



**An Encomium on
Amma Annapoorni Aiyar**

AMMA ANNAPOORNI AIYAR

The Back Drop: Nestling between Margao's prestigious Military Training Centre on one side, and the undulating hillocks overlooking the sprawling paddy fields, on the other, towards the north is Amma's humble "KUTIR" a modest dwelling place, hardly worth its name with a tiled roof resting on four crude mud walls, unique enough to be a temporary salubrious refuge, that gave her the joy of living in her pilgrimage from the womb to the tomb, with incessant reflections of the innate revulsions in life caused by her life partner's sad demise, who kept pace in equal measure of the quantum of happiness, throughout her life.

That Amma Annapoorni Aiyar got disengaged herself from the untimely loss of her husband, to devote her time for social cause and thus feel the fragrance of contentment in life is amply evident from the emergence of this temple complex that came as a memorial.

Domestic Aspect: Aiyar family arrived in Goa some- where in the mid thirties from Hospet. Aiyar took up a job with a mining company. Goa was then under Portuguese regime. They were expanding the industry for its export potential. Aiyar's experience in the earlier establishment and the developing industry in Goa made him give up his job and venture into iron ore business, independently. He was unlucky. Nothing went well with his business. By then the Second World War broke out. Impact of the war, consequent glut in the international ore market made him retreat from the business. He drew closer to penuriousness from where he never recovered and it took a heavy toll on his personal assets, and finally in the year 1952 he breathed his last succumbing to his pressures of the business.

By now, the family had grown to a sizable strength with three sons and two daughters of whom the last two were no more than infants and no regular income for subsistence, and no one to turn to, Amma Annapoorni Aiyar decided to face it all alone although, she knew she could lean on her brother (S.M. Sundaram) who was well placed with the British Broadcasting Corporation, London.

Her Legacy: A depleted economic front at home and a hostile atmosphere due to post-war conditions, ever suspicious attitude of the Portuguese Government, her large family of five children and her knowledge in herbal medicines were all the bequest of her personal property that she inherited for future. She was, besides, a firm believer in her ethno-botanic medicines which she used in dispensing to the needy all over Goa.

While facing challenges in life one knows not, the right direction to turn in. But Amma's faith in her Lord and her devotion to the cause she chose, steered her way to Rawanfond, near Margao where she purchased a piece of land to make a beginning of the dream of her life.

The Making of Life: She knew that she had irretrievably entered a course of life with nobody to turn on, or support her. She realized that the youngsters are to be guided to lead a decent dignified life. She was fully aware that she had to be practical for which she needed a job to make both ends meet. All that she knew was to help people in times

of difficulties; now, it was her turn; the best way for her, she thought, was to continue with the noble work of distributing medicines that she had undertaken long ago. Her knowledge in ethno medicines and the power of sacred ash that she possessed, worked wonders, it eked also her subsistances.

The Secret of Her Success: She knew she had to work hard; and maintained that sincere work alone would give her success, for, the value of work is judged not by its quantum but by its quality. The quality of her action, must inspire her patients to have faith in her medicines. Selflessness was her ideal and that guided her throughout. If there was a call for help she would set out with her satchel of medicines immediately, anywhere, any time and on foot. She has travelled, thus, on foot, to every remote corner of Salcete Taluka. Interestingly it was during one such expeditions to Vasco da Gama that she gave birth to Maruti, her youngest son. This time, her patients took care of Amma and the newly born baby. They carried them back to kelshi, near Cortalim, where Aiyar's had settled in Goa.

Miraculous "Vibhuti": Amma has unstinted faith in her Lord and did constantly meditate upon Him. She prayed to Him for endurance and fortitude as calamities befell on her one after the other. It was on one such troubled days that she got her "vision" of the cosmic qualities of the sacred ash "Vibhuti" of "Kumaraswamykovil" of Sandur with which she went around dispensing to the needy and the sick.

Most men of religious acclaim perform miracles. They produce simple objects or medicines from nowhere. That alone gave them a distinct acceptance among the people. Amma's Vibhuti was different from others, which was procured from Kumarswamy temple in Sandur. It worked wonders when administered with herbal concoctions and pastes. With her knowledge in ethno-herbal medicines little or deep, she carried on for over five decades with her frail body draped in a spotless white saree and protected by parasol over her tiny figure, she became a woman of healing touch. Like the Pandora's Box, her magic satchel worked wonders, for, she had medicines for everybody of all ages; she practiced with no concern of her own health or the well being of her family. She set out to any distant place on receipt of a "call" at any time of the day or night, if it served the people who had faith in her medicines. Gradually was known far and wide as "Amma" with a white saree.

An example of the extent of people's faith in her medicines is well illustrated by the experience of a parish priest of Agashi. He was afflicted with a deep sore on one of his legs which did not respond to any available allopathic treatment for a long period of time. Having heard of Amma's effective medicine and its therapeutic values, the priest requested her to pay a visit to him and do whatever she could, in the matter. Upon receiving the invitation she visited the patient and applied her herbal ointment mixed with the famous Vibhuti. He was also advised to drink a tumbler-full of water with a little Vibhuti mixed in it. Believe it or not, he was cured in a matter of 4 to 5 days. When people came to know of the incident, there was, literally, a flow of people from the neighbouring villages to Amma's house for big and small ailments.

The Sacred and The Secular: Amma Annapoorni Aiyar belonged to a high class orthodox Brahmin community of the far south in Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu. She respected all religions. She earnestly believed that man can be made better and happier by improving the atmosphere around and the quality of mind. The incident that follows is an excellent illustration of her secular approach. This particular incident took place while she was on a dispensing mission as an accoucheur to assist in a delivery case in Verna. On her return journey she noticed a cross attached to a fane on the road side, in

total disarray, completely covered with scrubs, a melancholy she could not stand; she stopped forthwith and set to work sooner than she realized. The scrubby grass, and the over arching shrubs all gave way. Upon seeing the old lady trying with her age, other joined in her project “cross-cleansing”; and soon the spot was spick and span. The following day she got it white-washed to look anew and afresh. It is the aspect of her life that revealed her secular sacrosanctity and attitude towards life.

Prudence or Courage: For Amma, life was a series of challenges and miserable experiences. When she confronted pain, she eked out no sorrow nor was she over joyous when she received pleasant news. For example, while at Kelshi, Kalidas, her second son died. There was nobody around. Stricken with grief, she wasted no time lamenting. Alone did she move with a pick-axe and spade and buried the remains without waiting for anybody to help her. Call it her courage, or prudence or both, she was a tower of unshakable fortitude during testing times.

There is yet another incident that shows her practical approach to life. It happened when she lost her eldest son. He died in Bombay in the year 1961. Upon receiving the news of the tragedy, people gathered at her place to offer condolences. But Amma was away visiting her patients. When she returned home she saw from a distance, a conclave waiting to sympathize with her. Amma told them, “Why have you come? To grieve over? If you grieve, will I ever get my son back? Go away and do your work”. Unmoved and unaffected she quietly slid into her room.

Another incident which has pleasing overtones is connected with her daughter Jaya, when she gave birth to a baby. The pleasant news was eventually carried to Amma who was, then, busy with in her work of beneficence. She had no time to rejoice on the new arrival. She looked at it quite casually and went on with her work.

Full Time Social Work: Notwithstanding the “twenty-four hour vigil” that she maintained visiting the sick and thus doing priestly type of puritanic work. She started with yet another humanitarian service of giving water to thousands of thirsty devotees who thronged Zambaulim during Shigmo – Gulal – Pindika festivals. She continued this noble service with great zeal; and even extended to the devotees at Chandranath Parvath, during Chaitra – Purnima Zathra Festival of Shri Chandreshwar, in the month of April. Imagine her work! Water had to be carried on head from the foothill – and distribution of water at the top of the hill to about twenty five thousand devotees, every year! She took upon herself as a bounden duty to serve water to the devotees of The Lord and derived great joy from her exercise.

Anecdotes: There are numerous anecdotes of her lifetime that reveal the different aspects of her life. This particular incident refers to Festival period of Zambaulim.

Ignorant of all political upheavals and the siege laid by the Portuguese army restricting people’s free movement in and out of Goa, Amma planned to visit her son in Bombay. Tiny Maruti and little Jaya had accompanied her. Without much difficulty they arrived in Bombay and spent a couple of weeks with her son. But she was becoming anxious, for, the Gulal Festival was fast approaching and her presence was needed there for the distribution of water. But on return journey she was not permitted to set foot on Goan soil. She was sent back to Bombay, where she became impatient. She did not know what to do; she wanted to return to Goa at any cost, and therefore, hit upon a daring plan to cross over unnoticed by a shorter route – via Sawantwadi. As planned she boarded a bus from Bombay and arrived at Sawantwadi in the morning; crossed over the border through Naibaug on foot and continued for about three to four hours. Weary and

tired, with no one familiar in sight, they took refuge under a tree. Hunger and thirst overtook them; thoroughly exhausted they were feeling sleepy; suddenly, somebody from nowhere appeared on the scene, gave them water and fruits; guided them to safety, but not before they were made to dress like the locals. Believe it or not, the man disappeared with no sign of his trail. But happily they arrived at Zambaulim in time to carry on with the noble work.

Amma, often wondered as to who could be the God – sent rescuer? Could He assume the form of a guide? Nevertheless, she reached in time for her service to the pilgrims at Zambaulim.

This noble tradition started by Amma is still continued quite religiously after her death at Chandreshwar Temple, at Parvath, Paroda.

There is yet another incident which brings about her promptitude in as much as her conformity with destiny and mental disposition. It took place at Chandranath. There was an unusual crowd of devotees that year during Chaitra-Poornima-Zatra. As in the past Amma was busy with her work at Chandranath. Someone rushed to her and informed that her daughter Jaya had a still-born baby and was being nursed in the hospital. She paused for a moment and descended the steps with as much alacrity as she look up the job on herself, got into the waiting vehicle and arrived at Dr. Gracias Nursing Home in Margao, only to see a crowd of her near and dear, about to burst. Amma knew that it was a serious moment and that she should have control on herself and in an unruffled even temper, she told her daughter: “Grieve not my dear girl; this child was not to be yours. It is an aberrant origin, a freak birth, an abnormal happening. You have no hand in it; shed not your tears. Nor am I prepared to waste mine; I must go back to do my appointed service – distribution of water. Thousands of people are waiting for me. Grieve not, my dear.” She patted her daughter and disappeared into the darkness.

The Making of A Temple: Amma’s mission in life was to have a place of worship dedicated to her Lord Murugan – her “ISHTADEVATA”. Committed to a noble cause in mind with strong will to cross over any hurdle; with firm conviction in her zest she set off; purchased a plot and approached the people of Goa whose spontaneous response was gracious enough to make a beginning of her mission. Boundless was her joy when she associated the Lord, Shri Ganapathi – the patron deity of Goa to make it a “Twin – Murthy” temple. A Sanctum sanctorum for both Shri Ganesha and Shri Murugan, the patron deity of Tamil’s from ancient times, symbolizing fraternity, integrity and harmony. People of Margao were happy because Rawanfond Temple was the only one of its kind in the whole of South Goa that enshrined The Lord Ganesha. Amma Annapoorni Aiyar was happy; her long cherished dream blossomed; and on 8th of February 1971 Shri Ganapathi – Murugan Temple became a reality. It is now a centre of attraction and devotees throng particularly on Vinayaki and Sankashti days.

With modesty in her approach, humility in her beginning, dedication in her zeal and above all, devotion in her action, the temple has now, turned into a complex where idols of Shiva-Parvathi to the south east corner of the sanctorum and Nava- Grahas to the north were added to the temple complex.

Today it is a place of worship for the people from far and near, irrespective of caste, creed, community or religion. Hundreds of devotees converge in the complex, everyday in the evening, at the time of aarthi or Deeparadana which was conducted by Amma herself when she was alive. She even prepared a panegyric composition for “Mangalarathi”. So much was the faith of people that she generated among her followers, that the devotees started pouring in regardless of time and season. All of

them return, but satisfied and satiated with sublime joy after partaking “Teertha and Prasaad”

There is an interesting experience of a devotee which has almost become like a folk-lore (the name is not revealed for obvious reasons). Amma used to watch a particular lady visiting the temple and taking circumambulations for over two hours every day, and sometimes even more. This continued for a number of days, and one day on her usual “Pradakshana-Yajna”, she swooned and fell prostrate in front of her deity. Amma attended to her soon, sprinkling holy water and holy ash. When she came around and was in a position to talk, Amma asked her whereabouts. Soon, her inherent loquacity revealed her woes. Because of her inability to find a consort and her vision that if she could circumambulate around temple a hundred thousand times she would get married and bear a child. Etc etc... upon hearing the sordid tale Amma brought out from a bag a pinch of the sacred “Vibhuti”, chanted a Mantra between the lips, showed around her body a few times and blew it off at one stroke – a gesture of warding off “Evil - Eye” or commonly known as Drushti. Further, Amma went inside the sanctum sanctorum and brought the tiny marvel of an image “The Utsava Moorthy”, placed it in front of the temple and asked the young lady to go around the idol. Her unstinted faith in the Lord and her utter craving for respectability back at home, she completed her holy mission, as if the small idol represented the whole temple complex for the purpose of circumambulations. After the holy mission she showed her gesture of gratefulness to Amma and returned home. She was back in the precincts after the appointed period to announce the happy news of her marriage and also of new arrival. She presented to the temple a tiny object of flesh and blood that kicked vainly in the thin air as if to protest against the tormentors of her mother. She, still, is an ardent devotee of this temple visiting very often, even today.

Temple Festivities: As in other centres of worship, Shri Ganapathy – Murugan Temple also celebrates the common Hindu festivals like Nava-Rathri, Ganesh Chaturthi, Skandh-Shashti, Sankasti, Makara Vilaku Pooja of Shri Dharma Sashta, Nava-Graha Pooja and scores of other rituals, the details of which are too expletive to accommodate in this already lengthy account.

Temple and Its Administration: Amma Annapoorni Aiyar left behind an institution - a legacy of her virtuous qualities, attained through proper means, direct realisation of Dharma- a place primarily for the mentally troubled and the unperceived to attain “Atma-Jnana”. People flock here to attain salvation and in fitness to their gesture they part with a portion of their earnings. It is but natural that there should be a custodian to coordinate and control the daily rituals of the temple. Amma was fully aware of this but, making the place, free from all encumbrances and debts, thus clearing the title of the property where the temple stood, was her prime Job.

When she realised that her time has come for the last journey she sent for the contractor of the temple complex, Mr.Kiran Naik, who was also a devoted follower, to settle the accounts; and at the end she went inside, opened one of her old trunks, removed a tattered cloth bundle and handed over the contents - a small packet of Rs.40,000/-. “Here, please, accept this and we settle everything with regard to the temple construction”. She was so meticulous that she wanted to settle every small thing connected with the temple before her long journey.

She had enough faith in the members of the family that she transferred the administration of the temple with them but after forming a Trust in which her son Maruti together with his two sisters and nephew formed the Managing Trustees, who would

decide as to how to perform poojas as also how solemnly festivals would be celebrated and lastly the use of the proceeds of the temple. She also willed that the temple precincts should be made available for all charitable purpose, religious, educational and social functions if it did not interfere with its discipline and sanctity.

The End of An Age: For Amma, life passed on inexorably. Her busy schedule seldom came on her way of performing her duty. She did not neglect any of her domestic or ritualistic commitments until a bad cold made the beginning of the end. Within a few days time, she was bed ridden, this time with high fever. Her condition deteriorated; every effort of the doctor proved of no avail. Finally, death crept on this great soul, the paragon of virtues, the devout lady – A Satwic Woman – a white sareed Sanyasini on the 17th of July 1991, plunging a host of people into uncontrollable grief. For, she was the moving spirit behind the imposing centre of worship, embellished its walls with her personal paintings and drawings, made it a long enduring structure so that the people of Margao may attain spiritual salvation under the marvel of architectural accomplishment.

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