

A friend in need

M.P. Anil Kumar, Tuesday, September 12, 2006 at 0000 hrs IST



It was August 19, 1983. Rajan Paul's head accidentally hit the shallow seabed off Doha while he was pursuing his pastime of diving. The impact cracked his cervical spine and paralysed his body, neck down. He returned to Kizhakkambalam, his village that lay east of Kochi, ambulant on a wheelchair.

A bosom pal realised there was life after quadriplegia for this ingenious engineer aged 40. So he designed a sophisticated wheelchair to enhance his comfort and mobility. The duo together went on to set up the Sevana Electrical Appliance at Kizhakkambalam in 1984, with a capital of Rs 4 lakh.

But starting an industry in Kerala is fraught with nameless perils. So they crafted a decentralised manufacturing paradigm. The products of Sevana were designed to require largely the skills for assembling fabricated components and electronic circuits so that the assembly could be done at homes and small workshops. Sevana procured all the custom-built parts, which were fetched by the workers to construct the gizmos at their homes.

For Rajan Paul, sublimating his woes in Sevana work diverted his mind from his paralysed body. Recumbent on the wheelchair, he slogged not less than eight hours every day at the computer to contrive myriad gadgets and contraptions. A semi-automatic sewing machine became his first brainchild. Sevana took wing.

It decentralised designing, manufacturing, quality control, marketing and after sales service, and now engages over 200 families in and around Kizhakkambalam. Eminent economists have hailed the Sevana Model as the apt exemplar for industrial development in India.

The awesome trail Paul blazed made him a nonpareil legend to fellow quadriplegics like me. I drew oodles of afflatus from him but never had an opportunity to meet or talk to him. I expressed this desire to Isaac Rajan (his son and my schoolmate) days ago, but it will remain a lifetime regret that I will never be able to do so. The legend departed on August 30.