

P. Kalyanasundaram: The Best Librarian in India

Dear Fellow Stephanians,

I wish to share with you the following real life story highlighted by the Hindu (thank God, some members of the media fraternity still care). Instances like this -and there are a few others as well- are an antidote to cynicism. I dream of a day when the stuck-up, Stephanian elitist disposition gives way to something more down to earth, more humane, more responsive. Nurturing a Kalyanasundaram is a far greater achievement than boasting of the luminaries that are often mentioned with uneducated pride. Someday we must undertake a 'human audit' of St. Stephen's, in truth and humility.

I am concerned, nay alarmed, at the rise of imperinence in the college. Discoutesy is not only spreading, but also, what is worse, finding greater tolerance. Discourtesy exudes ignorance: ignorance of realities. It betokens cultural bankruptcy. It mocks the greatness of an institution. We can't be great and crude at the same time. Education must promote greatness of spirit, not crudity of conduct.

St. Stephen's thanks the Hindu for sharing this story with the readers, among whom we count ourselves.

I salute Kalyanasundaram. In him I find the light of Jesus reflected and reinterpreted.

Ad Dei Gloriam

Principal

*A will to serve combined with a sense of social justice has been the guiding principle of **P. Kalyanasundaram**, who has spent over 45 years in social service. A gold medallist in library science, he is also an MA in literature and history. During his 35-year-career as a librarian at the Kumarkurupara Arts College at Srivaikuntam in Tuticorin district, he gave away all his salary for charity and did odd jobs to meet his daily needs. He has also come forward to donate his body and eyes to the Tirunelveli Medical College. His ability to strike a rapport even with youngsters is remarkable. He cites the instance when he started wearing khadi. In college, he was asked to take classes on Gandhianism. "I had to speak about simplicity and everything Gandhi stood for, but I was clad in expensive clothes. That was when I decided to switch over to khadi," he relates. Since then he had always practised what he stood for, making himself a role model for many youngsters.*

The Union Government named him 'The Best Librarian in India'. He has also been chosen as 'one of the top ten librarians of the world'. The International Biographical Centre, Cambridge, has honoured him as 'one of the noblest of the world', while the United Nations Organisation adjudged him as one of the Outstanding People of the 20th Century'. An American organisation has also selected him as the 'Man of the Millennium.'

*Mr. Kalyanasundaram, who has founded a social welfare organisation, 'Paalam', shares his experiences in a chat with **Prathiba Parameswaran**.*

SIMPLICITY IN life and exemplariness in practice has been the hallmark of Mr. Kalyanasundaram. Born in August 1953 at Melakarivelamkulam in Tirunelveli district, he lost his father at a very young age. It was his mother, who inspired him to serve the poor.

When he was at college, the Indo-China war broke out, and he contributed his gold chain to the then Chief Minister, Kamaraj, for the war fund. At this time around, he went to meet Balasubramanian, Editor, *Ananda Vikatan*. "He sent me away, saying he would write about me the day I donated something I had earned myself. I did not speak a word to anyone about what I had done. I took it as a challenge," Mr. Kalyanasundaram recalls. Ever since he got a job as a librarian in Tuticorin, he has contributed all his salary, pension benefits and ancestral property to social welfare. It was not until 1990, when he received his pension arrears and contributed it to the Collector's Fund, that the then Tirunelveli Collector felicitated him, despite his protests. The 'Paalam' serves as a bridge between donors and beneficiaries: it collects money and materials from those willing to donate and distribute them among the weaker sections. It has also contributed to the cyclone relief funds in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, and has helped the earthquake victims in Maharashtra and Gujarat. "We cannot sustain ourselves, unless we contribute towards the society in some way or the other. I strongly feel if even one person does his bit towards social good, there will be some change," he asserts.

Mr. Kalyanasundaram feels that one must achieve something in his chosen field. His contribution to library science is immense. A thesis he submitted as part of his post-graduate course to the Madurai Kamaraj University fetched him distinction. He has also hit upon an easy way of tracing and accessing books in libraries.

He was popular among college and school students, and many of them have joined his organisation. He has long-term plans for his organisation. One is the setting up of a nationalised digital library with modern equipment, which could be accessed by people from all walks of life. He also wants to set up an international children's university in Tamil Nadu, with foreign aid. However, he says, a mission has a meaning only when the right people are involved in it. The Directorate of Public Libraries should recruit people with a library science background to be librarians, he says. "And good librarians should have a broad knowledge of everything.

Mr. Kalyanasundaram worked as a Librarian for 30 years. Every month he donated his entire salary to help the needy. He worked as a server in a hotel to meet his needs. He donated even his pension amount of about TEN(10) Lakh rupees to the needy.

He is the first person in the world to spend the entire earnings for a social cause. In recognition to his service, (UNO)United Nations Organization adjudged him as one of the Outstanding People of the 20th Century.. An American organization honored him with the 'Man of the Millennium' award. He received a sum of Rs 30 cores as part of this award which he distributed entirely for the needy as usual.

All Indians should be PROUD. UNO has honored him but we Indians don't even know that such a personality exist amongst us.

Do pass this on. The whole world should know about him and his passion... so please share it