers' Training College in Bellary. That is the one nearest to my village.'

I agreed instantly but spoke to him a little more to find out whether there was any other course he preferred. I was trying to make it clear to him that we would pay the fees for any course he might choose. The boy, however,

seemed to know exactly what he wanted.

'How much money should I send you per month? Does the college have a hostel facility?' I asked.

He said he would get back to me after collecting the correct details. Two days later, he wrote to us in his beautiful handwriting that he would require approximately Rs 300 per month. He planned to take a room on rent and share it with a friend. The two boys would cook for themselves in order to keep their expenses down.

I sent him Rs 1,800 to cover his expenses for six months. He acknowledged my draft without delay and expressed his gratitude.

Time passed. One day, I suddenly remembered that I had to pay Hanumanthappa for the next six months, so I sent him another draft for Rs 1,800.

This too was duly acknowledged, but I was surprised to find some currency notes in the envelope along with his letter. 'Madam,' he had written, 'it is kind of you to have sent me money for the next six months. But I was not in Bellary for the last two months. One month, our college was closed for holidays and during the next month, there was a strike. So I stayed at home for those two months. My expenditure during these months was less than Rs 300 per month. Therefore, I am sending you the Rs 300 that I have not used for the last two months. Kindly accept this amount.'

I was taken aback. Such poverty and yet such honesty. Hanumanthappa knew I expected no account of the money sent to him for his monthly expenses, yet he had made it a

point to return the balance money. Unbelievable but true!

Experience has taught me that honesty is not the mark of any particular class nor is it related to education or wealth. It cannot be taught at any university. In most people, it springs naturally from the heart.

I did not know how to react to this simple village boy's honesty. I just prayed that God would continue to bestow the best on Hanumanthappa and his family.