

## My great grand-aunt

The Oxford dictionary, or so my computer tells me, recognises words like great-grandfather (which means the father of a grandparent) and grand-uncle or great-uncle (meaning uncle of a parent). I crave your indulgence while I boast a little about my lineage, but with a good reason. The point is that I come from quite an illustrious family of achievers, even if I say so myself. My (maternal) uncle and (also maternal) grand-uncle both won Nobel Prizes for their work in Physics. But this article is about my paternal grand-aunt who, in my book, is the greatest achiever among all my relatives. I want to talk about this great grand-aunt (not to be confused with great-grandaunt!) who led a simply astounding life.

She was known simply as Sister - conjecturally owing to a cute remark made long ago by her kid sister, my grandmother - to multitudes of women who had had unbelievably unfortunate lives until they had the good fortune of coming across her. She lived in a house right opposite the house where we lived when I was a little boy. I only remember her as a petite sweet old lady with a head of silvery hair, always dressed in impeccable white saris and forever fussing with a hearing aid which would periodically make cooing noises, much to her annoyance. I was 17 when she died. Her body had been laid out in the front sit-out of her house. And from the wee hours of the morning, there was a seemingly unending stream of women who kept coming, with tears streaming down their cheeks as they walked around the body of this silvery woman and paid their last respects to this great lady. It was a revelation to me, who had had no clue till then of what a fantastic life she had led. The haunting memory of that day is of the woman who came running to the old style cremation ground just as many of us were returning after having completed the last rites and consigned the great lady's mortal remains to the flames. This woman just kept sobbing inconsolably. As soon as she had heard (somewhere in Andhra where she was living then) of Sister's passing away, she had taken whatever buses and trains she had had to take in order to try, in vain as it eventually turned out, to pay her final respects to the physical frame that had once housed the person who had given her a new life when any hope of a normal one had appeared to have ended.

Now let me divulge the secret of her greatness. She had been 'married', when she herself was just eleven years old, to a boy just a few years older, and who died not much later. This was around 1900, and what the Brahmin community did in those days to a child widow belonged to a master-class in sadism. The little girl would be dressed up in all her bridal finery, jewelry (and the more the better), silk sari, etc., etc. And some duly authorised dignitary would proceed to successively remove all this finery from the poor child, and the *piece de resistance* was when she was tonsured, and the bald girl was made to change from her silk sari to a 'sari' of coarse white cotton, without even the customary blouse to cover the upper body. At the end of all this, the girl was banished to some unseen inner corner of the house, to lead the rest of her life in this attire and form, essentially as a servant/cook/odd-job-person, one never to be seen by outsiders or to participate in any 'auspicious' event!

Fortunately, Sister's parents (and a widowed aunt, who also lived with them) showed themselves to be remarkably courageous and enlightened people who simply refused to permit

a brutal society to steal the life of their remarkable daughter. Much to the derision and criticism of the ‘neighbours and relatives’, not only did they spare Sister the customary barbarism doled out to child widows, they even went out of the way to enable Sister to have a complete education. She stood first in the entire Madras Presidency in her school exams. In the face of people telling him ‘ok you have made your point, now this is more than enough’, Sister’s father got her into the Presidency College for her undergraduate studies. When she passed her B.A. in Botany with honours in 1911, she was *the first Hindu woman*, let alone a child widow, to have ever graduated from the entire Madras Presidency!

Now she began repaying the faith and commitment of her father by leading an exemplary life as social reformer and educationist. The educational institutions she had a non-trivial role in starting are legion: Sarada Ladies Home, Queen Mary’s College<sup>1</sup>, Lady Willingdon Training School, Kuppam School (near the erstwhile Ice House), Sarada Cheri school in Cuddalore, Sarada Vidyalaya School, Srividya Kalanilayam, Mylapore Ladies Club which subsequently became Vidya Mandir, Mylapore (incidentally alma mater to me as well as to my daughter); and many times, Sister just handed over the running of institutions she had got up and running, without once attaching her name to the venture in any way. All along, she also kept working at creating institutions such as ‘widow’s homes’ (Sarada Illam, for instance) where she led by example in creating an environment for women to live and contribute meaningfully to society.

I can go on about how she was part of the first All India Women’s Conference on Educational Reform (along with Rukmini Arundale, Rukmini Lakshmi pathy, etc.), one of only six women to have represented the entire Presidency, a nominated member of the Madras Legislative Council, ... Moving and illuminating accounts of her life may be found in Monica Felton’s *A child widow’s story* and in Malathi Ramanathan’s *Sister R.S. Subbalakshmi - Social reformer and Educationist* (Ph.D. thesis from Bombay University), which are both revealing records of the black ages from which she strove to liberate our women.

Ever since I started writing this column, I have been periodically receiving mails requesting advice or assistance on a variety of issues. I have even gone so far as to say, during a public talk I gave, that if you have been so fortunate as to touch one or two lives, yours would have been a life well-lived. This kind of complacent observation, when viewed against a life such as Sister’s, reminds me of Newton’s oft-quoted saying: *If I have seen farther it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.*

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<sup>1</sup>My reference to QMC in this context is based on the following anecdote in Monica Felton’s book (on p. 137), apparently narrated to her by Nallamuthu Ramamurthi (the sister of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, another visionary woman from Sister’s era): While she was still a student at PT School (Presidency and Training School in Triplicane) run by Sister, a member of the Governor’s Executive Council had visited the school, and she had read out her prize winning essay on how she wished to have a women’s college in Madras. The visitor pooh-poohed the very suggestion that it might be possible to fill a college with women. To illustrate his point, he asked the class full of girls just how many of them would really want to spend the next 3 or 4 years studying for an undergraduate degree. Every girl in the class put up her hand! And Queen Mary’s College was started the following year, 1914, by the Government.

Not only did Ms. Nallamuthu join the college, she even went on to become its first Indian Principal.

I got to thinking recently of Sister, as a result of an initiative begun by a cousin of mine, herself an alumnus of Queen Mary's College, as are many many Madras women (including my own mother). She was startled to find that even a former Principal of this College was unaware of who Sister Subbalakshmi was! This convinced my cousin of the need to create a web-site or a biopic on Sister's life and achievements. It got me thinking that I might help things moving by writing about her in this column. This column is supposed to address the special needs of people with disabilities. If losing a husband (rather than a limb) and being forced therefore (!?) to live an eternity of indignities is not a disability, I must be missing something. That is why you see me writing about this most Noble of my relatives, whom I was one of a handful of relatives who were privileged to have known as, and called *Ponnakka* (loosely translated as 'jewel among (elder) sisters')! As this cousin said when I asked her to look over this article for factual accuracy, and I couldn't summarise this article better than she did: *Ponakka drew many disabled small girls to her, and transformed them into a "differently abled" set of young women, in the literal sense of the phrase!*