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A silent star amid life's unfairness

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Freshwater fish is, well, fresh and has a unique and delectable taste in Kottapuram and denizens tell you that it is because the catch comes from areas where the backwaters seamlessly mingle with the sea. Similarly, as you drive from Kochi for three quarters of an hour on the Kodungallur route, the place is a mix of the rural and urban, defying definitions. But scratch the surface and you see poverty all around; once you reach the Diocese-run Kottapuram Integrated Development Society's (KIDS) centre, you realise that when pennilessness is combined with disability, it creates another deadly, nearly hopeless combo.

One runs into many individuals who, despite being restricted by physical challenges, put in hours of hard work, making flowers, mats, lamp shades, vases and what not, with natural fibres as raw material. Nearly all the 40 handicapped are women but there is this one man in red shirt who stands out among the crowd with his cheerfulness, almost as though he is smiling at life's unfairness. "He is like Krishna," jokes Sister Mercy Thomas, the administrator.

Sadhik, 36, cannot speak or hear and is also paralysed below the waist but he reads lips and communicates through signs and one of the first things he conveys is that he was born without the vocal chords required to turn sound into words. His mother Subaida soon takes over the narration but her tale of grief goes back a long way before Sadhik was born.

Losing both her parents even before she became an adult, she didn't have much say in her marriage, even though she did not

particularly like the uncle's son who was arranged as her groom.

Five years after marriage, her husband walked away one day but after giving her a son and daughter and one yet-be-born son. "We came to know later that he married again but there was no one who went after him to inquire," she remembers. The eldest son had problems with one ear and then the other, requiring surgeries and later developed a stomach problem which too required surgical intervention.

All she knew was to weave mats out of grass and pine but those days, it fetched not more than `18 for one. How did she manage to bring up her three children? There is no answer from her but only a muffled cry without tears. The eldest son is now an auto rickshaw driver with his own family and the second one has been married off, so their home now has only herself and Sadhik.

"As I had no money, I had to send the elder children to an orphanage during their school days and they have found fault with me for this," she says. "Even Sadhik, whose problems are congenital, sometimes blames me for not finding a medical solution early on," she says, her feeble voice betraying a sense of guilt.

She remembers that he did not cry after birth and wonders if a fever on the eighth month could have caused the disabilities. He did not walk but learnt to sit when he was two. He was enrolled for class one after he turned 11 and attended school for four years, learning to read and write a few words. "He is very intelligent though.

He reminds me to switch off the gas and checks whether the door is properly locked as we leave the house every day," she says with a smile. They stay in Mathilakam, a bit far from Kottapuram, and have to pay `500 for the two auto rides every day. "Earlier, there were a few others to share the cost but now it is only us. The centre is meeting the cost now," she says.

Sadhik is a kind of specialist when it comes to making straw hats and is currently working on a few lamp shades. But he has

been asking the staff when they would start putting together the stars, which he can make up to 10 a day. "In terms of money, what he does may not fetch much but it makes his life go round. He likes to meet people and socialise," says Subaida.

After working for a decade at the KIDS centre, Sadhik became part of a team that was sent to National Institute of Design at Ahmedabad. "We went by train and stayed at a five-star hotel," informs Subaida, only partially managing to translate Sadhik's excitement that he conveys through his gestures and expressions. Says Sister Mercy, "He was the only handicapped person in the team and seeing his enthusiasm, we could not deny him the chance. We had selected a girl too but she could not go. Sadhik came back with new ideas after his two-week stint and started making new products."

One of his desires is to own a wheel chair-cum-utility vehicle that he can manoeuvre himself and perhaps use to commute to his workplace. He insists that he has seen one such on TV but neither his mother nor others at the centre are sure if this is a pragmatic aim. The other ambition is to get married and he often confronts his umma with the question, "Who will look after me once you are gone?", leaving the poor woman tongue-tied.