

The Musical Saviour

Hollywood music composer comes to the aid of farmers' widows in Andhra Pradesh

By Rahul Chandawarkar

The widows of the farmers who committed suicide in Andhra Pradesh have found support in the most unlikely of quarters: Hollywood!

Yes, Joseph Curiale, leading Hollywood music composer is their saviour. He has traveled five times in the last one year from the USA to the farmlands of Andhra Pradesh with as much as 50,000 US dollars (Rupees Twenty two lakhs) to pay off debts of eight farm widows, rehabilitate many others and help construct an orphanage.

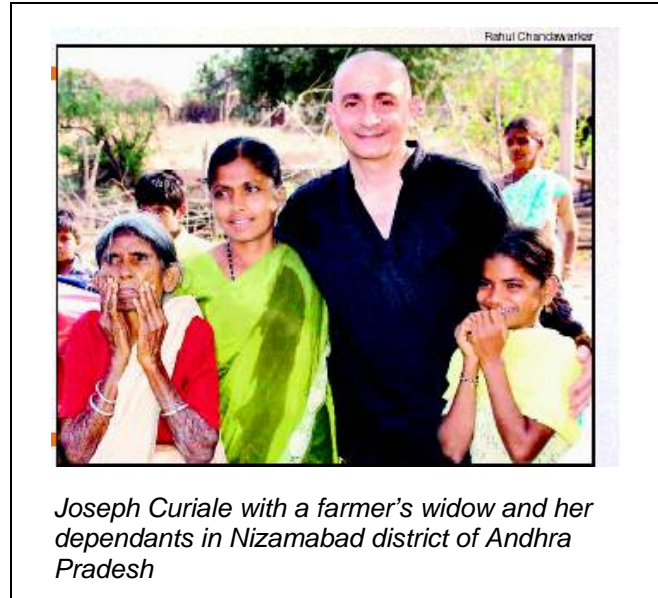
In an outstanding example of compassion, Joseph has managed to single handedly pay off the debts of eight widows amounting to Rs four lakhs, open fixed deposits of Rs one lakh each for eight widows and plans to construct a new building for a state government run orphanage in the Bodhan village of Nizamabad district for children of farmers' families.

For this, Joseph has put on hold a lucrative music career and has spent most part of last year mobilizing funds for the widows from his world wide network of friends.

The story began on March 2, 2006, when Joseph watched a CNN television report in his Los Angeles home on Anjamma, a farmer's widow from the Isaipeta village of the Nizamabad district of Andhra Pradesh. According to Joseph, it was Anjamma's dignity in the face of personal tragedy that struck a chord inside him and made him act upon it.

In Pune, on the invitation of the city based IT company Reflexis, Joseph told TOI, "Something mystical happened after I saw Anjamma on television. A voice from inside my head, simply said: 'Pay her debt!' and that voice did not go away. I did not have the money, but I remembered a Bible scripture, which said: 'Put God's things first and everything else will be given to you' Not surprisingly, a few days later, I got a royalty check of USD 1,600 from a music-related source."

Joseph revealed how a few days later, the same inner voice asked him: 'Why are you doing this alone? Ask you friends for help.' This prompted him to write 200 emails to friends across the world asking for help. His friends donated amounts ranging from USD 100 to USD 500 and in less than a month he had managed to collect USD 9,000 (Rs 3.96 lakhs), which he brought with him to Andhra Pradesh in April 2006.



He visited Anjamma's village and paid off her debt in a public function. He also managed to pay off the debts of four other widows and gave hope to 30 other widows giving them each, USD 110.

Joseph went back to the USA and raised another USD 16,000 (Rs 7 lakhs) in eight weeks and freed seven more widows and set up fixed deposits for them worth Rs one lakh each.

He now plans to construct an orphanage building in the Bodhan village of the Nizamabad district. Says Joseph, "There are 75 girls in the orphanage with just one single toilet servicing them. My heart bleeds for them. They are so innocent and haven't asked for anything. That is why I want to help them." Joseph is being assisted on the ground by the Hyderabad based voluntary organisation, Asha.

Joseph reveals that his tryst with India began several years ago, when he became a student of kriya yoga at Swami Yogananda's centre in California. "Yoga and Deepak Chopra's writings have given me a sense of direction in life," he says.

Says Devinder Sharma, New Delhi based journalist and activist, "Joseph's work is commendable because he has single handedly motivated his friends in the western world for this cause. Rarely do people put their careers on hold, to do this kind of work."

According to Sharma, the government paid cotton farmers a pittance for the 30 years just to make the Indian textile industry internationally competitive. Argues Sharma, "I feel the textile barons who became rich this way, should be going out there like Joseph and helping the farmers in Vidarbha and Andhra in their hour of need."