

## **Another very special person**

*V.S. Sunder*

People like me, who indulge in ‘activism’ of some sort in support of a disadvantaged minority, are legion. And you can find a common denominator to many of them, which is that they or some near relatives or friends have belonged to this minority, and they see and empathise with this person’s problems in just managing the routine of daily life.

I am embarrassed to say that the number of such activists that I know, who do not fall under this bracket, can be counted on the fingers of one hand. I have already written about a couple of these people in this column (Shiva championing the cause of Dalits, and Vaishnavi that of the mentally ill). I want to devote this article to one more such exceptional person - partly to punctuate the tedium of my predominantly complaining mode of writing with the occasional positive piece.

Let me lead up to my heart-warming experience. The faithful reader of this column will not need to be reminded that I suffer from a neurological condition known as multiple sclerosis (MS). I have, for some time now, been receiving invitations to attend monthly meetings of the Chennai chapter of the MSSSI (MS Society of India). Till recently, I had not taken up these invitations since I thought (how wrong I was) that it might be depressing to go to a place where several people with the same ailment gathered together to compare notes!

What changed my run of negative responses was an invitation which said the purpose of this meeting was to recognise and commend the efforts of the care-giver, the person who has devoted a large part of her life to enabling a near one afflicted with MS to live in some manner of normalcy. Since I cannot but agree that my life would be unimaginably difficult were it not for my wife helping me with countless acts of kindness every day, I wrote to the persistent secretary that I would be glad to come with my wife. This meeting happened to fall on a Saturday when Chennai was reeling under the onslaught of the monsoon with its attendant corollary of waterlogged roads. In spite of the daunting weather conditions, we entered a hall which was already half-full and filling up fast. It reminded me of frequent get-togethers we used to have long ago in our fairly large extended

family. Each new arrival was met with many friendly greetings and queries about how or where so-and-so was.

The reason for the bonhomie and camaraderie was immediately apparent. Everybody was welcomed at the entrance like a long-lost son by the secretary Ann Gonsalvez. She simply knew the entire family of the one who had MS, and the obvious happiness with which she welcomed people was a pleasure to behold. People simply blossomed in her warmth, and a tremendous feeling of a close-knit happy family permeated through the entire gathering. At each of these monthly meetings, Ann arranges for a physiotherapist and/or doctor to also be present whom the members could consult, or who might give a short talk addressing matters of vital interest to the MS fraternity. And alternate meetings are dedicated to fun and games so it is not always a somber occasion. Naturally, the meeting is capped by a lunch organised in the same room. This week's meeting will celebrate Diwali with a special lunch (to be sure).

To wrap it up, I should tell you the wonderfully serendipitous story of how Ann became the honorary secretary of MSSSI (Chennai chapter) - which post she has held for as long as almost (but not) all the current members can remember. Her predecessor had to relocate from Chennai to Bangalore, and wanted to find a successor. So she went to consult one of the longest standing members of this society. Unfortunately the latter had apparently moved. At a bit of a loss on how to proceed, this ex-secretary apparently found an open door and asked the inmate if she might know where Sushma might have moved to. The inmate in question offered a glass of water to her guest, who was apparently a big made lady slightly out of breath from her exertions, and asked if she could help. When she heard the reason for her guest's visit, she promptly told her that she knew the perfect person, also a neighbour, and recently retired from her tenure as a Bank Manager. And this neighbour was Ann, who took over 'because she had always been interested in doing some social service'!

The story of how she browbeat a commercial organisation (Bosch) into letting her have a room of their office for the society as well as their conference room for the monthly meetings of the society would exceed the customarily accepted word-length for this column. So let me just conclude with a heartfelt 'Thanks, Ann, for being you! Have a wonderful Diwali.'