

## Metro Plus Bangalore

Published on Mondays, Tuesdays & Thursdays

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### See what she has achieved

What does it take to win a Young Achiever Award? An expensive education? A management degree? Sangeetha G.N. doesn't have either. She is also visually challenged. And she is an achiever.



**Sangeetha: Setting her sight high. — Photo: K. Bhagya Prakash**

HOW DOES one cope when one literally faces a dark future? One can fall into depression and wallow in self-pity. Or else, one can be like 28-year-old Sangeetha G.N., who, with grit and determination, chased a dream and found enough success to win the Guild of Women Achievers' (GOWA) Young Achiever Award for January 2002. Those who know her say she won't just stop at this.

Sangeetha is visually handicapped and is presently working on a unique documentation project at the NMKRV First Grade College for Women. The project has so far recorded the life experiences of 500 women from all walks of life.

Earlier, Sangeetha set a precedent by being one of the first alumni of the Integrated Scheme of Education for the Blind. This distinction took her to England to meet and garland Queen Elizabeth on the occasion of the 42nd Commonwealth Day Celebrations.

She wasn't born blind. A brain tumour at the tender age of seven snatched away her sight. "But I haven't forgotten colours," she says with a big grin. The early days of her loss were difficult to cope with, not only for her, but also for her family. "They shielded me from facing any questions about my disability," she says. The protective barrier broke when Sangeetha stood up for herself and stood up to all those who looked at her with pity.

Her battle was not just with people, but circumstances itself. A family friend put her parents in touch with the National Association for the Blind (NAB), which had then just launched the Integrated Scheme of Education for the Blind. Under this scheme, mainstream schools were encouraged to admit visually handicapped children. The

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New Public School in Vijayanagar was only too happy to take their bright student back, even though she had lost a year due to poor health. The NAB assigned a Brail teacher and mobility instructor to help Sangeetha reorient herself with her surroundings. She was fast on the uptake, despite changed circumstances, scoring the highest total marks in her seventh standard finals. In her SSLC exams, she stood first amongst the visually handicapped students of Karnataka.

Sangeetha joined NMKRV Pre-University College for Women and took up humanities. "I decided to join that college because it is well known for its co-curricular activities. I received a red carpet welcome there," she says, with loyalty to the college written bright on her face. She stood 21st in the state Pre-university exams and eventually went on to do her Master's in Women's Studies. She fondly remembers late Dr. C.N. Mangala, who noticed her essays on women's issues and motivated her to take up Women's Studies.

The documentation she is engaged in is the brainchild of the current principal of NMKRV College, Dr. K.S. Umadevi. The stories of 500 women from all parts of the state and from varied professions are recorded on audiotapes. These tapes capture the women's lives, the hurdles they faced and how they overcame them. It was Sangeetha who did all the fieldwork. Some of the women are no more, and some have atypical vocations like sculpting, auto-driving, even realty! .

Her own experience during the documentation was very mixed for Sangeetha. "It has given me a lot of exposure, meeting the women and learning from them. I have developed as a person," she says. But when she first went out on her field trips, some women did not want to speak to her. They found it unusual that a blind person was travelling distances to come and talk to them. Probably moved by pity and good intentions, these women initially asked her to make arrangements for them to come to Bangalore. It often took a great deal of persuasion to explain to them she was as normal as any other person and that she could manage very well on her own. Sangeetha has now registered for a Ph.D. in Women's Studies with Hampi University. She wants to set up an information centre for women eventually. She also wants to start writing in the media to sensitise the public about disability and women's issues.

She says being educated in mainstream and integrated educational institutions has helped her tremendously. This is evinced in her articulate and confident disposition. "Most children who go to blind schools are segregated from society... Once these children have to go to colleges, they are not able to adjust," she states. A supportive family and friends' circle have helped her tremendously. Does she fear for herself and her future? "No way. I am as normal a person as you are," she chides. Looking at her makes you want to forget your own apprehensions. Now, that is the hallmark of a leader.

VINUTHA MALLYA

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