

Gurukulam: A sanctum-sanctorum for Swasinis*

What kinds of ambitions would you associate with a 23-year-old?

Perhaps aim for that elusive course; or work towards that white-collared job; or queue up for that American visa; or hunt with a cricket bat; or rather be hung up with the cinema sets?

Youngsters do follow such trends but what about the one who sets one?

There was one such youngster who, at 23, was driven by a national ambition.

At 23, he braved the establishment of a nation that ruled the world. At 23, he led a national movement. At 23, he went to prison. And at 23, he went into history books.

It was Sardar Vedaratnam, who at 23 championed the Vedaranyam salt march that triggered a national appetite for freedom, at 1930.

The crucial quest, known as the Salt March of the south, was modelled after the Dandi March piloted by Mahatma Gandhi.

Vedaratnam, who furnished all the necessary resources for the salt team, presided over the function at Vedaranyam when the team successfully entered the town to a welcome of gunshots and who played a pivotal role along with Rajaji in the march on the whole, was a man of ideals.

When his well-wishers, who foresaw the worst, advised him to move his properties to the names of his kith and kin prior to the march, he refuted. He reasoned out that such devices of political manipulation befit him not. We can't resist, here, the temptation of pondering about the misappropriation, in gargantuan proportions, of public properties by politicians today as a gross misfit in the exquisite record sheet of the thing called Indian political history.

His properties were confiscated indeed by the British for the conduct of the march, as spotted. In addition, Vedaratnam was jailed for six months and fined by the Raj.

Vedaratnam took all these fertilisers, like a seed would with rubbish, and sprouted out of prison stronger.

Once out of prison he became a talking point all over the nation with his exploits being compared to that of Sardar Patel's. He was sought after by the Congress committees of the state, for their conferences and meetings.

In 1931 he was conferred with the title 'Sardar' at a conference in Tirunelveli.

* *Chaste, unmarried girls*

Sardar always surprised all by his striking ray of idealism.

The British, after seizing his properties planned to auction them off. None, obviously, desired to acquire these lands in the locality. There was one man though who dared to acquire these properties.

Sardar Vedaratnam, being the idealist that he was, used to invite this very same man to preside over many of his public meetings, at later points in time, when he was in a position of prominence.

The same streak of idealism propelled him further and he founded the Kasturba Gandhi Kanya Gurukulam at Vedaranyam, just before independence.

He visited a Gurukulam set in a tranquil milieu in 1924 and was indeed fascinated by the idea. He resolved to undertake a similar initiative, symbolising piety and peace.

In response to the Gandhian call to his followers who were out of prison then, to channel their energies on constructive programmes that would liberate the nation from the vices of the day and lead towards growth and stability, Sardar chose the path of women education.

One other reason for his choosing this route throws more light on the spirit of freedom that prevailed then. One of his companions, who fought alongside him in various freedom movements earlier, visited him with his daughters Sarada and Kamala.

Narayasamy, as he was known, was a very rich landlord during his halcyon days. Nonetheless he spent his entire properties all through his life for the uplift of the untouchables and various other national causes. Sardar was touched by this old chum of his who was then reduced to severe paucity and who entrusted the girls under his custody vowing to his ripe age. Sardar accepted them as his own daughters and sent them out on training on basic education.

Later on, a casual comment from one of the two girls reignited his long-cherished ambition of commencing a gurukulam.

Sardar begets Gurukulam

On 7th February 1946, Sardar founded the Kasthurba Gandhi Kanya Gurukulam at Vedaranyam, India. It was designed to serve as a residential school for rural and poor girls.

He named the school in fond remembrance of Kasthurba Gandhi, the illustrious wife of Mahatma Gandhi who had passed away by then. The girls Sarada and Kamala served as the first couple of teachers while their father stayed with them and supported the undertaking till his very last.

Sardar thus realised his vision of emancipating rural women, girls and widows from the fetters of slavery, drudgery and illiteracy. The Kasthurba Gandhi Kanya Gurukulam has since been a quintessence of motherliness in the truest sense. Over the years, treading the path of service and sacrifice, Gurukulam, as it is fondly called now, has supported and educated thousands of poor girl children.

Its objective is to strengthen the weaker section in the rural part of southern India. The institution which is still fully operational has sailed into its seventh decade of existence. It provides food five times a day, clothes, shelters and educates the otherwise helpless girls.

The services of Gurukulam

The Gurukulam provides hostel accommodation along with other many services. The inmates of the hostel are in some cases orphans or ones with single parents and in extreme poverty.

The swasinis are no longer, aloof. They are safe, sheltered and sumptuously fed with edibles and edification. More importantly they are no more orphans.

In India most of the marriages are arranged by parents. The moving aspect is that the Gurukulam gets these girls married to the right person as a responsible parent would do and the girls in identical vehemence pay visits of happy homecoming along with their children to complete the circuit.

Parental care as pastoral care:

The concept of Gurukulam revolves around the traditional principle of parenting its pupils by feeding, sheltering and educating them.

It is believed that this approach exposes pupils to effective resource sharing, presence of mind and inculcates pragmatic skills.

In order to achieve all of the above, Gurukulam runs a higher secondary school from standards I to XII comprising of about 2000 girl students.

Quantity and quality seldom go hand in hand but there are exceptions to any rule.

The school has achieved a whopping 100% results in the public examinations in 2010/2011, winning state ranks in some avenues.

Despite kindling the wick of knowledge in the sanctimonious lamp of yearning minds, it provides a plethora of multi-faceted services, support and welfare programmes. One of it is to enable women to be self-reliant taking into vocation. By empowering rural women with self-belief and self-sufficiency, this charity is perceived to be making groundbreaking contributions to society.

The trailblazer achieves this effect by offering training on multifarious activities such as printing, civil draftsman engineering, radio and television mechanism, siddha medical science, office secretaryship, dress designing, banking, dairy scheme and so forth.

It has also created the required devices and now stands as a massive campus. The state government which has recognised the effectiveness of this institution and its infrastructure is sponsoring some training on the technical pathway.

In addition to the above an electronics unit that produces goods and trains on the same is fully functional and so is a cottage industry unit for women on production of incense sticks.

It also offers community living, emphasising on the village sanitation programme.

Keeping up the tradition

In comparison to its counterparts, Gurukulam of Vedaranyam has a prominent advantage. It has germinated from the national movement of independence, has been carried forward in the same spirit for decades by the heirs of Sardar and still retains the same level of patriotism to the day alongside the authentic services it offers.

This link with the national stream has attracted a surfeit of national personalities to Gurukulam who have taken to it as fish to water.

Rajaji, Acharya Vinobabhave [Lieutenant of Mahatma Gandhi], Bharat Ratna K. Kamraj [Former Chief Minister, TamilNadu], R. Venkataraman [Former President of India], Bharat Ratna C. Subramaniam [Former Finance Minister of India / Pioneer of The Green Revolution], G.V. Mavlankar [The first speaker of Lok Sabha, India], Union Minister of Home Affairs P.Chidambaram, Tushar Gandhi [great grandson of Gandhi], C.R. Kesavan [vice president, Rajiv Gandhi National Youth Forum], the Ambassador of Ireland Philip McDonnagh, Micheal Piednoir of Ajai Aadi, France, Sensei Dr. Rev. Narayan Uchigaki of Nippon Vedanta Society, Japan, the Ambassador of India to Norway and Iceland Gopalakrishna Gandhi, Sarojini Varadappan [Chair person, Indian Red Cross], Christine are some of the many such renowned associates.

The lighted lineage of the leader

Appakutti, the heir of Sardar, succeeded him after his demise and served the same cause as his father. Utilising the platform launched by his father the son advanced further and expanded the operations.

Appakutti, remarkable in his own right, diversified and modernised the setup. He switched the syllabus of gurukulam to the state board from the basic education plan.

On 25th March 1989, the government of India honoured him with the reputable 'Padmashri' award for his selfless service.

The international lions club honoured him with the prestigious Melvin Jones Fellow [MJF].

He was also offered an honorary title by the Ramakrishna Vidyalaya in Chennai.

The torch is now being carried by the grandson of Sardar, his namesake A. Vedaratnam Jr., who has now taken the institution to greater heights.

Treading the footsteps of his ancestors he has devoted his life for this noble cause and has further expanded the institution in many areas.

As managing trustee of gurukulam, on 14 April 2000, he received the highly acclaimed Dr. Ambedkar National award for social understanding and upliftment of weaker section.

At Rastrapathi Bhavan he was bestowed with this honour by the then president of India, KR Narayan.

On 21 July 2001, he received the GD Birla International Award for rural upliftment from the then vice-president of India, Krishna Kant.

Gurukulam has also received many other awards during this time:

The Rotary India award [Theme: 'Education: The Girl Child']

Annamalai University Founder Award,

Gandhigram Rural University Award for Rural Technology

FLO [FICCI Ladies Organisation] Award awarded by Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry [FICCI]

It is reassuring to note the flourish of the leaves and flowers from the seed of Sardar's dream.

Gurukulam today

The Gurukulam has taken its steps forward and has received laudable support from many fronts.

It has started a Teacher's Training Institute and a B.Ed. college for teaching for ladies.

The Government of Ireland has aided a Bakery Training Centre for Women. They have also provided support in building a Trainees' Hostel.

Similarly, the Government of Japan has donated and taken full responsibility for the new Printing Training Institute with a new building.

As a measure of relief from tsunami tragedy, WIPRO has extended their help in building two large complexes comprising of classrooms along with two water-purification plants.

The CARE India has donated a Tsunami rescue hall which houses vocational training centre.

They have also provided the protective compound wall that approximately runs for about 2 kilometres around the facility complex at the Gurukulam.

Under the Human Resources development Ministry, The National council of Rural Institutes (NCRI) conducted a national-level seminar on Basic education preached by Mahatma Gandhi under the title of 'Re-positioning of Nai Talim Education' during last week of December 2009.

Another one year training programme of Knowledge Empowerment -Value Based orientation to Teachers is currently going on.

In addition to the above, various other associations such as Topputhurai Singapore Muslim Association and Tamilnadu Foundation USA have donated classroom buildings and Laboratory buildings.

The municipality of the city of Vertou, France, has donated the French Friendship Hospital to Gurukulam.

American Vedanta Society, Connecticut Tamil Sangam and various such groups have showered benevolence on Gurukulam by contributing towards making buildings comprising of classrooms.

Readers desiring more information and update on this organisation can visit www.gurukulam.org.

The book titled 'Air, Fire & Water' details about the salt march, Sardar Vedaratnam, the genesis and operations of Gurukulam. This has been brought out last year - for anyone who would prefer to delve deep into the subject - and can be procured from Gurukulam.

The Swasini smile

The ambitions of a 23-year-old resulted in the Salt march of the south. His dream was realised through the genesis of Gurukulam. This 65-year old dream is still going strong realising many thousand dreams all along, as a chain reaction.

Some smiles are full of life. Some lives are full of smiles.

But there is something called the smile of life – the variety that makes others smile.

The swasini smile that is seen around Gurukulam, perhaps, has more to say on this meaning of life.