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Published by Anonymous on Sep. 02, 2000

DANCE

Miracle Girl of Mumbai

Sudha Chandran tells her tale of agonizing loss and dramatic recovery

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You may not have heard of her, but she is one of the world's best known women--Sudha Chandran, age 30, actress and dancer. Her television serials are screened in 54 countries. In her own country, India, more than forty million viewers watch her every day on the small screen. Everyone, from the humble rickshaw puller to the Mumbai business magnate, knows her and fondly refers to her as Sudhaji. Recently, the Indian government decided to include her story in primary school textbooks to provide youngsters a role model. What is it about this woman that has captivated so many millions of people?

Sudha is much more than an actress or a dancer; she is a living legend. Rather than resigning herself to fate, this sparkling beauty conquered her apparent destiny through sheer willpower. Her story is her message. Sudha was born in a middle-class family. Her father worked as a librarian at the American Consulate in Mumbai. At the age of three, Sudha was initiated into Indian classical dance. In no time she became one of the most promising pupils of Bharata Natyam, a dance

form of religious origins in which facial expression and ankle movement predominate.

Sudha, whose name means "nectar of the moon," had just turned sixteen when she and her parents set off on their vacation in South India. Every year the family visited a temple 200km from their holiday spot to make ritual offerings to the Gods and seek Their protection. That year was no exception. Mr. Chandran says, "As far as I remember, the journey was jinxed from the outset. When we reached the railway station, there were no seats available. We were on the verge of going back home when a young boy offered me seats on a bus, which I accepted." After propitiating the Gods, the family boarded the bus to return. While all the passengers were sleeping, a truck hit the bus head on. Sudha recalls, "I woke up in a public hospital. You have to see these hospitals in India to believe them. I had a fractured femur and a barely visible cut in the ankle. They put my leg in plaster and I stayed in bed for a week." Her parents, who had lost consciousness at the time of the accident, escaped with minor injuries. As soon as they were in a position to leave, Sudha's father arranged to transfer his daughter to a private hospital in Madras. That was the beginning of their nightmare.

Mr. Chandran said, "The doctor called me and told me my daughter was running a high fever. Her foot had turned blue--she had gangrene!" The gangrene was due to negligence on the part of the hospital staff. The plaster had been put on without attending to the wound in the ankle, thus infection. "We will have to amputate, it is a question of limb or life," said the doctor. "I just cannot express what I felt like at the time," says Sudha. "All of a sudden there was no future. I felt as if my

world had crashed, my existence had come to an end. I was young. I had dreamed of becoming a great dancer, getting married.... All of a sudden the light seemed to have died out of my life. I tried to delay the operation, but it was too late. My parents had already given their consent."

Sudha recalls how before going in for anesthesia she had asked the doctor to let her see her leg for the last time. "It seemed so normal. Then I saw my foot. What a beautiful foot! Just after that they gave me anesthesia and I lost consciousness." She cannot recollect what happened immediately after the operation. She has blanked out those excruciating moments from her memory. All that she remembers is the unbearable pain and the fact that she hardly reacted. She did not cry or shout except when the pain was acute. It seemed as if she had become totally insensitive. "I think I was in a state of shock. As the only daughter, I had led a very sheltered life. I was not even allowed to wear high heels for fear that I may fall and not be able to dance. And then all this happened. It was as if a bomb had exploded in my face."

"When I had to stand on my own feet, it was like being in a torture chamber. My amputated leg was very, very painful, even though it didn't exist. I suffered from phantom pain for three months. I was obsessed with my big toe, I kept repeating to myself 'Now, I don't have a foot...I don't have a foot.' I couldn't bear the idea of walking on crutches." Slowly, however, it dawned on the young dancer that things could have been much worse. That was the turning point that put her on the road to recovery. She started meditating, even though she does not consider herself to be a very religious person. "I began to realize that I had the strength in me. What

I needed to do was to bring it out."

Six months after the accident, the time came for Sudha to return to Mumbai. "As I was leaving the hospital, the doctor warned me that people would stare at me. I would just have to get used to it." Her doctor also advised her to use an artificial foot. Sudha says, "It was very badly made but it helped me hide my infirmity. I made up my mind to return to Mumbai the same way I had left it six months earlier--walking."

Two hundred people were waiting for Sudha at the airport, friends, companions, classmates, fellow dancers and acquaintances. Sudha, the spoiled girl, the darling of her teachers and friends, the explosive beauty, the great promise of classical dance, had returned, injured but alive and outwardly the same. "I was the same, but people had difficulty accepting it. Their attitude had changed. They would look at me with pity, as if to say, 'Poor girl, and to think she had such a promising career!' I had to learn to live with this even though my instinct was to rebel. I wanted to show these people I was the same. The only way to do it was to dance again. I did not have the courage to come out with such a foolish idea because I didn't want to be made fun of. Moreover, the artificial foot was very uncomfortable. I was seeing the moment when I would just have to get used to crutches. But one day at the orthopedic clinic where I had gone to get my artificial foot repaired, I saw one that looked very natural." She was told it was the Jaipur foot.

Miraculous feet: An article she had read in India Today when she was bedridden came back to her. A certain Dr. Sethi in

Jaipur had been awarded the Magsaysay Prize for having invented the Jaipur foot, a solid, flexible prosthetic foot. At the time she had not paid much attention to it. But that day, as soon as she got back home, she frantically pulled out all the old magazines to find the article. The minute she laid her hands on it, she wrote to Sethi, without any real hope of a reply. The Magsaysay Award is like the Asian Nobel Prize and the winners are much sought after. Much to Sudha's surprise, ten days later she received an answer: "Expecting you next week. Sethi."

For foreign tourists, Jaipur is the city of pink buildings and precious stones. But in India, Jaipur is best known for its hospitals. It was in the huge Sawai Man Singh Hospital that Sethi set up his workshop and orthopedic clinic. Hundreds of people with mutilated limbs were waiting under the scorching sun to see the doctor. With the Jaipur foot, they could once again lead normal lives. "When I met the doctor," said Sudha, "I felt I had known him all my life. His bearing was so noble, his manners so elegant!"

Sethi has spent 40 years of his life helping his patients--the poorest of the poor--stand up on their own feet again. The doctor's silver hair and sallow complexion give him an air of seriousness. A brilliant man, he has the humility of the wise and a soothing presence. His life's mission has been inspired by the Gandhian ideal of justice, long denied to his compatriots by the rigid caste system. He designed a prosthesis suited to Asian conditions, where people tend to sit on the ground; many of them work in the fields and have to move their ankles constantly. Artificial feet in the West are designed for "chairseating" people, not very practical in "floorseating"

countries.

Sudha blurted out the question foremost in her mind, "Doctor, do you think I'll be able to dance again?" "Why not?" replied Dr Sethi. "It is all in the mind. If you want to start dancing again, you will." Sethi confided with me, "I told her she could dance again because I did not want to disappoint her. But I was not sure. Sudha was still a child, a very lively, intelligent child, and I had no wish to discourage her. Since the accident, everybody lost interest in her; her own father had taken to drinking. Yet her mother was supportive." "Dr. Sethi's words resounded in my head," recalls Sudha.

Work on the new prosthesis began. Sethi recounts, "We studied the kind of dance Sudha was used to and tried to adjust the artificial limb to her. This was by no means easy, because the leg had suffered a lot on account of the fractured femur. To reduce the pain of the impact on the ground, we incorporated bicycle bearings in the sole of the prosthesis. The advantage is that the ankle is mobile and allows movement of all kinds. The next day we tried on the new foot."

The minute she returned to Mumbai, Sudha determinedly began to prove to herself and the world that she could dance. She spared no effort to turn her tragedy into personal victory. With the support of her mother, and without telling her father, she resumed dancing lessons. She also went to see a physiotherapist every day to gain precision in her movement. She had to relearn how to keep her balance, walk, bend, stretch, turn with the artificial foot and coordinate with the other foot and the rest of her body. "It was the coming

together of science, music and art, and we did a good job of it," recalls Sudha. For two years, this impromptu team worked hard to see that the child prodigy recovered her flexibility. It was a gradual process. In the end, tenacity, courage, knowledge and hope finally won the day.

"One day I got a call from Sudha," recalls Sethi. "She told me that she was staging a public recital on the 28th of January and that she would not perform unless I came. I told her I would not be in India on that day but she said if I was not there she would not dance. She was so insistent that I was in Mumbai on the 28th." The person most stunned by Sudha's performance was her own father, who found out only the night before. "Are you mad? How are you going to dance?" he asked her incredulously.

When "Nectar of the Moon" saw two thousand people in a theatre meant for five hundred, she had a terrible case of stage fright. "I just can't go out there and dance," she told her dance guru. Sudha's guru had not taken a drop of water for a week before the recital. "When I heard Sudha say she couldn't do it, I talked to the stage manager. He said, 'If you can't get this girl on the stage, I am quitting my profession right now.'" "All of a sudden, I found myself pushed onto the stage in front a welcoming audience," recalls Sudha. "I don't know how I danced. But I realized towards the end that I had done it."

The performance went on for three hours. As it came to an end, the audience rose to its feet and gave Sudha a thundering ovation. Dr. Sethi was overcome with emotion: "Sudha had painted her toe nails and was wearing bracelets and jewelry.

No one could tell the difference between her real foot and the artificial one. After the performance, people clambered onto the stage and asked the dancer tell them which was her artificial foot."

The next day, The Times of India, the country's most respected paper, ran the following headline: "Loses a Foot, Walks a Mile." It was the same in all the other newspapers. "Sudha Returns to the Stage Better than Before;" "An Unforgettable Recital;" "Sudha Dances again with the Jaipur Foot;" "20-year-old Sudha Chandran Shows the World the Power of the Mind," etc. By rediscovering the dance she loved, adored and practiced to perfection, Sudha proved to the world that the loss of a foot was not an impediment to a full life or, for that matter, to being a dancer.

All the media attention could not fail to catch the attention of the film world. After all, India is the largest producer of films in the world. A shrewd producer from Hyderabad asked Sudha to tell her story on the screen. The film was a roaring success. Sudha's fame spread to the four corners of India. From cinema, she moved to television. I interviewed her in a studio where she was shooting for six sitcoms in which she is acting simultaneously. Easygoing and lively, she spoke with conviction and assurance. She said that she did not enjoy socializing; she is married and likes to stay within the family circle. She has been married now for three years to a Mumbai film director. They live in Bollywood, where most film stars live. Sudha likes to live in simple comfort. There is nothing extravagant or pretentious about her house. In fact, it is rather spartan.

"I have never been very ambitious," said Sudha. "I have all I need and I'm happy. I want to concentrate on my career." I asked if she would like to help others with the same disability. She said, "Not directly. My life is my message. When I have more time, I'll open an institute or something like it." When I asked for a message for people who have had similar experiences, she offered, "In most cases, it is not the disabled, but their families who need rehabilitation. If you think there is nothing you can do, you will do nothing. This is a very negative attitude; it prevents people from moving on and makes them resigned to their fate. You have to fight against this." Finally, I asked how she feels about being so popular, with her name about to appear in textbooks: "I enjoy the affection. People stop me on the road and ask me, 'How are you, Sudhaji?' I think I have shown the disabled that the doors of the arts are open now for them. People see me as a role model. 'If Sudha can do it, why can't I?' they ask themselves. This makes me happy, because I feel my life has a meaning."

Javier Moro, is the nephew of Dominique Lapierre, author of City of Joy.