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## [From Sivaganga To UN, a Village Girl's Saga](#)

Born in a very small village, Sivaganga, Chitradurga district, Karnataka, in a farmer's family of 11 children, (seven girls and four boys), she was attacked by a bear when seven years old and was saved by parents. She lost her right eye and beautiful looks.

No bus would take her to the hospital. Busappa, a kind bus driver, went against the advice of the bus conductor and took the child dripping with blood to the hospital. A kind nurse Susheela at Chitradurga govt hospital treated her wounds, saved her life.

The tragedy that cost her right eye and some aesthetics created sympathy. The parents decided to send her to school as a consolation. She thanked the bear, as otherwise she would have been married at 15 years like her siblings. She attended the Sivaganga school where some teachers ill-treated her for her appearance. Her illiterate mother was determined to educate her against all odds.

In 1980 she finished from high school and got into teacher training at the Govt teacher training institute at Chitradurga. She then came to Bangalore and joined Bharath Education Evening College. In the mornings she taught slum women as part of govt's literacy program. She also worked with educationist Margaret of Tilak Nagar education society serving as a full time teacher for rag picking children.

In 1985 she finished her BA in Sociology and came to Chennai for her eye surgery. In Chennai she met with Mr. Edward, her future husband, who was working with Montessori educationist Amuktha Mahapathra, Mandara education center, to whom she got married.

From 1986 to 1990 Siddhamma was an activist with Pennurimai Iyakkam. Here an Irula from Gandhi Gramam village told her the harassment by landlords. This was when she began taking up the cause of Irulas. Without any financial support, until 1995 she lived with the Irulas and organized the community to represent themselves and their rights.

From 1995 to 1998 she received Fellowship from CRY through which she used to help 25 villages in Thiruvallur district. Children in Gandhi Gramam were living in the house of the landlords as bonded laborers and she started teaching children, finally enrolling them in Pudur Govt school.

From 1991-98 the Irula community transformed itself. They came together to fight against issues of human rights violations. In 1996 she facilitated a struggle in Thiruvallur against a landlord who had taken away the land of Irulas. The Irulas successfully got their land back which they are cultivating now. Through the Irula movement, villages are now getting better organized to demand their rights.

Sarpam, an Irula organization, was formed with leadership being promoted from within. HIVOS, a Netherlands-based co-finance agency, supported the community's initiatives. From all this experience, in 1999 Sidhamma concluded that lack of education was a central factor that led to exploitation of the Irula community.

In 2000, Sidhamma met Asha Princeton volunteer Shanmuga Subramanian at CRY. Ten motivation centers to encourage Irula children to go to school in Tiruvallur district were initiated. Muriel, a student from Belgium, supported running one motivation center for children in a rice mill. Several Asha volunteers Sundar Kumar Iyer, Jayashree Janardhan, Ashok, DP, Jeba, Melli have since been engaged with Sidhamma.

In 2002, Sidhamma served as the first woman Asha Fellow.

In April-June 2004 she was invited by Netherlands govt to discuss with Dutch students social work at Humanistic University. She visited Asha Zurich volunteers including Chidu in Switzerland. She spent a day at a village school in Germany. She met college students at Brusells University in Belgium, participated in a community meeting and met with Louven chapter of Asha. The community meeting led to help for resource centers and Tsunami recovery later on. In UK, she met with Asha London volunteers including Shankar. In Paris, she went with Muriel to meet organizations.

In Oct 2004, in response to Sidhamma's urgent call for help, Asha Honor and Asha Toledo chapter volunteers including Srikanth Pilla, Srivatsan Kannan, Jeba, Sathya and Dhanalakshmi played a critical role in raising awareness and funds to feed and educate rescued children of bonded laborers in Tamilnadu rice mills from over 1000 families. In 2005 Sidhamma has been engaged in Tsunami recovery work in seven villages of Cuddalore, and 11 villages of Thiruvallur.

In Nov 2005, she was honored by Sonia Gandhi with an Indian national speak-out award for human rights of bonded laborers. For the recent flood relief in Tamilnadu, in cooperation with Theosophical Society, Chennai, Siddhamma is providing mosquito nets, clothing, tents, dry food to over 1400 affected families.

In Feb1-2, 2006 she has been invited by United Nations to give a talk representing the Irula Dalit society of more than 50,000 people in 560 villages suffering from discrimination.

### **Awards & Honors**

Best social work Award, Lion's Club Chennai, 1999

Best community worker award, Irula Society, 2000

Asha Fellow, 2002

Best social work award, Medha Patkar, 2003

National speak out Award, Sonia Gandhi, 2005

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