



'If you don't do philanthropy, you are not a human being at all'

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When Sudha Murty decided to be a philanthropist she had no idea how to go about it. Her father Dr Ramachandra Kulkarni asked her what she planned to do, and the would-be-do-gooder declared she wanted to help the devadasis in her native Karnataka.

Dressed in jeans and T-shirt – her preferred attire 20 years ago – and sporting a bob, Murty ventured into the dark and dingy alleys where the devadasis and other women, as they say in India, of ill repute lived, to spread word about the hazards of AIDS, only to encounter abuse, mockery and even an odd tomato flung at her.

Chastened and tearful, when she returned home after a couple of such abortive journeys, Dr Kulkarni – whose other daughter Jayshree is married to Silicon Valley legend Dr Gururaj 'Desh' Deshpande and whose son Professor Shrinivas Kulkarni is one of the planet's leading astrophysicists – asked his eldest child to look at herself in the mirror.

'You wear trousers and a T-shirt and bobbed hair and you go into the area where these sex workers live. They have no education and you want to talk about AIDS and helping them,' Dr Kulkarni said. 'They cannot identify you with them.'

'I wasn't convinced how appearance mattered when I genuinely wanted to help them and eradicate prostitution,' Murty recalled, delivering the fourth annual Sarah Kailath Memorial lecture at the University of California Berkeley last fortnight.

It wasn't easy for a woman used to wearing jeans and T-shirts to transform herself into a woman in a sari, with a *mangalsutra* and *bindi*. She remembers buying the *mangalsutra* and sari for Rs 200 each.

'You have to understand in philanthropy, people should identify themselves with you, want to share their difficulties,' said Murty, the first woman engineer to be employed at Telco (now Tata Motors).

She is now chairperson of the Infosys Foundation and a Trustee of the Infosys Foundation USA. Her husband is, of course, N R Narayana Murthy, who co-founded Infosys and was its chairman for many years.

Her father, Murty remembers with obvious gratitude, helped her bridge the initial chasm with the devadasis. 'He said if you want to help the devadasis and sex workers, help their children first instead of scaring them with AIDS,' she recalls.

'Thus, my relationship with the devadasis began, by helping their children. They never knew my name or of Infosys. They called me Akka. My father told them she is a teacher and I got respect because I was a teacher. I got respect because I was wearing a *mangalsutra*. I got respect because I was wearing a sari and helping their children. Slowly, I became their friend and they shared their horrible stories with me. They would come to me and cry.'



Sudha Murty, philanthropist extraordinaire.

in Karnataka and served as bank guarantor for 3,000 women. Their children are now doctors, nurses and engineers.

'My father told me 'This is one of the oldest professions in the world, so don't say you will eradicate it. You can say I can reduce it. Don't say I can remove it,' Murty remembers, and adds, 'He said in my lifetime if you can rehabilitate 10 sex workers to live a normal life, I will be a very proud father. Before he died I was able to rehabilitate only seven, but in 17 years I have rehabilitated 3,000 of them.'

'I learned the basics from the House of Tatas,' Murty acknowledges when *India Abroad* asks her who inspired her to delve into philanthropy. A reporter who once interviewed her in India recalls she only has a portrait of J R D Tata in her office.

Murty remembers being choked up when asked to give a speech at a function hosted by the sex workers to honor her. 'When my turn came to speak, they were waiting to hear what I would say. I was unable to speak. Philanthropy means love your fellow human beings. Is it a must? Yes it's a must.'

'I went to engineering college in 1968 when it was unheard for a lady to join engineering college. When my husband started Infosys he asked me for money. I had Rs 10,250. I gave him Rs10,000... It was impractical to leave an engineer's job and become a teacher and a philanthropist. In the eyes of the world all decisions were impractical. But in terms of the philanthropy, I have always done what I am supposed to do.'

'Now when I see women in engineering colleges, I think my journey was worth it. I thank god for giving me an extraordinary life, a life where I can touch 3,000 families, and for giving an extraordinary career. A career of philanthropy is much better being a director of any technical company. For giving me extra opportunity to serve children in difficulty and in return they made me a better human being.'

'This is the magic touch of philanthropy,' says Murty. 'I have completed my circle. I started with nothing and today 3,000 people enjoy a free life. If you don't do philanthropy, you are not a human being at all. I realized that. My life cycle is fulfilled due to philanthropy.'

'Social change takes time,' she tells *India Abroad*. 'Look at my journey. I was the only girl in engineering at Telco. Today 60 percent of the engineering population are girls. Don't expect miracles in social change.'

Murty believes the next generation understands philanthropy, so they are shifting from donating food at temples to donating money for philanthropic work.

'What she said is very important,' Meghna Bhimarao, an undergrad student at UC Berkeley who listened to Murty, tells *India Abroad*. 'Life is not worth without giving love unconditionally.'

'I want to give effectively,' says Anitha Nagarajan, another attendee at Murty's talk. 'I don't want to give randomly, but to have a cause. I have watched YouTube to learn about philanthropy and Murty is so well known for it. The ideas she gave today were really useful.'



Left to right, Sudha Murty, N R Narayana Murthy, Nandan Nilekani and Rohini Nilekani, a journalist at Bombay magazine before their wedding, at a picnic near Bangalore in the early 1980s.

'I realized they didn't want a solution for their problems,' Murty remembers of her early foray into philanthropy. 'They wanted just one sentence: 'It is not your fault, the situation is like that.'

With her spirited narrative – Murty is also a best-selling and beloved author in India – enlivened the dry subject of her lecture, 'Philanthropy – An Option or a Necessity'.

The Sarah Kailath Memorial Lecture on 'Women and Leadership' derives from the Sarah Kailath Chair in India Studies.

The chair was established by pioneering scientist Dr Thomas Kailath and Vinita and Narendra Gupta in honor of Dr Kailath's late wife Sarah Kailath, to enhance awareness and knowledge of issues relating to the Indian subcontinent.

Seventeen years have passed since Sudha Murty began her philanthropy. She has rehabilitated 3,000 sex workers