

MSMF NEWSLETTER

A RAY OF LIGHT

I Decided to Dedicate My Life to Helping the Poor

By Dr. Chandrasekhar Sankurathri

Manjari Sankurathri Memorial Foundation (MSMF) was born out of a great Canadian tragedy, a terrorist activity which occurred on June 23rd, 1985. This is the darkest chapter in the history of Canada, which is known as a peace-loving country.



Mr. Ramesh from MSMF visit to Sarada Vidyalayam

Ramesh, MSMF Treasurer with Dr Chandra

In that terrible tragic incident, all 329 innocent passengers and crew lost their lives due to the explosion of two bombs placed in the airplane's luggage compartment by terrorists. All the passengers and crew were buried in the Atlantic Ocean near Cork, Ireland. This was a most heinous act and the first major terrorist act before the famous 9/11.

Most of the people killed were Canadians and 58 passengers were children. In that unfortunate act I lost my dear wife Manjari (32) and two lovely children, son Srikan (6) and daughter Sarada (3).

This tragedy impacted me very much and left me wondering why I was suddenly alone and in a totally confused state. I began to search for the purpose of my life. After struggling for answers for three years I decided to dedicate my life to helping the poor and needy, to bring

about change in their lives. This prompted me to resign my job with the Government of Canada and return to India in 1988.

To initiate my mission of bringing about change in the lives of less fortunate people I created the Manjari Sankurathri Memorial Foundation as a tribute to all the people brutally killed in the Air India Flight 182 bombing on 23rd June 1985. This foundation was registered as a not-for profit organization on 29th September 1989 in Ottawa. Through the work of MSMF I wanted to immortalize the incident in Canadian history with constant reminders so that such terrorist activities can never happen again in Canadian history.

It has been a long 35 years since MSMF was established as a not-for-profit organization. My thanks to all the volunteers, donors and some institutions who helped make things happen to ultimately change millions of lives in India. Even though this foundation was born out of an evil and destructive act, MSMF has become a beacon of light and hope for over 4 million beneficiaries.

In tune with the services, we provide to the poor and needy, we have created a "Canada-India Peace Garden" to commemorate the Air India Flight 182 terrorist action and to show what a noble outcome has been achieved despite this heinous act.

My Journey With MSMF Since 1989

By Dr. Chandrasekhar Sankurathri

After the tragedy – as described in my other article - I tried to continue my life in Canada, but it was impossible for me to do so. I struggled for three years to find a way out of my trauma and find a purpose for my life; ultimately, I decided to dedicate my life to serving the poor and needy. I couldn't find a better place than India to pursue my mission in life.

I immediately resigned my position at Ministry of Health and Welfare in Ottawa in 1988 and returned to India after living in Canada for 22 years. I decided to fulfil the mandate of MSMF by my presence in India and started the projects from scratch.

The initial years were difficult because of several local issues in addition to financial problems, even though I cashed my pension and used it as seed money, but several Canadian friends and well-wishers helped me to move forward.

With that momentum and hope I addressed two important areas to improve the quality of life among the poor and downtrodden: education of poor children and quality eye care for poor and needy people.

In the early stages, I visited Canada regularly and travelled across the country to brief donors about the progress of various activities and the need to move forward in India. Donors were happy to hear from me about the progress of the two major projects.

As time went by MSMF also received some financial help in the form of projects so that Sankurathri Foundation could sustain and expand the services to help more people. These included Help the Aged in Canada and the Canadian International Development Agency. Because of these projects Sankurathri Foundation was firmly established and was able to execute education projects through Sarada Vidyalayam and eye care projects through Srikan Institute of Ophthalmology.

In 2005 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation broadcast a one-hour long documentary "A Ray of Light". It was seen by many Canadians from St. John's to Vancouver Island. This led to a greater awareness among Canadians and an increase in donations. In addition to the donations, several volunteers,

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ophthalmologists, nurses, and others helped the Foundation and the activities to move forward.

In this respect the Ottawa Eye Institute played a significant role in establishing the quality standards of the eye care services we offered to our patients. In return, we helped many young ophthalmologists from Canada learn a technique, "Small Incision Cataract Surgery".

Both projects were very successful, and the results were greater than I expected. We helped eliminate school dropouts, child labor and child marriages from this region. Many of the high school graduates became engineers, teachers and very successful leading persons in the community. We are proud to say that two of our Alumni are working as Mechanical Engineers in ISRO (the equivalent of NASA) and contributed to the successful launch of Chandrayan 3.

In terms of eye care, we have provided outpatient care to over 4.2 million needy people and performed over 370,000 cataract surgeries to restore patients' vision. Almost 90% of these patients could not pay for their surgeries.

These unique achievements are possible because of donors, volunteers, and supporters from St. John's to Vancouver Island. We thank them all for their dedicated efforts and cooperation in making this work successful -and famous. We received many accolades and much recognition, not only in India but also in Canada and USA. Among them is the most prestigious recognition, "Padma Shri" by the Government of India in 2023 for the services we provided patients without expecting anything in return.

This journey was not a bed of roses; we encountered several challenges including COVID-19, human misbehaviors, back stabbings, etc. But we overcame them by our resilience, discipline, commitment and by the Grace of God.

I thank Canadians for the indomitable support they have extended over these years. I respectfully request that you continue your support to further help us continue our journey making a profound difference in the lives of poor and needy.

Dr. Chandrasekhar Sankurathri
Board member
MSMF

Volunteer Profile: Bala Brahmanandam Madaparthi: 22 Years of Volunteer Service to MSMF by Pierre Barbeau, MSMF Chairman

MSMF is very grateful to Bala for coordinating on a volunteer basis our annual picnic in Ottawa for the last 22 years. The main purpose of the picnic - which generally attracts over 300 people - is to raise funds for our projects in Kakinada and to raise awareness about MSMF.

Bala arrived in Canada in 1991 and became aware of the work of MSMF through volunteers he met, starting in 1995. He was particularly impressed by the dedication of Sarma Vishnubhatla who had taken early retirement to direct and manage MSMF as a "full time" volunteer. Bala attended several MSMF picnics, first in Sarma's backyard and later at Andrew Haydon Park. Sarma was impressed by his commitment and asked him to coordinate the picnic starting in 2004.

The most challenging part of organizing such a large picnic is to recruit approximately 80 volunteers to set up the tents, prepare food, etc. and to pray that this outdoor picnic doesn't have to be cancelled at the last minute due to a thunderstorm.

The first few years were a major challenge, but the ongoing success of the picnics encouraged Bala to also volunteer to create and organize the Great India Festival in Ottawa which now attracts about 18,000 people every year.

Gradually, Bala, like Sarma, also became a "full time" volunteer following his retirement from Bell Northern Research.



Mr Bala distributing cake to MSMF volunteers

Bala met Chandra during his annual fundraising and public awareness visits to Canada. Bala first visited the Sankurathri projects supported by MSMF in Kakinada during 2010. The visits greatly encouraged him to continue his valuable support. He was particularly impressed by the fact that MSMF administration costs were so low, mainly because of the complete absence of paid staff in Canada.

Bala, who acquired a PHD in engineering in Kharagpur, regularly returns to visit family in Andhra Pradesh and is proud of his long-term association with MSMF. We thank him and his numerous volunteers for their valuable support which has greatly benefitted thousands of poor and destitute people in the Kakinada region who have regained their sight!

Bala would like to personally thank the long-term volunteers who have provided essential support.

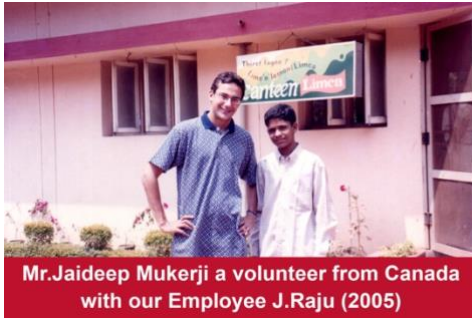
"I wanted to do something in memory of my wife"

By: Amitabh Mukerji,
MSMF Volunteer

While I was aware of the Air India tragedy of 1985 and the catastrophic impact it had on lives of innocent families, majority of whom were Canadians of

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Indian origin, I was not personally acquainted with any of the victims. I also did not know Dr. Chandrashekhar Sankurathri or his wife Manjari, as many in the Indian community here did. We had just moved from Halifax to Ottawa the year before and were yet somewhat new in this city.



Mr. Jaideep Mukerji a volunteer from Canada with our Employee J. Raju (2005)

It is my younger son Jaideep through whom I came to know about Manjari Sankurathri Memorial Foundation (MSMF), in the year 2000. The person who introduced him to MSMF was Pierre Barbeau, who is currently the Chairman of the Board of Directors of MSMF. Jaideep, who was an undergraduate student at the University of Ottawa at that time, told me and my wife Michele, that he was contemplating a co-op semester, during which he would work for a not-for-profit organization based in Ottawa, which supported another foundation based in Kakinada, in Andhra Pradesh, India. Later that year, along with Jaideep, my wife and I went to the house of Sarma Vishnubhatla and his wife Lakshmi, where we met Chandra for the first time. This was also our first exposure to the work done by MSMF to support the activities of Sankurathri Foundation (SF) in Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh.

Jaideep was going to Kakinada, for a semester as part of a co-op program to produce a video, while completing his undergraduate degree in Communications in Ottawa U. I should add that he had no prior experience in making any kind of video. Many years later, experienced CBC journalists like Terry Milewski and Adrienne Arseneault would also go to Kakinada and produced documentaries which received wide coverage, however, Jaideep was a

pioneer of a kind although a total amateur.

Jaideep spent four months in Kakinada between January and April 2001. When I visited my mother who was living in Kolkata at that time, I took the time to go to Kakinada not only to see Jaideep but also to take a firsthand look at the activities in Kakinada. He was staying near the campus at a house which the Foundation had rented, along with three other local young men. These young men were part of a training program run by the Sankurathri Foundation to train them to become optical technicians. Similarly, young women were also being trained in the campus to become nursing assistants and other functions. The only privilege Jaideep had was a private room with an attached western style toilet.

This first stay 24 years ago, gave me my real insight into the work being done in Kakinada. The hospital was a two-story building then and the school was also a two-story affair. The children used to do morning prayers (Saraswati Vandana) before classes. Lunch was served at noon, children sat on the floor, ate Indian style and afterwards cleaned up everything. I also remember that some students used to come in the evening and sit in the patio in front of Chandra's house to do their homework with guidance and encouragement from Chandra's sister, Hema.

In front of the hospital building there was a beautiful garden with bright coloured flowers, Jaideep had told me that when the patients' bandages were removed after the operation, the first view they encountered were all those vibrant colours. I am happy to say that although the hospital is now a larger building, the garden is still there. The school is also a much bigger building with science and computer labs, but the discipline and cleanliness are still there.

My dear wife Michele passed away in 2008 due to brain cancer. In January 2009 I went to India and visited Chandra in Kakinada. I wanted to do something in her memory, and Chandra suggested

setting up an endowment fund for scholarships. On my return to Canada, I asked Sarma Vishnubhatla for advice on how to set up an endowment. He very kindly guided me through the steps by which the endowment with its principal amount could be set up in Canada with the proceeds from investment income generating revenues which could be directed towards the scholarship in India. The first recipient of the Michele Mukerji scholarship was a girl named Renuka Ganga Jekkilenki, and I received her photo. She came from a poor family, where her father was a labourer and her mother was illiterate. Later during a couple of subsequent visits to Kakinada, I had the pleasure of meeting her in person. On completion of her university studies, she obtained a job in Mumbai with Cap Gemini. I believe she is back in Kakinada now.

In the intervening years I have been to Kakinada a few times, the last one being in 2023, which I had recounted in an earlier newsletter. This article is a personal reminiscence. I had the honour and pleasure of serving on the Board of MSMF for two years, and although I am no longer a member of the Board, I hope to continue my association with MSMF.

The Only Paediatric Eye Hospital in The Region Case Study – Baby Murram Himansh

Rajavommangi is a small tribal village located in the midst of hills in the East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh. Mr. Nannaji, 35 years old and married to Kumari, comes from an agricultural background but because agriculture is not profitable, he set up a small convenience store in the area and makes his living by selling to the local people. They have two children studying at the Agency Residential School. They also have a 7-month-old baby boy. As a result of illiteracy, orthodox habits and lack of family planning awareness, Nannaji found it very difficult to manage with three children due to financial restraints.

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A month ago, they took 7-month-old baby Himansh to a primary healthcare centre for vaccinations. The paediatrician examined the boy and noticed that he responded to sound but was unable to see due to cataracts in both eyes. The paediatrician advised the parents that they should proceed immediately to the Srikiran Eye Hospital in Kakinada.



28th April, 2022
Murram Himansh after Cataract Surgery in his Mother's Hands
Baby Murram after cataract surgery

Because of their illiterate nature, they were very confused about how to go, who to meet, what information to share, and how to respond to questions about payment, if asked. Eventually they did indeed visit the Srikiran Eye Hospital. By the time they arrived, the baby boy was crying for milk.

The parents were very confused about where to breastfeed the child and who to ask. One of the nurses noticed their predicament and advised the mother to go to the special breastfeeding area located in the paediatric eyecare unit. After doing so, the baby was happy, and the mother was equally happy for the care and facilities for small children in this eye hospital.

After the Doctor examined the baby boy, he asked many questions regarding consanguinity, medications used, any diseases, delivery details and several other questions. The parents did not understand any of these questions; they tried to answer but the doctor was not happy with their responses because he did not get the information he needed. He asked the parents to remember everything which happened since the pregnancy and up to this date. Suddenly, it occurred to the mother to advise the doctor that she took Covid-19 medication while she was pregnant. The doctor explained in simple language how

some of these medications, lack of proper food, and abnormal practices might have had some effect on the baby in the womb.

He believed that the medications being used during Covid-19 must have caused the cataracts in the baby boy. He assured them that they should not worry - the baby's eyesight could be restored after a cataract operation. When the parents advised the doctor that they could not pay for the cataract surgery, Srikiran Eye hospital - with the support of MSMF - volunteered to perform both operations completely free of cost to them.

Now, baby Himansh can not only hear but can also see; he follows everything with a big smile. The parents commented: "While we were at the hospital, we saw several small children and their parents happily moving around because of the special paediatric eyecare unit at Srikiran. Afterwards we realized that this is the only paediatric eyecare facility available in this region and we are thankful that God provided this facility for our benefit."

Thank you for your support

Year 2025 - Board of Directors

Pierre Barbeau,
 Chandra Sankurathri,
 Ramesh Jonnavithula
 Jennifer Daubeny
 Krishnan Sekaran

Note: Please send us your email ID to "admin@msmf.ca". We would like to send our next Newsletter by email.

Thank you for Caring

MSMF is doing well because of your generous financial support, dedicated services from staff and teachers at Sarada Vidyalayam, and doctors and paramedical staff at Srikiran Institute of Ophthalmology. We pledge that we will continue to provide outstanding support and services, that is possible, to the poor, disadvantaged and the suffering. Please donate to support our programs financially using one of the following methods:

- 1. Cheque / Credit Card:** Complete the donation form which came with this Newsletter, attach a cheque payable to MSMF or provide details of your credit card information and mail it to MSMF, 174, Berrigan Dr, Nepean, ON K2J 5C6.
- 2. Email Transfer:** Please use admin@msmf.ca and please provide your address for tax purposes.
- 3. Donate online:** Go to <https://msmf.ca/donation-options/>, enter information requested and complete the donation process,

We thank you.