

# Towards dignity in death

AUGUST 27, 2006 00:00 IST

UPDATED: MARCH 26, 2012 13:33 IST



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Thozhar, a charitable trust in Coimbatore, has taken upon itself the task of giving a decent burial for unclaimed bodies.

A WOMAN hovers helplessly around the mortuary, reluctant to leave her dead son behind. But she has to. She has no money for his last rites. Flower-decorator Shantakumar and his friends can't get this image out of their minds. There are hundreds of mothers, husbands,

brothers and friends who have to leave their dear ones without the benefit of a decent burial or cremation. But, Thozhar, a charitable trust formed by Shantakumar, flower vendors Sampath Kumar, Ibrahim and Jeevanandham and lathe worker Annadurai, is trying to change this. Their mission - to foster humaneness. The members of Thozhar have chipped in with funds to bury everyone from pedestrians killed by speeding vehicles unknown to their families, to a son whose mother was too poor to even afford a tumbler of milk and a joss stick to perform the last rites.

### **The first casualty**

"The first thing that poverty kills is humaneness," remarks Shantakumar. Thozhar is an important part of the friends' lives though they all have regular jobs. Shantakumar strings together colourful garlands and oversees floral decoration at wedding halls. His office in the bustling and fragrant flower bazaar area is very different from the stench of death hanging over the mortuary. But, he springs into action the moment he gets a call from the police that another unclaimed corpse is waiting in the mortuary. For a decent send-off from Thozhar. Calls are made to the gravedigger, the funeral van and the person who sells shrouds. That done, the friends weave a garland and wreath and send another soul out of this world with dignity. So far, Thozhar has helped perform the funeral of 111 unclaimed bodies. It all started accidentally. The friends used to organise camps for blood donation and get doctors to talk about health awareness in their area. During one such trip, a doctor, Senthil Kumar, asked them if they would like to do something different. He spoke to them about the unclaimed and abandoned bodies lying in the city morgue and the need to give them a decent burial. "His talk triggered memories of seeing workers carelessly tossing four to five bodies in a van and taking them to a burial ground on the outskirts," says Ibrahim. "Aren't people entitled to dignity at least in death?" he asks. Their families, too, are very supportive. "They realised we were motivated," says Ibrahim. They don't pretend to be unaffected by the sights they see, be it a blackened two-month old corpse, the disfigured remains of a criminal lynched by a mob or the overwhelming eucalyptus-laced smell of death which hangs like a pall over the mortuary. The doctor set the friends on a path from which they have not wavered, despite odds. They began with the burial of four bodies on April 1, 2004. "When we first saw the blackened bodies, a wave of revulsion swept over us; but we soon overcame that and covered the faces and carried on with our work." The group now maintains records of every burial, with the mortuary discharge certificate and the signature of a police official saying the body was buried under his supervision. Initially, Shantakumar did not feel the need to preserve the certificates. Then, they faced a legal problem and realised that they needed the certificates to avoid getting into trouble. Each funeral costs Thozhar Rs. 500. This amount too, is heavily discounted, with the gravedigger and ambulance service cutting their fee by half. "There have been times when we have asked the officials concerned to postpone a funeral by a day so that we have some time to arrange for funds," says Shantakumar. Miraculously, funds have always materialised. No

member, however, is compelled to contribute for a burial. "If you look at it as Rs. 500, it is daunting. But, we only see it as Rs. 100 per person. Whoever has the money at that moment pays," says Annadurai.

### **Future plans**

Have they ever thought of seeking outside help? "No. We started this work and felt it is bad to ask others money for something you do," says Ibrahim. Problems arise when they bury many bodies at the same time. Recently, they arranged for the funeral of 11 bodies. "That was the first time we faced a serious financial crunch. Raising Rs. 5,500 was not easy. So, we are now planning to create a corpus of Rs. one lakh from public contribution. We never dreamt there would be so many unclaimed bodies. Now that we have started the work, it should go on even without us," they feel. S. Kannappan, head constable, Traffic Investigation Wing, Coimbatore Police, who has worked with them in more than five cases, says, "Despite being busy in their work, they make themselves available whenever they are called." Thozhar's future plans include entering into a contract with a cloth manufacturer for supply of a free shroud or at a discount and a funeral van. Their advice to the average man on the road? "Carry your ID card on your person. Many of the unclaimed bodies we buried could have been affluent people from a different city who carried no identification. Their families are probably still looking for them," says Shantakumar. Contact them at 98422-67700/98422-51523/98433-47786

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