

# AN ENDURING GIFT: Q&A WITH SUDHA MURTY



Interview by New Acropolis Culture Circle  
Compiled by Bhushan Dabir

Philanthropy can be a bridge between the ideal of fraternity and its material manifestation. Imagining a better world, with a greater sense of fraternity is intuitively appealing to many. Yet, to make a personal sacrifice in order to create that better world, is the choice that we make less often than is needed.

In this light, it is relevant to ask - what drives one to share with that urgent sense of duty? Does one need money and power to be a philanthropist? What is the relationship between our choices and our identity?

Gentle and inspiring, Sudha Murty's life throws light on to these very questions and the principle of fraternity shines brightly through her choices and actions.

Born in 1950 in Shiggaon, in Karnataka, Sudha ji graduated as a gold medalist from both her Bachelor's and Master's programs, and started her career as an engineer with TELCO, becoming the first woman to be employed by that company. Later, she became a college professor, brought up her two children, and contributed – both financially and professionally – to building the fledgling Infosys which has today become a software behemoth.

In 1996, she started the Infosys Foundation. As its Chairperson she has handled 16 national disasters in the last 24 years, established over 60000 libraries, built 16000 public toilets as well as 2300 houses for flood affected people, apart from running several initiatives for poverty alleviation and women's empowerment.

An author of more than 30 books, which have sold over 3 million copies, she has received 9 honorary doctorates, several literary awards, and was honoured with the Padmashree in 2006.

She lives by the belief that *generosity of a few is hope for millions*. She recently shared a collage of anecdotes and experiences with the Friends of New Acropolis Culture Circle. The following is an extract of that dialogue



***Philanthropy means love for your fellow human being. It is a mindset, an attitude. It has nothing to do with money.***

**New Acropolis Culture Circle (NACC):** In the foreword of your beautiful book, *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*, you describe being brought up in a village without telephones, CDs, or music systems. You say, “The only luxury was books.” And you speak about how your grandfather would tell you stories under the twinkling stars. As an author yourself, Sudha ji what is the great importance of stories in our life?

**Sudha ji:** Well, if I tell you – you should speak the truth, you should work hard...and if I go on giving a sermon like that, you will get bored. But, if I convert that into a story? Then, the same message, you will *never* forget. That’s because all human beings enjoy listening to stories.

Also, storytelling helps you a lot in creative thinking. For example, in my childhood, in the evenings after dinner, very often my grandfather would tell us stories from...say... *Bhagwata*, something about Krishna. He would describe to us, that Krishna had lotus eyes and he was dark in complexion... *Shantakaaram Bhujangshayanam Padmanabham*. I could imagine Krishna the way I wanted to; tall, handsome, dark skinned. One’s imagination is boundless. So, my imagination too grew a lot in listening to those stories and I learnt the art of putting any message in the form of a story, which is enchanting, easy to understand, and difficult to forget.

**NACC:** In the book *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*, you say, “We cannot choose the community or religion that we are born into. So, we should never think that our community is our identity.” Sudhaji what do you believe, is the true identity of a human being?

**Sudha ji:** A good character is the true identity of a human being. Why was Krishna respected? Is it because he was the son of Devaki and Yashoda? Is it because he was the husband of the beautiful Rukmini? They say none of these are true identities. *Krishnaha swayam Krishnaha*. What you are, is what you are. It is not because you are somebody’s wife or husband. It is not because of the money you have. On the outside, it may be that these things create your identity; but inside, your true identity is defined by the way you behave with people who are less privileged than you are, especially when

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they are in difficulty. That is what shows who you truly are. And I have always believed that this is what God... or whatever or whomsoever you believe has made you... has made you to be; to be a good human being. This is more important than the religion you are born into. You have to be born into one religion or another, one family or another, isn't it? And depending on that, you will have some particular name and you will be brought up in that particular atmosphere. But, inside - you should be a good human being. I often tell my children - what you achieve is not important to me; but you must be good human beings. And that means to work hard, to be truthful and compassionate. These are the qualities of a good human being.

**NACC: That naturally begs the question - what is needed to be a good human being? In *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk* you tell us that "One doesn't need money to help people." So what really do you need to help another human being?**

**Sudha ji:** First and foremost, you should love your fellow human beings. The Latin word Philanthropy means love for your fellow human being. Particularly, when you find that others are in some difficulty, you should want to look for ways in which you can help them. It is a mindset, an attitude. It has nothing to do with money. And this is not taught in college, this cannot be taught through books and it cannot be not taught anywhere else but at one's own home. One learns this from elders. As a child, you observe how they behave with people.

**NACC: We wish to understand, what are the values or principles that one follows as a philanthropist?**

**Sudha ji:** Well, everybody has a different way. I can tell you, what I follow.

Firstly, I really do not care what people say about me - good or bad - it doesn't matter to me. What people say depends on their way of looking at me. But, what I am inside, only I know.

Secondly, when I help people in my work, I don't expect anything in return. On the contrary, I thank them as they have given me an opportunity to help.

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Thirdly, I always keep in mind that there is a way to live. We never aimed to make lot of money in life. We worked passionately, we worked for our joy. Money came... like a jackpot. So I wondered: why did God give me money? There are so many people who are smarter than me, who work harder than me. Why then, did I get this money? I felt it is a signal from God: look, you are an honest person. This money is not yours. You are only a treasurer of the money and this money should go back to the society.

**NACC: I believe you actually did teach your grandmother to read, as the title of your book suggests, didn't you? Please tell us about it.**

**Sudha ji:** Yes! My grandmother was extremely bright, but she never went to school. She could not read and write. So, I used to read to her. Every Wednesday, a magazine would arrive and I used to read to her a particular series known as *Kaashiyatre*, about an old woman who wanted to go to Benaras. Once, on a Monday, I went to another village for a wedding and I had planned to come back on Tuesday evening. But, you know...we were a lot of cousins together and we were having a wonderful time...so I came back on Friday. When I returned home, my grandmother started crying. She told me – “The magazine arrived. I wanted to read...but I could not read. I touched the pages with my fingers and I wished my hands could read.”



She had decided. At that time, she was 62 years old and I was 12 years old. She asked me, “Will you help me? I want to learn the alphabet and learn to read”. I said, “Awwa, you are old! Do you want to go to school?”. She said, “No, I am not going to school. You are going to teach me at home...I will work hard.” And thus, I became her teacher. I was quite hard on my student. I would tell her to read passages, write something down 20 times, recite something else 15 times... and she would do everything! Within 3 months, she learnt to read and write! Soon thereafter, came the day of Saraswati Pooja. It is a day of thanksgiving to the goddess of learning. Awwa called me that day, and she got a chair for me to sit. She handed me a gift. And...absolutely unexpectedly, she touched my feet. I was so scared! Elders are never

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supposed to touch youngsters' feet. It is not correct. I said, "Awwa, what are you doing?" She explained. "I am not touching your feet as my granddaughter... I am touching the feet of my teacher." A Teacher is the one who takes from *ajnana*, darkness or no knowledge, to good knowledge or *paripoorna*. Thus, my grandmother taught me the greatest lesson – that, for learning, age is no bar. The day you stop learning you become old.

**NACC: That lesson is truly an enduring gift. And that, Sudha ji takes us to *Three Thousand Stiches*; the book in which you speak of the best gift you ever got. Do tell us about it.**

**Sudha ji:** When I was a young woman, I started working for sex workers' rehabilitation and in the beginning it was quite difficult to gain their confidence. The first few times they threw slippers and tomatoes at me. Pimps threatened to break my knees...all sorts of things! My father told me, "In your life if you can rehabilitate 10 people, I will die a happy man." For the first few years, the success rate was in single digits and it was extremely frustrating. Many a times, I felt, I can't do this, but I continued to try. After 18 years, when 3000 of them had begun a new life, they wanted to thank me. When we met, they said, "Akka, you gave us so much in life – affection, confidence, rehabilitation, bank guarantee... we want to give you a gift. So, this is a quilt we have made. Each one of us has put in one stitch, so there are three thousand stitches... and whenever you use it, we will be with you. And that is what I call the 'Three thousand stitches' – the best gift in my life!

**NACC: Sudha ji, truly, you are a special human being!**

**Sudha ji:** You know, I am a very ordinary person! I say, don't compete with anybody. Compete with yourself. How was I yesterday and how am I today? Am I a better person? How should I improve? How should I be a better human being? That's all I have. ☺☺

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