

Chapter 11

Phenomenal Endurance to Seek Purpose and Overcome Limitations - R. Shreedhar



Introduction:

Most of us would like life to be smooth and comfortable, and give us our due share of happiness and pride. We believe that life is a blessing and one is chosen by God to enjoy the goodness of His creation, this universe. We seek education, engagement in a profession for pecuniary benefits, appropriate marriage and creation of progeny, staying in the pink of health and finally, getting socially recognised for being a “complete human.” We see comfort and happiness in life as being the end game of our living and we go through a lifelong checklist that keeps us posted on the socially accepted parameters of good living. We see materialistically, and also go by our own and social perceptions.

The above is an idealistic condition. Not many are blessed to live ideally. There are people who are deprived of wellbeing by circumstance of birth or some time after in life, when they are brought down by sudden sickness or

by an accident. One may feel deprived because of social factors prevailing at birth or later in life. There are also people who are deprived due to their economic conditions. However, any such person can shape his or her own life based on a genuine effort to face life completely and squarely, irrespective of the circumstances and irrespective of what others may think. One must be able to muster a lot of courage, endurance and faith in oneself to overcome and enjoy living when one is seriously afflicted. These are conscious choices a person makes: one, to allow their misfortunes to continue to hurt them and bog themselves down with self-sympathy and a despondent attitude, blaming the unknown for such a poor condition, or, two, to be brave and fight to lead a life that makes a difference, to become an “Incredible Champion.”

Here we discuss Mr. Shreedhar, who has successfully overcome his unfortunate condition of being affected with a permanent inability caused by illness when he was a child.

Early days:

Shreedhar was born to a traditional family living in Chennai. He has two brothers and a sister. His father was the main breadwinner for the family and his mother provided all the care and grooming to the children. When he was of 18 months old, he was down with fever and attacked by polio. One of his hands and both legs were badly affected. He could hardly walk and hold things. His parents tried their best to cure him with different traditions of medicines, without any success. It was tough for everyone in the family and devastating for Shreedhar.

Initially, his father used to carry him for school. Those days there was no awareness about the needs of such physically challenged persons in public places. Schools neither had provisions for ease of movement nor could they afford to install them. Further, there were a number of emotional factors that worked in the society of those days. The presence of physically challenged persons in a school and its classrooms was seen as an avoidable distraction, and schools did not encourage such children to enrol. These two factors made Shreedhar drop out of school at the age of eight years. One can imagine how life became miserable for an eight-year old boy who was fond of education but found himself stuck at home, with nearly no interaction with rest of the world other than his family.

This was in the mid 1950s, when in India, even in a place like Chennai (then Madras), there was inadequate social support available for challenged persons. There was complete lack of support in the public for them. Even today in India in many places, there is lack of infrastructure support that would expedite

movement of such people. Shreedhar could hardly go out. He could not afford a wheelchair till the mid 1980s, when his cousins got him one. By then, he was already into his late 30s. For everything in life, he had to look up to someone to help him.

Overcoming the challenge:

It was difficult to spend time effectively and Shreedhar's feeling of being deprived of education increased. He started reading newspapers and familiarised himself with happenings around the world. During the early stages of his youth, Shreedhar was focused on learning languages, namely, Tamil and English. Apart from reading newspapers, he extensively used the radio for companionship and learning.

Slowly, he started engaging himself with a peer group, mainly the visually impaired, who were interested in pursuing an education. They lacked the support of professional readers and writers that could help them. Shreedhar offered to work with such people as reader and study for them. This was especially for those pursuing graduation and post-graduation in literature, namely Tamil literature, and then philosophy. These two subjects helped him to gain a lot of confidence and take life more pragmatically. Reading philosophy also kindled his interest in learning astrology.

Shreedhar was also crazy about learning English. He used every opportunity to learn English. He went on learning new words and ensured the practised whatever he read in the day, using it in a conversation and/ or in writing. In spite of his limitations, he constantly referred to a leading dictionary. It is amazing to note this, but he explained, "I could then relate early to radio and work on developing friends." Thus, Shreedhar overcame his disadvantages by reading and writing and helping others as well.

Radio programme reception monitoring:

In the earlier era, radio news was one of the key means of communications to external or overseas countries, especially for developed nations. The English news was the most popular programme broadcast by them. The reasons for such propaganda news were: 1. establish, renew and keep progressing on cultural connect, especially with developing nations or erstwhile colonies; 2. communicate about developments, especially on calamities, natural disasters and outbursts of violence and spread messages for peace and harmony through international leaders and opinion makers participating in such programmes; 3. government owned stations used to broadcast a nation's foreign policy interests and agenda by disseminating its views on international affairs or on the events in particular parts

of the world, especially on geopolitical matters. During periods of cold war, this was critical to pass on lead opinions among listeners; and 4. communicating on areas of interest for business and leisure travellers.

Some of the leading broadcasting stations with which Shreedhar was associated included Voice of America, BBC, Voice of Germany, Netherland and France for their English news programmes. He was also excited about Radio Ceylon and supported its Tamil programme with his feedback. For all these radio stations, he used to monitor the quality of reception of the news broadcast by them. More importantly, it connected him not only with the news, but also with important personalities and journalists. This explains his drive to network and his passion about what he pursued, which took him to greater heights than a normal enthusiast would have found difficult to attain.

Not only did these popular radio channels help Shreedhar to learn English, German and gain working knowledge of Spanish and French, they also kindled an interest to connect with amateur radio (popularly known as ham radio) enthusiasts. Shreedhar had a ham radio and also procured a license to operate it. This helped him to connect with large groups of people across the globe. He developed friends in every nook and corner of the world and engage in conversations with them on matters of mutual interest. It was a phenomenal achievement for someone who was crippled and who could not go to school!

Practice of astrology:

Read what Shreedhar has to say of his interest in astrology.

I learned and mastered astrology, especially the traditional Indian practice of reading horoscopes, which are based on planetary positions at the time and place of birth. Even today, I practice astrology as a professional and a number of people visit me every day for consultancy. Astrological predictions give them emotional support and balance when they are engulfed by problems, disappointments or are brimming with hopes and expectations and seeking divine blessings for favourable outcomes. Such things cannot be foretold. But astrologers can be good counsellors who prepare them to better address the pains and pleasures of life. People love to share and require empathy and compassion. If they are strong, they do not come to me. If they are meek, then also they do not come to me. People who come to me need direction and a shoulder to cry on. I lend them that, with what I have learnt. I guess people need that and that's why they approach me. Traditionally, these practices are based on statistical analyses and detailed observations, and personally, I recommend taking them in a guarded fashion. Anything which is overdone is not correct, and so also astrological prediction-driven behaviour patterns!

Shreedhar further adds, “Personally speaking, it is such sessions that help me to build my confidence. When people are crippled in so many ways, big and small, why should I worry too much about my own limitations! God has been kind to give me the spirit to fight it out. I have the endurance to pursue my goals, to make a difference to my life by not looking inward and sympathising with myself, but by chasing a dream of a fulfilled life.” His resolution to live an extraordinary life is amazing, and could well be the envy of any human being!

Another important advantage of his astrology practice was that from the time he started the Maithri Educational Trust to help economically deprived students, funds started to pour in from those who had consulted him earlier and settled abroad. It may be sheer coincidence, but it was all for a great cause!

Helping economically underprivileged:

Here is Shreedhar talking about his motivation to help the economically underprivileged.

Around 1986, when I was about 40 year old, I started feeling that my purpose in life was not fighting the crippling of my limbs, but helping poor students who could not go to school for want of money. I was disturbed by the fact that I could not complete my schooling as I could not be physically carried there every day. I was depressed to see well-built boys and girls unable to go to school because of the poor cultural and economic positions of their families. Though there were trusts and government programmes that were meant to enable such people to pursue an education, all of these programmes were still found to be inadequate. There were a few other drawbacks that prevented the deprived from using them at different times. One was that many of the poor did not have an identity, meaning proof of residence. They may not have had a ration card or any other official proof of identity. Nowadays, this situation is being improved, with the introduction of the Aadhar Card and the National Population Register, which are all recent developments. The kids of those days failed to get support of such programmes. Their families themselves cited the lack of proof of identity or address as a reason not to push for their education. To top it all, most of the children were orphans or were nurtured by single mothers, or their fathers were alcoholic and not much concerned about family commitments.

Sitting at the front of his home, Shreedhar would see children wandering on the road during school time. He started probing and decided to help them by using his leadership qualities to create an organisation that would cater to them. He had innumerable problems. He first gathered a group of people who could assist him in this process. He had to organise a group of the right beneficiaries and then organise funds for them. Second, he had to evolve a system with which the children were adequately motivated to make a difference to themselves

by availing of such support. Further, he needed an appropriate programme monitoring system to satisfy himself of advancement, as there was no governing principles or funding bodies which mandate him to do so.

He started off the Maître Educational Charitable Trust with 20 children in 1991. Today, he supports around 338 children, of whom more than 150 children are girls. Shreedhar has a strong team of volunteers who go scouting for children to help or validating references they get. The only conditions he imposes for supporting a child is that the child must come from a genuinely weak financial background and that there was inability to get support from any source. Shreedhar encourages children by not just paying their fees, but by also going beyond that to ensure their environment is improved. For example, there was the case of a family with three brilliant girl children, who did not have a toilet. The girls found it very difficult when they were growing. He ensured that he arranged donors who could help build a toilet for that family.

He distributes hygiene products, especially for girl children, by buying them in bulk directly from manufacturers and wholesalers. Shreedhar visited the Goonj (means echo) office in Chennai. Goonj is a multi award-winning social enterprise that started the NJPC (Not Just a Piece of Cloth) initiative in 2005. NJPC is focused on popularising low cost hygiene products for women who cannot afford expensive brands. The NJPC programme is a nationwide intervention, which not only starts with providing a physical product but stresses more on changing practices, behavioural patterns, education and replication in the long term.

There have been a number of instances when he has travelled the extra mile to help students. In one of the cases, a girl student in an engineering college at Chennai was asked to leave the course as she could not find financial support. All doors were closed and the college asked her to leave. At that point, Shreedhar came to know about the situation. He got in touch with the management and spoke to the faculty and assessed the student's capability and plight. In an hour, he had transferred half of the dues and had promised to pay the balance in a few weeks. The college took her back and the girl was not even informed till the whole process was complete. Shreedhar keeps close track of all beneficiaries. He meets them regularly, even if it means constant travelling to different places. All those in and around Chennai meet every week end for about eight hours. They interact among themselves and bond well. It is amazing to learn that members of the peer group support each other to overcome problems and stay focused. Shreedhar ensures that students who are supported by them are not defocused and drop out. This meeting also supports sharing knowledge and supplementary requirements in their learning, as all of them cannot afford private tuition.

Shreedhar maintains a complete record of all students and donors. He connects through mail and updates his records of students' marks and attendance based on inputs from the schools. It is a thoroughly professional and tech-savvy approach that is a differentiator. He handles all these tasks by himself.

Challenges and support:

Shreedhar felt that challenges were aplenty at the early stages. He has learnt to be resolute. He loves nature. Whenever possible, he likes to be with nature and enjoys the environment around. When he was going through a transition in the mid 1980s, he decided to stay away from home for one and half months, all alone with a help around for emergencies. He did a programme on "The art of flowering" in The Theosophical Society, Adyar, staying all alone there for a few weeks. These were the times which built his endurance and enabled him to stick to making a difference to others by giving them what he himself could not have, education. And yet, he lives with humility, dignity and honour.

Shreedhar talked about how many friends helped him voluntarily. They were all impressed with the system and confidence he had and the impact he could create on the students while counselling them for good. Shreedhar was also impressed with his peer group members who have been "Incredible Champions": Mr. Ramakrishnan, who started the Amarseva Trust at Ayikudy, Thenkasi and Mr. Sankara Raman, who joined the Amarseva Trust later. He also drew inspiration from Mr. J. Prabhakar, who is a social activist. He recalled how in 15 minutes on December 24, 2004, the day the tsunami hit Chennai, Mr. Prabhakar drew ten pictures, which were auctioned for a huge sum of money to provide immediate relief to those affected (ref: Exhibit).

Exhibit: Work of phenomenal personalities and how they inspire

J Prabhakar: Prabhakar, who was born in Seetharamapetta, a village in Andhra Pradesh, showed great talent for line drawing, and all early signs were that he would become an artist. Even as a boy, his gifted pencil art won him accolades. He was very outgoing and service minded at school. He was disciplined and showed bravery in reaching out to social causes. He enrolled in the NCC and was an outstanding cadet. Through a sheer accident in life, he could not manage admission to an academic institution and further his ambitions of becoming an art teacher; he took a job in a factory at North Chennai. He resolved not to languish over spilt milk and started to rekindle his interest in social service. There has been no stopping him since then. He proves that you do not need huge capital, but the willingness to work as part of a team and to

network outside your own group to reach out to people. Sharing experiences and galvanising interest groups have accelerator effects. That's Prabhakar, who inspires us.

Ramakrishnan: Ramakrishnan belongs to the category of unfortunate people who became physically challenged due to an accident in their prime. The level of impact and incidence of such accidents vary from person to person. Though any crippling is a misfortune, there are cases where a person becomes confined to a bed or a wheel chair because of spinal injury. There are some cases where the victims are reduced to a vegetative state! "God forbid such cruelty" is a wish and a prayer. How does a family with a member who is so affected manage the misfortune? These victims must learn to refocus and rebuild their lives to achieve relative normalcy. We rarely come across a person from this category who not only restructures his life, but also manages to set up an institution to serve other physically challenged people. S. Ramakrishnan, the founder of Amar Seva Sangam, who became a quadriplegic in 1975 at the age of 21, is an incredible champion and a great person worthy of adoration.

Sankara Raman: Congenital muscular dystrophy often appears at birth with hypotonic and severe trunk and limb weaknesses. Obviously, afflicted persons find it difficult to lead a normal life, as they are confined to wheel chairs. Like many other physically challenged people, they also tend to give up enthusiasm and the hope of being a normal human being due to the pains they undergo. This is an undesirable consequence, as they too have the right to lead a normal life. Here, we explore how Sankara Raman fought this kind of a physical challenge with courage, determination and intellect. He has teamed up with Ramakrishnan. The phenomenal character and spirit displayed by him, and his willingness to fight to restore dignity and confidence in differently abled persons is worth emulating.

Source: Chandrasekaran, *Incredible Champions* published by Notion Press, 2014

According to Shreedhar instead of resigning to fate, accepting reality and steering in the right direction will take one to far and wide destinations, which would bring about a sense of satisfaction. According to him nothing is impossible if one is desirous and works hard towards getting what one wants.

Conclusion:

Shreedhar impresses immensely with his ability to overcome limitations. He believes in giving others what he could not have himself, and now, he gives

in abundance. Shreedhar believes in technology and information systems for monitoring and giving feedback. He demonstrates humanness and is committed. He is energetic all through by connecting with people through a communication mode. In simple terms, one can be crippled by the inability to think beyond limitations and to lament on one's fate. If one desires to overcome setbacks, the sky is the limit. Stretch the horizon far and wide and aspire to reach the stars. He is simply inspiring, especially after you look at him and talk to him for a while!