

T 118



CHAPTER I

LIFE SKETCH OF G. RAMACHANDRAN

G.Ramachandran was born in an upper middle class family on 8th October, 1904 at Perumthanni in Trivandrum Taluk, Kerala¹. His father was Sri.K.Govindapillai, who started his career as a graduate teacher and later joined the State Excise Department and retired as the Acting Excise Commissioner of the former Princely State of Travancore. He was a stern disciplinarian and a very upright person. He belonged to the Punnarthala family of Neyyatinkara. His mother Smt. G. Madhavi Tankachi belonged to the *Pathara Tharavad*. They had four children and Ramachandran was the third son². Sri. Marthandan Thampi was his uncle who was the founder of the Central Native School in Trivandrum. He had great concern for the low caste people and owing to his intimate relationship with the low caste people; he was nicknamed as 'Pula-Thampi'. Being a Nair, Marthandan Thampi had no hesitation to keep a 'Pulaya' as his Butler. This was something very revolutionary in Travancore during that period. Anyone who was his guest, had to drink and eat what was touched and cooked by an untouchable and that was a hammer blow at caste system and untouchability at that time. Ramachandran's great granduncle was Sri. Thiruvikraman Thampi, the recipient of Veera Sringhala from the Maharaja of Travancore³. The



Suffix ‘Thampi’ too was an adornment given by the Maharaja of Travancore. He held the post of the Superintendent of police in Trivandrum⁴.

1.1 Primary Education

As an Excise Commissioner Sri. K. Govinda Pillai got transfer once in every two years⁵ and Ramachandran’s family had to shift from one place to another. This helped young Ramachandran to mingle with various types of people in Kerala and study in different environments. Ramachandran started his primary education at Parur Government High School near Trivandrum and continued it at C.M.S High school, Kottayam⁶. Ramachandran was an average student⁷, but possessed great enthusiasm in studying English and always attempted to speak English fluently. He got C.J. Kurian Memorial Medal in elocution competition conducted in the C.M.S School at Kottayam⁸. When he was studying in the C.M.S High School he became an avid reader. He was deeply attracted by stories of adventure and had read most of the books of R.M. Ballantyne, W.H.G. Kingston, Captain Marryat and similar authors. He also read “The Coral Island”, “Gorilla Hunters”, “Martin Ratter”, “Ungava” etc at an early age⁹. While at Kottayam two great personalities – Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi – influenced his career¹⁰. When his father was transferred to Nagercoil, he joined the Fifth Form at Scot Christian High School, Nagercoil. Here started the mental and spiritual changes in him when he began to know more about Mahatma Gandhi¹¹. He was influenced by



Mahatma Gandhi's teachings, radical social reforms, crusade against untouchability etc. He was so eager to read the 'Young India' edited and published by Mahatma Gandhi¹². His father was a loyalist of the British and this caused heated dialogues between Ramachandran and his father. When he was selected as the best student of Scot Christian High School and received a medal his father tried to ridicule him by stating that it was a medal of the King Emperor and not from Mahatma Gandhi¹³. It provoked him so much that he immediately threw it away to show his fidelity to Mahatma Gandhi.

Ramachandran was inspired by Gandhi's call to leave schools and participate in the National Movement. He responded to Mahatma Gandhi's call immediately in 1920 and as a student he collected Rs.350/- for the Tilak Swaraj Fund¹⁴. Deeply attracted towards the magnetic personality of the freedom fighter, Doctor M. E. Naidu, G. Ramachandran started weaving and wearing Khadi¹⁵. He used to meet the eminent congress leaders of Nagercoil like Sivathanu Pillai, Dr.M.E.Naidu etc. He considered Dr M.E. Naidu as his first political Guru. He learned spinning and started a spinning club and presented the first cloth which he had spun to his mother¹⁶. He passed his S.S.L.C. examination from St. Joseph's High School at Trivandrum¹⁷.



1.2 Higher Education

He joined Visvabharati University at Shantiniketan in 1920 for higher studies. He became one of the earliest Honours Graduates of Visvabharati with distinction in 1925 and received the Gold medal from Rabindranath Tagore¹⁸.

From Shantiniketan G. Ramachandran went to the Satyagraha Ashram in Sabarmati to meet Mahatma Gandhi and that was a turning point in the personality development of G. Ramachandran. At the instance of Tagore, G. Ramachandran became an inmate of the Sabarmati Ashram in 1924¹⁹. As an ardent disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, G. Ramachandran had the good fortune to spend one year at Sabarmati Ashram under the close and direct training of Mahatma Gandhi which helped to mould his philosophy and principles in activities of social life. In Sabarmati Ashram, he obtained training for a whole year in different aspects of 'Khadi' work and also obtained special training in community sanitation, education, horticulture and 'goseva'. In the Gandhi Ashram all work was done by members of the community, everyone taking a share in the work and responsibility. In the Satyagraha Ashram he became a training scavenger, spinner weaver and constructive worker. Mahatma Gandhi bestowed special attention on him and gave him hard training, giving him important assignments. Mahatma Gandhi wanted G. Ramachandran to be familiar with as many items of work of the Gandhian Constructive Programme as possible. G. Ramachandran's associations with the All India Village



Industries Association and the *Harijan Sevak Sangh* were part of his training under Gandhi²⁰. Kasturba Gandhi also contributed her share in the formation of his character²¹.

1.3 G. Ramachandran in Jamia Millia University

When Dr. Zakir Hussain visited Sabarmati, he was very much impressed by G. Ramachandran's sincerity in organizing the Khadi work. He requested Mahatma Gandhi to send G. Ramachandran to Jamia Millia Islamia University to organize Khadi work and take up any learning and teaching that he could²². Thus Ramachandran took up his first assignment among Muslims. As G. Ramachandran took leave of Mahatma Gandhi to go to Jamia Millia, his advice was to give more importance for Hindu-Muslim unity. He said it was the dream of his life and without realizing it there could never be free India. Mahatma Gandhi added, "You must make use of the present opportunity to learn all you could about Islam and Muslims. Every Hindu should learn something of Islam and every Muslim should learn something of Hinduism"²³. With this message locked up in his heart, G. Ramachandran left for Delhi. By the time G. Ramachandran arrived in the Jamia Millia University, Dr. Zakir Hussain, Professor. Mujib, Dr. Abid Hussain and a band of devoted Muslim teachers were steadily building up the new institution. G. Ramachandran was one of the few Hindus to become a teacher in the Jamia Millia University. He was given the special task of organizing Khadi production. He worked as a



Lecturer in Jamia Millia University and taught Literature, Philosophy and Spinning. G. Ramachandran's tenure at Jamia Millia ended with two years, when Mahatma Gandhi wrote to Dr. Zakir Hussain to relieve Ramachandran to enable him to join Sri. Rajagopalachari's Gandhi Ashram in Tamil Nadu²⁴.

The opportunity to work at Jamia Millia University was considered by G. Ramachandran as a great blessing. It refined his character very much. In the words of G. Ramachandran, "The culture of an educated Muslim with all his fine courtesies is something worth knowing. Neither in Shantiniketan nor in the Sabarmati Ashram had I experienced such graces of culture"²⁵. To him Islam has a powerful liberalizing influence bringing to the common people the message of equality and freedom of man before God and Jamia Millia University was like an oasis of communal amity in the desert of communal differences and strife²⁶.

1.4 G. Ramachandran with C. Rajagopalachari

Returning from Jamia Millia, G. Ramachandran went straight to the Gandhi Ashram, Tiruchengode in Salem District of Tamilnadu and met Rajagopalachari. Rajagopalachari requested him to go to Tiruppur which had been earned the reputation as the 'Khadi Capital of South India'. In Tiruppur he studied the preliminaries of Khadi production and learned the account side also. Mahatma Gandhi asked him to go deeper into the problem of village poverty and unemployment to understand the meaning and challenges of the



Khadi programme²⁷. He was in charge of Khadi production centre in Uttukuzhi. Here G. Ramachandran saw for the first time the depth of poverty in the villages. He started training in Khadi sales in Karaikudi. He subsequently moved to Rajagopalachari's Gandhi Ashram and took over its managership. He gave much importance to adult education and built a number of schools²⁸. At that time, G. Ramachandran became conscious of the impropriety in the observance of untouchability and started a crusade against caste system. He founded an organization called Anti-untouchability League in Madurai which came to be known as Harijan Sevak Sangh by 1930's²⁹. G. Ramachandran took his mother also to this Ashram. She lived there for some months with its minimum comforts for his son's sake³⁰.

In the meantime, Mahatma Gandhi was preparing to start his second great non-violent Satyagraha - the salt Satyagraha campaign in 1930. G. Ramachandran joined the salt Satyagraha and participated in the Vedaranyam salt satyagraha led by C. Rajagopalachari and was appointed the fourth central Camp Leader in Vedaranyam. In this connection he was arrested and sentenced for one year and three months rigorous imprisonment and fined Rs.500. He was sent to Cuddalore jail and then to Vellore jail. In jail he learnt tailoring³¹. G. Ramachandran was released under the Gandhi-Irvin Pact of 1931³².



1.5 Ramachandran's marriage

When G. Ramachandran was the secretary of the Harijan Sevak Sangh in Sevagram Ashram, he met Mrs. Soundram, the daughter of T.V. Sundaram Iyengar and Lakshmi Ammal. T.V. Sundaram Iyengar was the owner of T.V.S organization which is in the industrial forefront in India. He took part in freedom movement. A great patriot, he associated himself in social services. Though Mrs. Soundram's mother, Lakshmi Ammal belonged to an orthodox Brahmin family yet she took her full share in all the work of Mahatma Gandhi for the welfare of the people³³. Mrs. Soundram had a brilliant academic career and was awarded a gold medal for standing first in Lady Hardinge Medical College, Delhi. She took her diploma in Gynecology and Obstetrics from Madras University³⁴. From the young age she was attracted towards Gandhian ideology. She was married to her uncle Dr. Soundrarajan, a popular physician. It was a great shock for Mrs. Soundram when her husband died of Plague in 1925.

Both G. Ramachandran and Mrs. Soundram worked under Mahatma Gandhi for sometime. They loved each other and decided to marry. Ramachandran earlier had taken a vow that he would marry only after 35 years and till then he would be a Brahmachari. Mahatma Gandhi had signed on one side of the written vow. So, the couple waited till time was ripe³⁵. All the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi and Rajagopalachari failed to get the consent of



T.V. Iyengar. At last in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi, Rajendra Prasad and other Congress leaders, G. Ramachandran married the Brahmin widow T.S. Soundram on 2 November 1940. The marriage was celebrated at Gandhi Ashram, Sevagram in a simple manner³⁶. Mahatma Gandhi gave the bridegroom a doti, which was spun and woven by his own hands and Kasturba gave the bride a saree spun by her own hands. The marriage was not only an intercaste marriage but was also an interprovincial marriage and widow-remarriage, which was certainly radical in those days³⁷. When Mrs. Soundram's other family members neglected her due to her inter-caste marriage, only her mother visited her house at Adayar in 1943 after her marriage³⁸. G. Ramachandran had no issues in this marriage. Later G. Ramachandran himself was instrumental for many inter-caste, inter-religious and inter-provincial marriages³⁹.

G. Ramachandran's marriage with Mrs. Soundram was a turning point in his life. Mrs. Soundram was also one of the great freedom fighters and social workers. To serve the village, with noble efforts of Mrs. Soundram and G. Ramachandran, Gandhigram was founded on 15th August, 1947⁴⁰. After the marriage, they stayed in Thycaud, Trivandrum. During that period G. Ramachandran conducted anti-liquor agitation in southern Travancore under the auspices of the Travancore State Congress. G. Ramachandran then



plunged into the political movement in the Travancore state for attaining responsible government.

1.6 Important positions held by G. Ramachandran

The important positions held by G. Ramachandran during his illustrious life are the following:

1. G. Ramachandran started a spinning club while he was a student of Scot Christian High School in Nagercoil and became its first president⁴¹.
2. He was the Secretary of the Students Association in Shantiniketan⁴².
3. G. Ramachandran assisted C.F. Andrews when Mahatma Gandhi started his 21 days of fasting in Delhi. C.F. Andrews was in charge of this fasting and G. Ramachandran worked as his assistant⁴³.
4. He worked as a teacher for two years in Jamia Millia University⁴⁴.
5. He took the charge of a Khadi Production Centre in Uttukuzhi⁴⁵.
6. He was the Manager of Rajagopalachari's Gandhi Ashram Tiruchengode⁴⁶.
7. G. Ramachandran was the fourth Central Camp Leader in Vedaranyam Salt Satyagraha⁴⁷.
8. He was the Provincial Secretary of the Harijan Sevak Sangh in Tamilnadu and Kerala in 1934⁴⁸.
9. G. Ramachandran was the Secretary of the Harijan Sevak Sangh in Sevagram Ashram⁴⁹.
10. G. Ramachandran was the Secretary of the Travancore State Congress⁵⁰.



11. He was a minister in the Pattom Thanupillai's Cabinet in Travancore in 1948⁵¹.
12. He was the Director of Gandhigram for thirty long years⁵².
13. G.Ramachandran was the General Secretary of the All India Village Industries Association⁵³.
14. He was the Chairman of the Basic Education Assessment Committee set up by the Government of India in 1955⁵⁴.
15. He was the Vice Chairman of the Basic Education Advisory Committee set up by the Government of Madras in 1956⁵⁵.
16. G. Ramachandran was the Honorary Adviser of Rural Extension Training Centre in Gandhigram⁵⁶.
17. He was the Honorary Director of Social Education Organisers Training Centre in Gandhigram⁵⁷.
18. G. Ramachandran was the Vice Chairman of Fellowship of Friends of Truth in Gandhigram⁵⁸.
19. He was the Chairman of the Kalvi Kazhagam (study circle) of Gandhigram⁵⁹.
21. He was one of the members of Sarvodaya Mandel founded by Vinobaji⁶⁰.
22. He was an Educational Advisor to the Rajagopalachari Government in the Madras State⁶¹.



23. In 1957, he was a member of the Balwantraoi Mehta Committee of the Government of India on Community Development and went round India and helped in formulating the concept of "Democratic Decentralisation"⁶².
24. He was the **Chairman** of the All India Khadi Commission from April 1972 to March 1975⁶³.
25. G. Ramachandran served in the University Grant Commission and put programmes of Gandhian Studies through Gandhi Bhavans in the Universities⁶⁴.
26. He became the Editor of "Indian Express"⁶⁵.
27. He was the Editor of Gandhi Marg for 12 years.
28. G.Ramachandran was a member of Rajya Sabha during 1964 to 1970⁶⁶.
29. He was the General Secretary of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi, New Delhi⁶⁷.
30. He was the founder Secretary of the Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi in 1969⁶⁸.
31. G.Ramachandran was the first and founder Vice Chancellor of Gandhigram University from 1976 to 1979⁶⁹.

1.7 Services of G. Ramachandran outside India

In 1955, G. Ramachandran visited United States of America, England and Germany as a member of an Asian Goodwill Mission under the auspices of the Town Hall Inc of New York. The visit helped to establish friendly



relationship with the famous universities of United States like Princeton, Howard, Tuskegee and California and Europe. The US association, 'Fund for Asia' had sent Dollars 6000 towards the construction of the new Hospital building in Gandhigram. Attempts were also made to establish in Gandhigram a Gandhi-Lincoln Institute of Human Relations under the direction of G. Ramachandran⁷⁰.

G. Ramachandran was one of the most authentic interpreters of Gandhian thought, peace and non-violence. He travelled extensively and delivered lectures on Mahatma Gandhi. In 1969 he presided over the Gandhi Centenary celebration in a number of world capitals including the UNESCO Conference in Paris⁷¹. He then travelled to England, U.S.A, Belgrade, Germany, Poland, Yugoslavia, Ceylon etc. Where ever he travelled, he preached the Gandhian ideals and non-violence.

In 1962 he visited Beirut and participated in the World Peace Conference to discuss steps, each nation could take towards peace⁷². The lecture tours he made to the USA evoked considerable interest and he was honoured during one of his visits with the 'Key to the City of Dallas'⁷³.

He visited Russia. He was a member of the Delegation sent to Moscow by Gandhi Peace Foundation along with Congress President, U.N Dhebar to plead with Russian leaders to halt the testing of nuclear weapons on land and in the Oceans⁷⁴.



After two hours of discussion the impression created by Mr. Khrushchev on Ramachandran summarized as follows:

Mr. Khrushchev would never himself start a war. He would not be guilty of taking upon himself such a responsibility, knowing fully the consequences. The world would be destroyed in a nuclear war and there would be neither victor nor vanquished. Mr. Khrushchev also would not abet in starting a world war because it would come to the same thing, the destruction of the world. Even more, if someone started a world war he would block it with all his might. Mr. Dhebar and G. Ramachandran came away with the conviction that Mr. Khrushchev was undoubtedly one of the most powerful and convinced sentinels of world peace⁷⁵.

G. Ramachandran attended the famous Paris Seminar⁷⁶. He participated in the International Inter-Religious Symposium on peace convened by the U.S Inter-Religious committee on peace and the Seminar Sub-Committee for Gandhi Centenary which took place in New Delhi from 10th to 14th January, 1968. The aim of the Symposium was to bring together the heads of the various denominational religions like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and other faiths from different parts of the world to discuss the vital contributions that religions can make for world peace.



G. Ramachandran exhorts, “Guard ourselves against creating a cold war in our worldwide endeavor to prevent nuclear war. Let all men and women in every country stand up fearless and alert and join their voices of protest to declare with all the strength in them that the people of the world will no longer to driven like sheep to nuclear slaughter”⁷⁷.

G. Ramachandran did not believe that powerful nations and their governments will ever make peace in the world; or will any Summit. But it is the common people that can achieve it. He expected, someday little groups, meeting in tens of thousands of places in the world, standing for peace, federating together and creating a people’s movement might make the peace of the world. He said the next great step in peace-making in the world would be for the peoples to turn their faces towards their own governments⁷⁸.

1.8 Awards won by G. Ramachandran

For G. Ramachandran’s meritorious service he was awarded the Padma Bhusan, but he rejected it. At the age of 85, he received the highest honour of the Visvabharati University. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi - the Chancellor of Visvabharati - gave him “Desikottama” award which he considered as the most valuable gift⁷⁹. Kashi Vidyapith conferred on him the degree of D. Litt and Gandhigram Rural University honoured him with Doctorate.



1.9 Madhavi Mandiram Loka Seva Trust

After 76 long years of service, he returned to his birth place in Kerala at Neyyatinkara and founded the Madhavi Mandiram Loka Seva Trust on 2nd October, 1980⁸⁰. The trust runs the Mahatma Gandhi Vidya Peedom which is an institution of the Peoples Education Programme.

1.10 Conclusion

Born in an aristocratic family, G. Ramachandran gave up all sorts of luxuries in his life from his very childhood and lived with the down-trodden people and worked for their welfare throughout his life. He could serve the people in various fields. He was an educationalist, a social reformer, a peacemaker and a freedom fighter. Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Rajagopalachari were the mentors of his life. The institutions like Shantiniketan, Sabarmati Ashram etc influenced his life very much.



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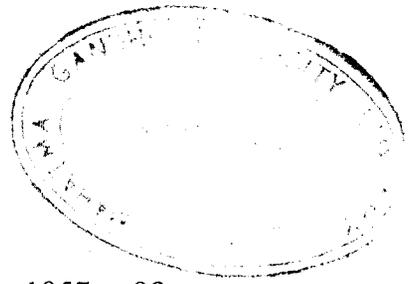


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