

# UNsung BEACONS

VOLUME X

STORIES OF PEOPLE FOR WHOM HUMANITY MATTERS



**A compilation of  
articles featured in  
Conversations Today 2019**

# Unsung Beacons

Volume X

*Stories of people for  
whom humanity matters*

*A compilation of articles featured in  
Conversations Today – 2019*

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## Foreword

I am happy to know that Centre for Social Initiative and Management is bringing out the 10th Volume of '*Unsung Beacons*' which is a fine compilation of articles featured in their monthly '*Conversations Today*' in 2019. The fact that CSIM is taking efforts to bring to light the social change-makers and inspiring personalities besides being a leading institution in the field of Social Entrepreneurship is highly appreciable.



The *Alumni Talk* is sure to give a glimpse of how the efforts of CSIM have generated a multiplier effects in bringing out irrevocable social changes for the betterment of Children, Women and weaker communities. The Potter's Wheel Education Services by Shri.Sanjay Vomkarey is sure to mold the young minds in a proper way and produce best crop of younger generation in the years to come. The initiatives of the other alumni of CSIM will inspire many more for addressing the social issues.

The interviews with *Inspiring Personalities* have not only showcased the attributes of these personalities that set them apart but also the initiatives taken by them for societal benefits so that those who get inspired will try to emulate those initiatives. Ms. Marie Banu has skillfully interviewed these personalities to bring out their best attributes.

The *NGO profile* section will be an eye opener for many, particularly the student community to engage in social activities by showing how some small yet sincere interventions can bring about gargantuan effects. If the initiatives of Sight savers, Mithra and Diya Foundation are learnt by students and adults alike, it will definitely create a huge impact, I believe.

The short and powerful articles under the *Positive Energy* section do definitely create positive energy when surfing through the pages. Ms. Bhuvaneshwari Ravi has touched many subjects from breaking free from our mold, being deliberately developmental, power of choice to practicing patience finally advising to have human moments by paying more attention to others.

The articles highlighting the *Trendsetters* will be highly inspirational for the trend setters in the offing by prompting them to think differently.

My sincere appreciation and best wishes for CSIM for bringing out this rich repository of information and inspiration!

**Date: 21.03.2020**

  
(GAGANDEEP SINGH BEDI)

## Editor's Preface

I am delighted to present the tenth edition of *Unsung Beacons*. Each of us have a story to tell, and we love listening to stories too. *Unsung Beacons* is a compilation of enthusing stories of changemakers featured in *Conversations Today* 2019.



Social entrepreneurs are individuals with innovative solutions to society's most pressing social, cultural, and environmental challenges. They are ambitious and persistent — tackling major issues and offering new ideas for social change. Each new year brings new social entrepreneurs, and new ideas show how we can impact the world using our consumer power. The main objective of *Unsung Beacons* is to share stories of change makers who have been tackling social problems in an entrepreneurial way.

In many ways, this book is a time capsule, a peek into how social entrepreneurs have been adopting several strategies and evolving different business models to address social issues like education, healthcare, disability, gender and environment.

*Unsung Beacons* has a range of options for where meaning might lie for us. It is time to turn the pursuit of a meaningful life from a routine-complex impossibility to something we can all comprehend, aim for, and succeed at.

My journey with *Conversations* has been most edifying. As a researcher and interviewer, it has given me the opportunity to meet people from different walks of life. First and foremost, I would like to thank God. In the process of putting this book together I realized how true this gift of writing is for me.

I wish to place my thanks and gratitude to Mr. PN Subramanian,

Managing Trustee, Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS) and Mrs Latha Suresh, Trustee, MSDS for their continuous support and encouragement. My warmest thanks and appreciation to my fellow writers and designer who were carefully chosen to provide the perfect blend of knowledge and skills.

It would have been an impossible task to write for Conversations Today and compile this book without the love and support of my family. My most sincere thanks to my parents and children for their unconditional love and understanding.

To the casual reader, this book will be impressive because of its sheer size and simple language, but I am sure that social entrepreneurs as well as corporates engaged in Corporate Social Responsibility will find this as a handbook to seek reference from.

Happy reading!

**Marie Banu. J**  
**Chief-Editor, Conversations Today &**  
**Director, CSIM**

## **I. Alumni Talk**

*Stories of social change agents who have  
pursued their Social Entrepreneurship course in  
Centre for Social Initiative and  
Management (CSIM)*

## 1. Dhanalakshmi Sattu

### They are like my own children



As per the Indian Census 2011, over 20.42 lakh children in the 0-6 year age group are disabled. This roughly translates to one in every 100 children (in the same age group) is suffering from some type of disability. While our cities now see parents of special children approaching specialised centres and skilled professionals to assist them, what about the children from low-income families? This is exactly what got Dhanalakshmi Sattu thinking when she was working as a special educator as part of the government-led Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme (launched in the early 2000s). “I was getting a salary but I was not happy with the reach of my work. Convincing parents from disadvantaged families to send their special children to school was a challenge. I wanted to get into this full-time,” says Dhanalakshmi who went on to start the Abhaya Pradha Education Society at Nacharam in 2012.

To widen her expertise, she took up the course in NGO Management at the Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) in 2015. “I benefited from the course in a huge manner,” she says, adding about the various things she learnt as part of the six month course. “I enhanced my communication skills and learnt how to

approach people in the field. We were taught skills management and even practical subjects like account management and taxes. The team has been a part of my journey and continue to support me.” The CSIM team was invited as guests for their Annual Day 2018. Dhanalakshmi adds, “Even my batchmates visit the school and help spread the word. It is a great community.”

## **EARLY DAYS**

Having worked with families across slums in the area for many years, she says the journey hasn’t been easy. “When I started, I was saddened by the sight of many differently abled children in slums, sitting idle at home. They faced many issues - speech difficulties, behavioural issues, slow learning, etc,” says the 40-year-old. Another issue she highlights is how dealing with parents who weren’t keen to send them to ‘normal’ schools was a huge hurdle. “They were apprehensive about how they would gel with other students and most importantly, what job opportunities could they possibly have once they were done with their education,” says Dhanalakshmi. As per UNESCO, illiteracy levels are high across all categories of disability, and extremely so for children with visual, multiple and mental disabilities (and for children with severe disabilities across all the categories).

With both parents working, it is also important to note that the needs of special children are overlooked to a great extent. Even parents need to be educated on their child’s needs, how to address them and ensure them a fun and safe childhood. And seeing these children being neglected gave her the much-needed push to start Abhaya Pradha. “I discussed my plans with my husband and he was very supportive. He works in a government company and also helps me run the school,” says Dhanalakshmi. She started off by speaking to the many families in her neighbourhood and convinced them to send their children to her school - ensuring them quality education.

## **OF TRAINING AND FUNDING**

In its sixth year now, her school has four teachers on board. “I

started with six children and now the number has risen to 50,” says an elated Dhanalakshmi. The children are in the 3-18 age group and are given speech training, written skills development and methods to improve their social and behavioural capabilities. Apart from training children, she tells me how parental counselling is an even bigger job. “It is mandatory that one parent accompanies the child so they can learn how to engage them at home. It is helpful when parents see the work we do and how it is benefiting their child.” Dhanalakshmi is proud that seven children have moved on from her school and are now part of conventional schools.

One teacher for every five children is mandatory, she says, but funding issues are preventing her from keeping up this ratio. At present, the school is self-funded with help from family and friends. “Including rent and salaries for the teachers, I spend around Rs. 50,000-Rs. 60,000 a month. If I do get better financial assistance, I would like to bring in more specialised training for my children - tailoring, computer classes, candle making, and more. This will help create gainful employment opportunities for them once they leave school,” she says.

## **CHANGES ON-GROUND**

Today, the parents have come a long way since when they first started. They are glad to see their children develop their speech, write a bit or even interact well in a social space. “When parents meet me, they cannot control their tears of joy. Seeing their children evolve gives them hope that they too can be integrated in a ‘normal’ school and study with other children their age,” says Dhanalakshmi, a mother of two children - a boy (in class 10) and a girl (studying in class 4).

But her journey is far from over. “I want to change the syllabus,” she says, adding, “I want to craft a separate syllables that suits their requirements of special children. If you give these children the right attention and specific skill sets, they can be moulded into bright, financially independent individuals.” And this is her long-term aim. It is heartening to see companies and local

establishments now approaching Dhanalakshmi and volunteering to employ children who leave her school. Take Hari for instance - he came in with a speech problem and after studying at Abhaya Pradha for a year, he went on to be gainfully employed as an accountant at a neighbourhood stationary shop. “It makes me very happy to see them succeed. They are like my own children and I celebrate their birthdays like I do with my own two children,” concludes Dhanalakshmi.

*Nidhi Adlakha*



## 2. Jeevan Mirror of Hope



A third of India's enormous population comprises children. A study by a leading international children's charity found that around 20 million children in India are orphans. The disturbing fact is that out of these, the study finds that only about 0.3% of them actually have deceased parents. The rest are orphans by abandonment. Poverty is a major reason why so many parents are driven to make this decision. Children who are left with no protective systems caring for them, often end up victims of more poverty, child labour and trafficking.

As it happens, the most healing hands are the ones that know pain, all too well. For Jeevan, founder of Asha Kuteer Orphanage, his lonely and "unloving" home environment became his biggest motivation to bring children who are born under worse circumstances, into a loving, nurturing home. Born and raised in a small village in Krishna District in Andhra Pradesh, Jeevan, the eldest of three siblings, often felt his parents favoured his other siblings over him. He completed a course on Computers at the local Polytechnic college, but for unavoidable reasons

could not pursue a career in the same field. He worked as a medical transcriptionist for a few years. He battled with severe depression, his girlfriend at the time left him and the medications he was taking for his depression rendered him unable to take on a fulltime job because he was sleeping till late into the day. His already strained relations with his parents worsened. It was when he hit rock bottom that he had an epiphany. “I thought, why should I run after people for love? I will instead give it to someone who needs it especially,” says Jeevan. He decided he would provide a caring, empathetic home for children who knew neither.

“When I started Asha Kuteer, I didn’t have any experience or training to build an organization,” says Jeevan, “I learned through trial and error. Most of us think providing physical comforts is the bulk of parenting. We forget just how important emotional support is for a child.” He provides an example, “We have a girl in our orphanage who witnessed the horrific burning of her mother by a neighbour. After receiving her into our care, we realized she had no control of her bowel movements. At least thrice a week we would receive complaints from her school for this. The trauma had affected her physical and mental wellbeing. We gave her as much love and support as we could and within six to eight months, the complaints drastically reduced.” Started in January 2013, Asha Kuteer currently runs three homes in Hyderabad housing a total of 75 children. While basic supplies of food, clothing and school supplies are being donated by generous individuals, the organization constantly struggles to find regular funding.

In 2018, Jeevan joined the 16th batch of the Hyderabad chapter of CSIM’s Certificate Programme in Social Entrepreneurship. He says, The CSIM course gave me great insights into what other NGOs around the country are doing. What stood out for me was “harnessing the power of technology for social good”.

While he has been continuously learning and streamlining the work of Asha Kuteer to make it sustainable, Jeevan still faces challenges every day. He highlights a few, saying “First, helping

our children overcome a tragedy. We have children who have seen their mothers burnt alive, or forced into prostitution. Sometimes, I have no words to even console them. Secondly, finding funds. My wife and I have used up our life's savings on building these homes, and we work every day to bring in the required money. Thirdly, it's tough to find compassionate and capable staff. We previously had single mothers on our staff, but due to their bad experiences in life, they were spreading negativity among our children as well."

As per government rules, orphanages like Asha Kuteer can only admit children between the ages 6-18 years in their care. While none of the 75 children under his care are old enough to leave the home anytime soon, Jeevan is hopeful about their future. Asha Kuteer also runs a home for the visually impaired college going boys.

When asked what his aspirations for them are, he emphatically states, "I have no aspirations for the children. They have big dreams of their own which I'll only be too happy to assist them with. We do not insist on any one career path for them. Recently, one of our girls got selected to play for the Telangana Team at the National Roller Hockey games." Pride is evident when he shares this news.

Jeevan credits his wife Mercy for making his dreams come true. "Without my wife, Asha Kuteer would merely be a hostel," he says. "She bore with me as I suffered my depression. She cared for and nurtured our kids when I had to run administrative errands and fund raising work, away from home. The only other people who have extended their immense support are my board members," says Jeevan.

"Hope is VITAL for survival," says Jeevan. When he was going through some of his roughest times, he kept a small mirror under his pillow. Every morning before even opening his eyes, he would bring the mirror up to his face, open his eyes and say to himself: "I love you Jeevan". "It was hard because I didn't love myself, but it gave me my last string of hope," he says. Jeevan

believes that in service of the children, he has found healing for himself. “When in depression, one tends to think only of one’s own problems. However, as I started learning about each of the kids’ tragedies, my own problems seemed to fade away. Thinking about the kids, their needs, their education and their problems has made me a less self-centered person on the whole.”

Jeevan’s vision for Asha Kuteer is, “To see desperate and disadvantaged children grow to be valued members of society with a promising future and a memorable past, empowering them to lead productive lives beyond the orphanage and to become contributing members of society and leaders of the next generation.” We wish him the very best.

*Archanaa Ramesh*



### 3. Lakshmi NV

#### Carrying the Beloved's Legacy with Pride

*“Carve your name on hearts, not tombstones. A legacy is etched into the minds of others and the stories they share about you”*

—Shannon Adler



N.V. Lakshmi did the same while she bid farewell to this world at the age of 52 due to brain haemorrhage. She spread life even in her death through organ donation which sparked a new life to six other people. During her life, she along with her husband Mohan Nishtala was involved in various philanthropic activities.

Lakshmi believed that education is the light of life and supported poor children with fees, books, and school uniforms. Her deep passion to educate the underprivileged children is the area that NV Lakshmi Foundation focuses upon. Mohan visits various schools and colleges and identifies girl children who need education support. Some children are also recommended by their teachers. Today, these girls are pursuing professional courses across the country.

Mohan started the NV Lakshmi Foundation in 2011 in memory of his dear wife Lakshmi to continue what she had begun and left behind. Organ donation awareness is also an area that the

foundation focuses on as Lakshmi herself has led by example and believed that Giving is in fact Living.

Mr. Mohan recollects how they both met a young electrician some 15 years ago who couldn't afford to study further. They offered him support to pursue his education and that young man today has reached great heights. Quite a lot of people would want to testify how a phenomenal woman and her deeds have led them to have a better life, a better future. Recognizing the social initiatives of Lakshmi, the Rotary Club of Secunderabad, Cantonment invited her and Mohan to be Rotarians which opened gateways to a host of NGO's who were doing phenomenal work.

There is a synergy between the Rotary Club and NV Lakshmi foundation which has led to a number of joint projects. "It was one of the Rotarians who had undertaken the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme at CSIM that recommended me to take up this course in 2013. My time at CSIM was an enriching learning experience. I learnt about the Government regulations and how one can become a social entrepreneur," says Mohan.

My association with CSIM is strong and has opened great networking opportunities. But, the learnings and knowledge I gained here is incomparable," he adds.

Mohan promotes organ donation and hosts a Memorial Lecture on Lakshmi's birthday (13th of December) each year in Hyderabad. "Our Trust's primary goals are to support girl children education and promote organ donation. Lakshmi also had concern towards differently abled children and was associated with Sri Vidya School for Special Children and Deaf Enabled Foundation. For her, the urge and passion to do something for the underprivileged was imbibed since childhood, says Mohan.

Lakshmi and Mohan have been engaging in various social causes together since the time they got married. But neither of them had plans to start a foundation. It was only after Lakshmi's demise did Mohan decide to keep her thoughts and actions going.

N.V. Lakshmi Foundation was nurtured initially by Lakshmi's and Mohan's family and their close friends who still continue to support the cause they are working for.

“While organ donation is prevalent in the country, there is social stigma attached to it. By spreading the right awareness, one will be able to save more than one life. My wife Lakshmi had set an example,” says Mohan. Giving back to Society is crucial and that is what Mohan has been doing and striving to do through the foundation.

“We can serve the society in many areas and in myriad ways. What is required is the intention to serve, a little sacrifice, a little time to reorganize personal priorities to achieve the satisfaction of serving society.” –N.V Lakshmi at a Rotary Club Meeting.

Lakshmi's journey was a melody, an incomplete music score that's getting composed by her husband, family and close friends for over a decade now. Sometimes, counting one's blessings will make us want to be good and do good. Lakshmi's impact has created a ripple effect on everyone she had touched during her lifetime and keeps transforming many lives. It has touched the writer in me, and it hopefully will touch the reader in you.

*Angela Anish*

## **4. Nagan**

### **Foundation for Tribal Development**



The lack of awareness to health and education was always a daunting issue that led to exploitation of various tribal groups across India. The literacy rate of Irula is 49.05 percent i.e, only 5 percent of the 60,000 Irulas living in Thiruvallur district are literate. It was always an uphill climb to achieve something as an Irula. For ages, they have been well known for their exemplary skills in catching snakes. But as time passed by, many of them moved out of this to attain jobs in cities. Over time, we have heard stories of how the Irula community have slipped to bonded labour as most do not have education or land of their own to farm nor access to necessities or rights. Irula (people of darkness) inhabit mostly in the northern Tamil Nadu, and some parts of Kerala. Their origin is from ethnic groups of Southeast Asia and Australia. They speak a language closely similar to Tamil and Kannada.

While they are entitled to many benefits from the government, a mere lot is aware of their privileges. For V.Nagan, it was not just the duty towards his people, but also a childhood dream come true to bring about education to the tribal community he belonged to- the Irulas, an aboriginal scheduled tribe of Thiruvallur district in Tamil Nadu.

The birth of Foundation for Tribal Development is in a small village called Ponneri in the district of Thiruvallur. Nagan, along with others, crafted various programs that would not only provide education to the tribal children but also bring forth awareness on various social issues that the tribal community was unaware of. Initiatives like the Children Parliament helps enhance a child's talent and helps a child improve his/her decision-making skills. Awareness programs on environmental education, food habits that causes diseases, abolishing child labour, child sexual abuse, child rights are discussed in different schools for these children and the elderly tribal folks as well. Medical camps are also conducted frequently.

“For bringing about societal changes, we need to bring awareness especially government policy related awareness,” says Senthil (Co-founder of Foundation for Tribal Development)

Being unaware of privileges and benefits of the government takes a toll on them as most face difficulties in obtaining community certificates. “Earlier it used to take 2-3 years to get community certificates, now that the folks are aware of the procedures, they obtain it in a few months' time,” says Nagan, (Founder-Foundation for Tribal Development).

The children are also guided during their 10th and 12th grade on entrepreneurial opportunities that they can pursue through the government. Health awareness is also a major program where children and adults alike are made aware about basic medications during diseases. Also are children taught about hygiene practices and grooming well.

It has also come to the attention that a lot of female children drop out during their high school as most of the times these children must travel through forest to reach school and after a period, parents are reluctant to send their girl children alone. However, the foundation puts in all effort to motivate parents to send their children to school and are made aware about the employment opportunities their children can achieve after their education and why primary education is a mandate.

The inception of the foundation was the effort of V.Nagan, Srinivasan and Deepa in 2018. Although there had been considerable amount of work in the area, the official establishment of the foundation happened very much later. “CSIM guided us through different stages that we were unaware of until we got registered,” says Nagan.

The children have vast knowledge on nature and unique skills that is acquired through generations. They hold close their dance forms and folksongs. Irulas follow a tradition rich in music and dance. There had been a period of oppression for the Irulas and despite the change in laws and ways, people still choose to exploit them. This is frequent as many of them migrate to Chennai outskirts looking for jobs in farms, construction fields, rice mills, brick kilns and other meagre occupations.

There is a large drop out during grade 10 and 12 as many choose to go help their parents in their respective occupations. The Foundation so far have succeeded in filling the gap in education and helping the tribal community understand their privileges. Nagan says, there is still more to be done. And he hopes, in a few years’ time, everyone in his community will achieve great.

***Angela Anish***

## **5. Nandhini Sudha**

### **Women’s Conscience**



The nature of women’s participation in household and economic activities has undergone a sea change in the past few decades. Factors that support or inhibit this transformation have also changed, calling for a fresh perspective that can help bridge the gap between women and opportunities.

“I also used to wonder why micro-finance became so important in women’s empowerment. Wasn’t the traditional ecosystem of support comprising family and friends adequate to abet our efforts to run a new economic activity? Did all women really have enough support to look beyond constraints and pursue aspirations? I was inquisitive about those factors in our society that determined the nature of support, encouragement and assistance women received. I grew with these questions and my general observations on the Self Help Groups in and around my village provided new insights. Yet, I wanted to explore why women found microcredit through SHGs very promising,” exclaims Ms S. Nandhini Sudha, Founder of Red Flame Women’s Education and Social Service Trust.

Nandhini hails from Elathur village in Vellore district and like most other girls in her village, she studied till class ten and got married at the age of eighteen. Her thoughts and questions

persuaded her to work in organisations that implemented micro-credit programmes for women. She joined Thirumalai Trust in SIPCOT and worked for two years as its Block Coordinator. “I saw the confidence that women felt. It was not only credit availability, but the sense of accomplishment they felt. Women seemed happier when they were able to help other women. Similar work in Hand-in-Hand organisation took me closer to beneficiary families and I began to see other concerns that bothered young women,” shares Nandhini.

Alarmed by the rate of teenage pregnancies in Vellore district, Nandhini decided to organise simple interactive sessions with adolescent girls to help them understand socialisation, typical patterns and ways to thwart undesirable consequences. She got in touch with three school principals in her village and conducted these sessions. “We are not a society that completely favours sex education. All women, irrespective of age, find it uncomfortable, and some even feel shameful to discuss this issue. The inhibitions that I felt while actually interacting with the girls called for a proper training in the subject,” she says.

With all her exposure restricted to her prior work experience, Nandhini decided to get trained in her subject of concern and also on the dynamics of running her own organisation which, she felt, would allow her to divulge to address new concerns as they emerge. Her expectations from CSIM were clear – she wanted to learn the intricacies of communication that can take her ideas farther and convince listeners about her objective.

“CSIM enabled me to look beyond the immediate reality. One often reacts to a situation (here, teenage pregnancies) and thinks of ideas that can deal with the situation instantly, like training programmes for adolescent girls, etc. It is rather more important to analyse all aspects of the situation and intervene wherever possible to eliminate such situations by conducting awareness among parents. I realised why it was important to understand gender and rights perspectives. I knew I had to become the nodal point in my village that could connect poor children to welfare schemes that were available. CSIM taught me how to

stay updated,” says Nandhini, who recently completed a course on Child Rights conducted by Loyola College and UNICEF in Chennai.

2017 marked an important year for Nandhini - the inauguration of her Trust. The CSIM course and her training on Child Rights gave her the determination to look at different layers of an issue and promote interventions where appropriate. “We organise awareness programmes for parents to help them better understand child behaviour and their state of mind. They should be prepared to guide their children, without any stigma or subscription to specific gender roles,” adds Renuka, Field Staff at Red Flame Women’s Education and Social Service Trust.

Given that the issue is not restricted to school going children, efforts are also taken to reach children outside schools. In the process, children employed in the construction sector and other hazardous conditions are mobilised and admitted in government schools. “Once children are in schools, it becomes easier for us to impart awareness and training programmes,” she opines.

Nandhini wishes to initiate vocational training programmes for adolescent girls and women as it is the best chance to bring together women of all age groups and education background. “As students, she believes, they will become a homogenous group and it will be easier to facilitate dialogues on sensitive matters that affect their health and welfare. Awareness that comes from such deep interactions will encourage them to take a united stand for or against matters that concern them. I want to see that collective conscience protect and promote rights of all women in the community, bringing them closer to their opportunities,” she says.

***Shanmuga Priya. T***

## **6. Preeti Iyengar** **Creating Ripples in Learning**



An avid traveler and photographer, Preeti Iyengar, a third-generation educator from Hyderabad, is the Head Mistress of her own school for over two decades now. She met Mr. Manmohan the Chairman of India Literacy Project (ILP), Hyderabad an illustrious alumni of CSIM who influenced her to get involved in the social sector.

ILP was founded in 1990 in the USA by a group of Non-Resident Indians with a mission to be ‘A Catalyst for 100% literacy in India’. It is a developmental support organization that works in partnership with local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other networks in India. ILP’s main role is to enable and support the implementing partner (NGO) in its processes of strengthening the community, to identify and address the gaps in the delivery of education services, and to bring about systemic changes through advocacy. The Hyderabad chapter was launched in 2007.

Four months after taking the plunge into the social sector, Preeti joined CSIM. “Joining CSIM’s course on Social Entrepreneurship was one of the best things that happened to me apart from joining ILP. CSIM opened up my vision to many factors that exist in the NGO sector, right from its finances, the rules and regulations,

the types of organisations, etc. The project work was my most enjoyable part of the course as I learnt a lot more than I did in a long time,” says Preeti.

ILP has initiated many exciting and innovative programs. Mobile Libraries bring joy of reading to young new readers, and Multi-Dimensional Learning Space (MDLS) takes learning to a whole new level that goes beyond the school curriculum. Counseling-Scholarship-Mentoring (CSM) program provides the much-needed bridge for children to progress from school to college levels and beyond. The Knowledge Hub initiative provides a platform to share ILP’s rich experiences and know-how with everyone.

“We have a good traction in our work in and around the cities of Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai and Visakhapatnam, through our local chapters in each of these cities. The MDLS is part of ILP’s Quality of Teaching and Learning focus. As part of this project, we have created content and processes that can significantly impact learning levels in children and complement any quality of education interventions that the School might already be pursuing,” she says.

All resources created as part of the MDLS project is available as free/open source content. ILP is now working with Government Schools to set up smart class rooms, and supplement this infrastructure support with pedagogical support in the form of digital content such as lesson plans and experiment kits for multi-dimensional way of learning in classrooms

“The two aspects of the MDLS project that is closest to my heart are the career guidance program and the library program. Teaching how to comprehend a sentence and then looking at that glow of recognition on the faces of children is extremely gratifying,” she says. With 60 core volunteers and 40-50 floating volunteers, ILP Hyderabad works in over 225 schools in the city impacting over 35,000 students. Volunteers teach or read books to the children. “We have a flexible system where volunteers can offer their time; it could either be one hour a week or even

two hours a month. All we ask the volunteers is to treat this task seriously and be committed to it.”

***Highlights of ILP – Hyderabad***

*Multi-Dimensional Learning Space (MDLS) centres in Telangana are now serving over 75 schools in Telangana*

*12 Mobile Library vans cater to 102 schools and over 10,000 children*

*Career Counselling carried out in over 120 schools benefitting over 7500 students.*

*Scaled up summer camps from 4 schools to 6 schools.*

*Teacher Training through workshops and Tele-Mentoring for the teachers on modern teaching methodologies.*

Speaking about the rising number of volunteers, she shares, “It’s encouraging and heartening to see how the youth is also interested in giving back to the society. Earlier, volunteering was considered something that was done by people after retirement.”

Preeti meets aspiring students who are driven with passion to reach heights, no matter how hard life gets. Her heart flutters when she talks about some of the exceptional students who shared their dreams of defying odds and struggles to achieve their dreams. She has been instrumental in convincing parents of many of such girl children who need education. She finds joy and happiness when these girl children come back to share their gratitude and respect to people like her who have been the light, that paved way for their dreams to come true. “I have seen much more of the world in these one and a half years than what I had experienced in the past two decades. It has been an enriching journey,” says Preeti with a humble yet deep satisfaction.

***Angela Anish***

## **7. Purna Chander Rao**

### **Aspirations and Right to Life**



Right to life is a constitutional right and its interpretation within the frame of socio-economic rights has brought to fore many concerns that were earlier unknown. One such concern is the notion of minimum wages. The idea behind setting a benchmark such as minimum wages is to ensure that human labour is no longer sold at prices that disregarded protection of the said constitutional right. However, the limits observed leave much to be desired, highlighting the situations of survival which may go unnoticed in the larger frame of human development indices.

Mr Purna Chander Rao, Secretary of NICE Society in Hyderabad grew up witnessing circumstances that jeopardised right to life. He could not comprehend why some sections in the society spent their lives struggling to survive. “Their children will follow and the vicious cycle will continue. That is the inter-generational poverty which longs for a fresh perspective. There is a need to check how appropriate the current benchmarks are,” says Rao.

Brought up by his widowed mother, Rao always knew the significance of labour in poor households. It was her hard work

that met his education needs. However, he could not afford other activities and skill training programmes that would have provided a better start for his professional front. Soon after graduation, Rao joined a private company in Hyderabad. He was shattered to learn what his colleagues earned. “Some earned a meagre amount that wasn’t enough to meet the sustenance of even one person. To me, this was injustice and complete disregard for one’s right to life. Why isn’t everyone paid adequately? I couldn’t see my co-workers working hard to earn such low salaries, hence I quit this job,” admits Rao.

Now comes the volunteering phase in Rao’s life where he was associated with CRY for five years. “I began to see the value of working for a cause. Although it was a challenge for me to meet my day-to-day needs, I somehow managed to cope,” says Rao who could not accept organisations who spent their funds more on non-programme expenses or administration.

Rao began to nourish the dream of establishing a good quality residential school to provide free education to orphan, semi-orphans, and other needy children. Having experienced the life of a poor child and the growing quest for transparency, accountability in non-profit institutions, he pursued his dream to demonstrate the value for human aspirations at all levels.

He founded NICE – Needy Illiterate Children’s Education in 2002 with the support of individual and corporate donations in Guntur district. NICE is a residential school affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education, Government of India, and is the very first CBSE school in the country that caters to orphans and semi orphans. Building his dream project brick by brick, he diligently chose his team members. “As they are going to be an integral part of my dream, I was very careful about whom I chose. Of course, qualification and passion were equally important. I employed staff from poor neighbourhoods that lacked social support. I promised myself that every staff would be paid well enough so that they are able to plan a secure future for themselves,” said a determined Rao.

Beginning with ten children in 2003, the school is now home to 250 children (140 boys and 60 girls) studying from fifth to tenth standard. The lowest employee at NICE is paid 11,000 rupees, which is much ahead of the threshold that is set in place by state and central governments. NICE also provides food, accommodation and health care services to all its staff and their children. “They no longer have to spend their entire lives struggling to survive or worry about their future,” Rao heaves a sigh of relief.

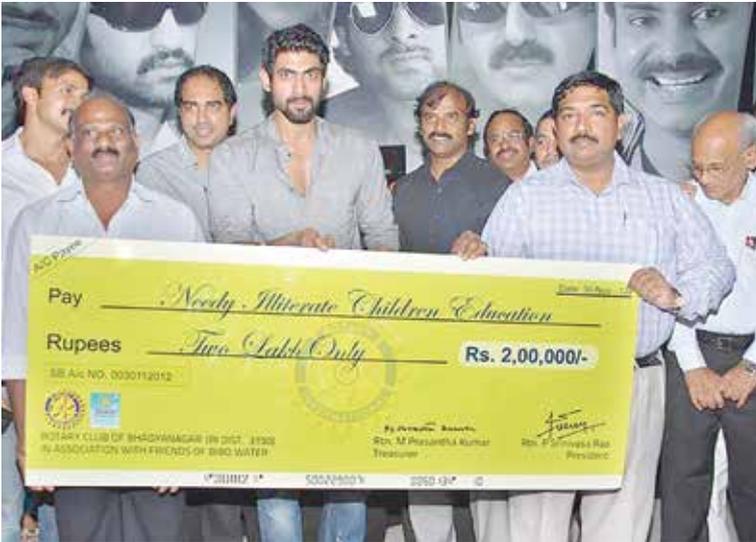
A team that lives and eats together with the children, collectively dreams for the future of these children. “A happy staff, we share our passion too. Commitment and loyalty in them sets an example for the children. They see these principles unfold as they grow up. They also learn the social and economic worth of labour,” says Rao who continues to handle administration single-handedly and efficiently, only to invest more in children and staff. Rao’s association with CSIM dates back to 2005 as the school received support from Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani’s Dal, Oil and Sugar scheme for over four years. “That is when I learnt about CSIM and it benefited social enthusiasts like me,” he recalls.

Rao feels that connecting like-minded individuals and helping them move forward is a great task that CSIM has been carrying out very effectively. He appreciates the efforts taken to stay in touch with the alumni and learn about their progress to further motivate new batch of students. Most of all, Rao feels that CSIM’s approach prepares to unlearn many things that not only help in running a non-profit organisation, but also prepares one to lead a sufficient and resilient life at a personal level. “CSIM has strengthened my resolve to retain administration expenses under five percent of the total budget. Timely preparation of balance sheets and sharing them with all our donors is an incredible exercise for us, allowing us to plan any development well ahead and within our limits,” shares Rao, reiterating how CSIM helped him structure his values alongside NICE’s routine operations.

Twelve batches have passed out so far without failure and over

ninety percent of the children have passed with first class. Few alumni are now chartered accountants and software engineers and earn a decent salary. Their juniors will follow suit and eventually, Rao hopes to see labour and wages as factors enabling pursuit of aspirations.

*Shanmuga Priya.T*



## **8. Raghunath Reddy**

### **Bridging the gap**



Raghunath Reddy is the founder of “She Endeavours,” an organization that addresses the information gap on Rights, Health, Finance and Leadership, by grooming grassroots level change agents and local leaders who are armed with information and resources that can be spread among those (especially women) who are still living in the depths of obscurity. Since his student days, Raghunath has been involved in youth leadership organizations such as the National Service Scheme (NSS), AISEC and the Association of Leadership Development (LDA).

When asked to give a brief recounting of his early years, this CSIM alumnus says, “I come from a financially strapped family in South India. We lived in a tiny, drought ridden village, with one primary school. Though not literate, my parents tried their hardest to send my three sisters and me to school. However, since the next English medium school was in a different town and sending girls so far away to study was considered taboo, I got the unique privilege, as the male kid, to go there, while my sisters continued their education at the Telugu medium school, just five kilometres away from home. For almost a decade, my

family was in dire poverty. While my sisters didn't get even three square meals a day, I was encouraged to stay in a hostel so that I would not be deprived of food. I would go to my relatives' home during the holidays too. My sisters, on the other hand, endured untold hardships back home. They would go to the fields to work all day every day." Raghunath observed that his sisters had no awareness about the world outside their village. They didn't know about education opportunities, physical and mental health, digital literacy or employment opportunities. He decided that he would study hard and educate himself on all of these wide ranging topics.

Riding on the constant support of a loving family that would go to any stretch to give him good education, Raghunath came out a district topper in High School. He passed his Bachelors in Technology with Distinction, on a Merit Scholarship provided by the State Government of Andhra Pradesh. He further pursued Post Graduate Diploma in Construction Project Management. During his Diploma, apart from the academic assignments, Raghunath grabbed an opportunity to work with Tata Housing Development Company. Says he, "This gave me deep exposure in planning, primary and secondary management functions with a significant insight into business management perspectives. Having faced severe financial hardships all along, I believed in the importance of creating opportunities for myself and fighting any odds with sheer perseverance and diligence."

"Since childhood I have seen my mother and three sisters facing problems simply due to a lack of information. This inspired me to do something for all girls and women; to be the support they can rely on. In 2017 I started brainstorming on this with my mentors and friends. I was keen on publishing stories of women who had overcome extraordinary challenges. I knew I wanted to work on Gender Equality and also that I wanted this venture to be the voice of women. So I presented the idea to my mentor, Ms. Aruna. She came up with a name for it, and that is how 'She Endeavours' came into being." He says, adding that, "In the initial days of setting up She Endeavours I came across the story of Rehmath,

an illiterate rural woman who helped her co-sister come out of a cycle of domestic abuse by simply plying her with necessary legal information. It left me amazed at the scope and potential of women armed with a little information and awareness! Gradually what started out as a collection of stories on inspirational women, developed into a huge resource for women's welfare."

She Endeavours today conducts workshops on Gender Sensitivity, Entrepreneurship, Digital Literacy and Cyber Security. The CEO Connect Program serves as a platform for budding women entrepreneurs to connect with accomplished leaders for mentoring and incubating their ideas into viable products. Their website contains important information on women's rights, legal/social/educational services, and their social media is filled with awareness messaging. "We are also working on developing serious games using VR technology to address mental health related problems," adds Raghunath eagerly.

Initially, seeing his struggles in setting up the organization, Raghunath's mentor Ms. Aruna suggested he join CSIM's Certificate on Social Entrepreneurship course. He says, "CSIM provide me with knowledge of law, fund development, social research, social marketing and management tools such as project management, finance, human resource management and accountability. The synergy in the class was amazing. We had the opportunity to meet social leaders and learn from their experience. CSIM Hyderabad helped me in developing the strategy for She Endeavours. Twice a week I would meet with him and take his guidance"

Today, with a flourishing corporate career, Raghunath is more than well equipped to handle the challenges of his thriving NGO. Has his career helped his passion in some way, we ask. Pat comes the reply, "Yes, corporate sector experience and skills helped me in establishing the process of certain operations in the organization. Defining timelines and targets improve the productivity of the human resources and the organization on the whole. These organizational skills, which I implemented in

She Endeavours to good effect, come from my working in the corporate sector.”

Raghunath juggles his twin pursuits with a rare sense of balance. “I dedicate two hours on weekdays and four to six hours on weekends to She Endeavours. For most of the tasks I use digital tools, which saves time in the management. Volunteer management is the key,” says he.

“My vision is to see that in our country, women do not miss out on anything due to a lack of information; that they are no longer the ‘weaker’ section of the society; that they are financially independent, are treated equal to their counterparts and get equal opportunities to learn and exhibit their skills. She Endeavours will continue to instil financial independence, open up equal learning opportunities, access to information and firmly stand by the rights of every woman.”

***Archanaa Ramesh***



## 9. Sandhya

### Nutrition for Life



This catchy phrase has caught great attention this year through a famous advertisement on Indian women and anaemia. Roughly half of all women in India suffer from anaemia caused by iron deficiency.

Our country has a high prevalence of anaemia, prevalence is even higher among Indian women with around 50% of women having low haemoglobin levels. As anaemia can often be the indicator that there are more serious underlying illnesses, it is very important to improve disease awareness and obtain an accurate diagnosis of its cause.

Sandhya was always on a quest to find answers to this persisting problem. Having completed her M.Sc. Pharmacology from London, she and her team were researching nutraceuticals and their high benefits. During this phase, she felt like certain of these ingredients like Spirulina can create an impact on the nutrition of children, and pregnant women who were suffering from anaemia. She launched Sukrutha Organics, a social enterprise

striving to create awareness of Spirulina and its benefits in our country, along with Dr. Vanitha in 2017. Since then, the duo have been striving to raise awareness on anaemia and iron deficiency through campaigns and training sessions.

“The rate of anaemia is an alarming 75% among children under the age of 5 and around 53% among women. There are lots of myths on iron deficiency in India. It is not just about lack of concentration or immunity deficiency. It’s more than that! Taking tablets or supplements is not adequate. It’s essentially about what we consume in our daily diet. I have observed in many places how people are ignorant about BMI, calcium and iron deficiency,” says Sandhya.

During the initial interventions in local anganwadis, she found out that children wouldn’t consume food products which had spirulina due to their odour and taste. “We had to find a way to make children eat them. They love to eat chikkis or biscuits which did not have maida or sugar, and also sweets made out of ragi, muringa, etc. So, we masked our ingredients in such food items. Children started eating our products and this was a good sign,” says Sandhya adding, “For mothers, there was a considerable increase in their lactation after consuming these products.”

Sandhya learnt about CSIM from her mentor who told her about the opportunities she will be exposed to in CSIM’s Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme. This has made a great difference to my organization. Among the many things that CSIM taught me, I count two of them to be special. The first was patience. After listening to various speakers, and understanding their humble beginnings and struggles, I learned that it’s alright to be patient. Beginnings are meant to be this way, with several ups and downs, a roller-coaster ride in fact. It taught me patience and an overview of everything.”

“Improving on my presentation skills will be my second most important takeaway at CSIM. From 20 percent to 80 percent, I have climbed the ladder on my presentation skills at CSIM

Inputs given by the resource persons at CSIM helped me craft the impact and the essential parameters in the most presentable manner. Days have come when my audience is impressed by the presentations I showcase and all credits goes to CSIM,” she says.

Currently, Sukrutha Organics has 4 to 5 highly nutritious products and are associated with Synergy India Foundation as nutrition partners which work closely with Telangana government. They have also given their products to Novartis for a blood donation camp.

Sukrutha Organics has also conducted many nutrition awareness camps along with Telangana state residential hostels, Health Supervisors, Assistant Caretakers and Teachers and has impacted over 3.5 lakh students over time. After their training sessions, health officers across these institutes have taken an oath on conducting Healthy Tuesdays and encourage children eat healthy food .

“This month, we are conducting a campaign called Iron for Life in association with Synergy India. Our interventions for the last 8 months, for children under the age of five, have shown a considerable increase in children’s appetite, physical activities, and their height and weight has quite a good improvement,” she says.

“Sukrutha in Sanskrit means ‘good deed’. That is what we strive to achieve every day. If one can give small quantities of micro nutrients to children and pregnant women, we could resolve multiple health problems that are related to nutrition levels. Nutrition is like a switch. If you provide nutrition, every aspect of a child’s life – concentration levels, immunity, strength, and productivity increases automatically,” says Sandhya with hope.

***Angela Anish***

## **10. Sanjay Vomkarey**

### **Reinventing the Wheel**



Sanjay Vomkarey has been in the education sector for over 20 years. A proud alumnus of the prestigious Hyderabad Public School, Vomkarey exhibited a love for teaching, training and mentoring from a very young age. His exuberant nature shone through in his active participation in extracurricular activities such as debates, elocution and quiz competitions all through his school days. A member of several service organizations, Vomkarey lent himself to organizing constructive activities for youth through the Jaycee's Club, Round Table 148, and the Rotary Club.

During his tenure as the Director of the Rotary Club of Bhagyanagar he organized a massive inter school fest for government school children. 109 schools from the Rangareddy District participated in this event and over 1200 children took part in the various literary and art competitions. His active engagement in these types of service oriented activities has earned him several awards of recognition from each of the organizations he has served so far.

One of Vomkarey's first ventures which aided in his future ones is

his educational products company, Acme Instructional Technics Pvt. Ltd. It was manufacturing “first of its kind” products in India such as “Encapsulation of Specimen Study Technology in Biology Media”. This was a product that proved a boon to biology students as well as medical students alike. The product was so popular it earned them the Best Entrepreneur Award by the then Education Minister. While working on this product, Vomkarey met and worked with government schools, Zilla Parishad schools, Navodaya Schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas. Says he, “Having studied in a premier private school, I had assumed that the quality of education would be just that high in every school. But, working with these schools opened my eyes to the reality that the system is so skewed.”

It is while working with these government schools and charitable institutions that Sanjay Vomkarey came up with an idea. He questioned whether the current system did justice to the cause of learning. “Children should get quality education, at affordable costs, be equipped with today’s skills, in a stress-free learning environment,” he says adding that “Education needs to be student-centric, not teacher-centric.”

With this mission, in 2013 he started Potter’s Wheel Education Services, an organization committed to improving schooling systems by training teachers and students alike on current day skills and stress-free learning methods. Potter’s Wheel is a playground for kids, where they dribble with thoughts, ideas and imagination. It is a place where curiosity is encouraged and children are free to explore their subject.

When asked what is the reason behind naming the organization “Potter’s Wheel” Vomkarey says, “It is on the wheel that the potter turns raw clay into something exquisite. It is world class, yet it is very much grounded and tied to nature.”

During the early stages of his journey into setting up an institution, Vomkarey came in contact with CSIM and signed up for the certificate course on Social Entrepreneurship. “I’m

from the 25th batch of the Hyderabad chapter of CSIM,” he says proudly. When asked what impact CSIM had on his journey, he says, “CSIM’s motivation and guidance was of immense help to me. What also helped me a lot was meeting with peer groups and understanding the huge social impact they were making; that was a driving force for me to continue with my own mission in the education sector.”

At Potter’s Wheel, they believe that the school is the second best place for a child to learn, the first being the child’s home. “Children of today urgently need to be taught real life skills, such as leadership, problem solving, organizational skills, exploration, innovation, creative skills, to name a few,” opines Vomkarey. What should parents do in order to provide the optimal learning environment for children at home? We ask. He says, “Stop believing in grades and marks. Insist on outdoor play. It is an essential aspect of learning. Believe in your child’s potential and give them the freedom to find their passion.”

The Potter’s Wheel pre-school curriculum is based on the theory of Multiple Intelligences. It draws on the UNICEF Charter for Children’s Rights and Learning, and is a unique combination of Play way Method, Montessori Method, the Waldorf method and the High-Scope method. Experiential learning is very much a part of this curriculum. Periodic training sessions and workshops are conducted for the teachers of Potter’s Wheel schools. Teachers are also encouraged to try out their unique ideas and diverse learning methodologies, ranging from Vedic math to student parliament. Summer camps, science fair and a lot of extracurricular activities are organized throughout the school year. Workshops are also regularly conducted by trainers from the Council for Creative Education (CCE), Finland.

When asked his opinion on the role of technology in today’s learning environment, Sanjay Vomkarey says, “I believe in less is more. When children are still young, they shouldn’t lean too much on technology. We ought to rely more on the natural processes of learning. While it is inevitable that children will have access to

gadgets in today's times, these can be introduced gradually and with precaution. Technology can be a boon if introduced in the right way at the right time.”

Potter's Wheel is on a drive to bring in the best education practices to affluent as well as not so affluent schools all across the country. Apart from their online teacher, student, as well as school development programs, they also offer educational exchange tours in partnership with CCE Finland.

We ask Sanjay Vomkarey what his vision for the future of Potter's Wheel is. “I will establish a hundred schools all over the country, focusing on rural India, in order turn the world's attention to the ingenuity and creativity of our rural students. I will make my mark in the education system and build my legacy here. Think Indian, Impact Globally!” he says.

*Archanaa Ramesh*



## **11. Sreekrishnan**

### **Giving Sport a Chance**



A flourishing corporate career, a deep love of sports and a quest for social change; these things converge, in Sreekrishnan MV, City Lead (Bengaluru and Chennai), Enabling Leadership.

Having lived in Bengaluru pretty much all of his life, Sreekrishnan identifies himself foremost as a “complete Banglorean”. A fitness enthusiast and football lover, he is a die-hard fan of the Bengaluru Football Club. “During the Indian Super League (ISL) season, you will find me at the West Block A stand, rooting for the BFC for all of their home matches” he says. It is his long-distance endurance cycling, that takes Sreekrishnan a long way, over 24000 kms long, to be precise, carrying his messages for various social causes wherever he goes.

A veteran of the corporate world, Sreekrishnan held a successful career in leadership roles with companies such as Titan Group, Timex, and Vodafone, before recently shedding his corporate ‘avtar’

and fully immersing himself in the service sector. Interestingly, it was the employee volunteering program at Vodafone, that got him thinking about using his years of experience and his various interests towards social causes. “World of Difference (WOD), the flagship Employee Volunteering program of the Vodafone Foundation selects 32 Employees (winners) from across the organization to work with select NGOs across the country at the grassroot level for a period of three months, away from regular office work. I was a winner of the WOD program in 2013. I was posted at Vishakhapatnam, where I worked with the NGO Magic Bus,” he explains.

Magic Bus is an organization that dedicates itself to ensuring children complete their secondary education, thus effectively preparing them for a way out of the self-perpetuating cycle of poverty. Sreekrishnan’s first day at a school in Vishakhapatnam got off to a rocky start; delays in transport, a school with dirty walls, broken benches and broken window panes. He noticed, however, that the children in the school were brimming with energy, which rubbed off on Sreekrishnan who, by lunchtime, found himself sharing food with them, eating what he calls “the best lunch I had eaten in a while”.

He started writing about his daily experiences while still working with Magic Bus and after his three-month stint, compiled those writings into a book, “Journey of Discovery”. He sold 250 copies of the book, and used the proceeds from the sales, amounting to Rs. 1.5 Lakhs to build infrastructure for Youth Development Centres of Magic Bus in Mysore. He also raised another Rs. 50,000 for Magic Bus by running in the TCS 10K Run in 2014.

Eventually, he heard about CSIM’s certificate course in Social Entrepreneurship through a friend of his, who also happens to be an alumnus of CSIM. He says, “I went through the course outline and found it very interesting. The course was on weekends, intense classroom sessions, field visits and lectures by experts in the field. This was exactly what I was looking for and signed up for the next available batch.” When asked what his biggest

takeaways from the course were, he explains, “The entire teaching methodology and course content was well thought of. The one thing that stood out for me was the lectures by the experts in the field of Social Sector. It gave deep insights into how the sector works, what are the likely pitfalls to be avoided, opportunities that exist etc.”

While still contemplating how to give more time to his service-related work, a shocking incident jolted Sreekrishnan into action. In October of 2018, a dear friend phoned him, quite uncharacteristically during his work hours. Sreekrishnan’s friend had just lost his wife to a road accident. Sreekrishnan says, “They were a couple who had big plans, with their six-year old daughter being at the centre of those plans. A bubbling life had been snuffed out in a matter of minutes. A husband bereaved, a daughter yet to understand the gravity of the tragedy. It brought me out of my reverie. I started to look at my priorities in life and to reconsider where I was headed.” He asked himself, “20+ years of the hustle and bustle of corporate life have been extremely enjoyable, but how much more of this? When do I make the transition out of my comfortable corporate life? I could continue to sit in my cabin & keep thinking about the ‘right’ time or take the plunge.” He concluded, “The sand in my hourglass is running dangerously low. For me the ‘right time’ has come & it is NOW.”

After exiting Vodafone in April this year, Sreekrishnan says he wanted to take a three-month break before looking for openings in the social sector. “However, within a week I got an alert through my LinkedIn page about the openings in Enabling Leadership (EL). One role suited my profile and I applied for it. As luck would have it, I was called for an interview & in about three weeks’ time I got my offer to join EL. I officially joined on 3rd June” he says.

Enabling Leadership is an international Non-Profit Organization that focusses on “growing leadership through a shared love of music, football and creativity”. Sreekrishnan says “I think as a nation, we are too focused on academics and are missing out

teaching life skills, sports etc. to our kids. While academics are definitely important, this unidimensional approach does not prepare youngsters for what life holds ahead for them. After all, life is not just Mathematics and Physics. It is also the ability to handle disappointments, success, failures, decision-making etc. The entire school curriculum needs to be re-looked and sports & life skills must be made mandatory courses.”

What has joining EL full-time, meant to him, we ask. He says, “EL has offered me the perfect fit where in my love for sports and fitness meets my passion to give back to the society. I look forward to all the learning that it will bring, the small changes that I can bring about and more importantly to keep enjoying as I go along.”

***Archanaa Ramesh***

## **12. Srisha Challapalli**

### **Awareness and Choices**



The human dimension to development is a strong idea, compelling development practitioners to analyse situations from the perspectives of all stake holders. Significantly, it emphasises the need to look at stake holders who are end users of programme benefits. Applying this phenomenon in any field can lead to incredible revelations and disturbing trends alike. Ms Sirisha Challapalli, Content and Curriculum Specialist at Learning Curve Life Skills Foundation couldn't agree more.

Sirisha was always a nerdy student, who was successful in getting her first job from the very first interview she attended. With an MPhil in Immunology, she started off as an Assistant Professor teaching Bio Technology to undergraduates and post graduates. She was passionate about her job and publication of books added to her merit. However, the unfortunate suicide of one of her students gave rise to many questions in her mind. "I was completely shaken up by that episode. Don't students fully realise what they are getting into when they choose to study courses of their choice? I thought we have moved far from the notion of courses being forced on children by parents. I learnt that choice was a privilege many didn't have, be it students or professors. A professor for about ten years, I had failed to notice

the inability of my students to face emotional challenges and peer pressure. I then began to think of students who dropped out without completing their courses. It was a big cycle of introspection that I got into,” says Sirisha.

A seemingly successful career did not satisfy her anymore. Meanwhile, the news of a Delhi school boy murdering a fellow from school to avoid appearing in board exams hit her hard. “Why weren’t students capable of facing challenges? What threatened them so much?” she wondered. Sirisha left her job and joined a start-up organisation that worked to improve cognitive skills of school children. Her questions still remained unanswered and she didn’t feel better. “Emotional development of children was not a priority from any side. Focussing only on cognitive skills cannot take them far,” she laments.

A friend’s suggestion led her to CSIM and thereafter, there was no looking back. Beginning as a Biologist who eventually became desperate to do something for the betterment of students, Sirisha couldn’t find the proper channel. CSIM helped Sirisha identify herself with many like-minded individuals and organisations who understood what holistic learning meant. Following a guest lecture by Mr Subbu Parameswaran, the CEO of Learning Curve Life Skills Foundation, Sirisha continued her association with this non-profit organisation to learn more about the aspects of social and emotional learning. Their focus on under privileged children who often miss the privilege of ‘choice’ convinced her to look deeper.

“This is where I want to be,” she reckoned. She appreciates that this organisation recognises social and emotional learning as continuous processes that cannot be confined within the limits of any institution. “The idea is to develop a culture of social and emotional learning in schools and families. The workshops are customised to adhere to the roles of students, teachers, parents and also members from school administration teams. Facilitating an interface between them is the objective and when I saw that happening, I wanted to be a part of this change,” says Sirisha who

joined the team as Content and Curriculum Specialist in April 2019.

Having struggled hard to answer her questions, the platform provided by CSIM exposed her to newer insights and the intricacies in operationalising them. “The discussions strengthened my resolve to move forward and the Learning Curve Life Skills Foundation in Hyderabad was the best place to start with,” says a content Sirisha who also acknowledges the difference this journey has made in her approach towards her children’s behaviour.

Every time she handles a teacher development workshop, Sirisha is amused by the variety of experiences they share and the extent to which her curriculum can add value to their capacities. Rigorous documentation and meticulous evaluations help the team stay abreast about the reach of their content. “Last year fifty percent of the teachers who enrolled in the programme showed improved social and emotional competency,” she says.

Sirisha feels happy, satisfied and content. Her awareness of self is her biggest strength. She feels empowered to be able to support the disadvantaged children, enable them make informed choices in their lives and also take full responsibility for that. “I have not only evolved to be a better person, but an aware and conscious parent too,” she says.

***Shanmuga Priya.T***

### **13. Venkatesan**

#### **From self to community**



Development is understood and interpreted in many ways by different social groups based on their own experiences. That is what makes it more intriguing every day. “Authorities, statutory bodies and civil society have been playing their respective roles. Yet, the wide range of unfinished tasks offer opportunities to amateurs like me who strive to make a small difference somewhere,” says Mr. M Venkatesan, Founder of Makkal Marumalarchi Trust in Thiruporur, Chengalpattu. Coming from the Irular community, he is fully aware of the struggles any tribal teenager has to overcome to reach a respectable position in the society.

Venkatesan hails from Nandivaram in Guduvanchery, Chennai and was brought up by his widowed mother whose only source of income was from domestic labour. Soon after his graduation he took up a job in a private company. “My recruitment itself gave me a new sense of respect. Is that all? Am I content? My self-introspection soon drew me to resignation because I was in no way adding value to my community,” says Venkatesan, who felt that his sense of self-respect must emanate from his contribution to the upliftment of vulnerable tribal youngsters who are often lost without proper guidance.

“To me tribal development is more intriguing, because we have to stand up against the deprivation our community has suffered since independence. The presence of our community members who are completely unaware of their entitlements in this era is a testimony to the fact that a lot needs to be done,” he asserts.

It took seven years for Venkatesan to get his community certificate, that authorises his identity to avail scholarships and welfare services provided by the government. To him, it meant loss of opportunities that came his way during those years. Resolving to help others, Venkatesan began his journey from Thamizhaga Aadivasigal Kootamaipu. Enabling students get their community certificates, families acquire land allotted to them, and fighting encroachments on lands that belonged to tribal families – became his regular work. “A community certificate is the doorway for social upliftment. The fact that many have to wait for years to get it is a clear indication of the distance between tribal communities and institutions. Every effort I took up needed diligent attention to details and entailed meticulous homework. If this is what the community needed, I cannot give up,” says a committed Venkatesan.

Makkal Marumalarchi Trust was established in 2018 to take his mission forward in a systematic manner. However, Venkatesan feels that the establishment of this trust allowed people to approach him and his team more easily. It also gave an identity to their efforts, allowing him to strengthen his team with new and experienced members. “We work with officials on a daily basis. The credibility we earned not only brought people in need to us but also like-minded individuals who dreamt of tribal development in its true sense. Bringing them all together has been the biggest success to me,” says Venkatesan.

Knowing the strengths of being together, he attempted the formation of men self-help groups. Apart from the regular micro credit services and bank linkages, Venkatesan ensured that these groups were educated about rights and entitlements provided by the state and central governments, and that they passed on all useful information to fellow members and families. “After all,

awareness is the first step towards empowerment,” he says. Land for landless tribal people came in after a long struggle endured by our great leaders. However, its execution is a long-standing disappointment. Venkatesan and team have helped more than 75 families in Keezhkottai reclaim their land. In some cases, it was necessary to engage with the State Human Rights Commission as well. The success of this land reclamation resonated and more families from Gundri village in Erode district approached him. Over 125 families were given land pattas before 15 years but they were all encroached. “Our team is now doing all the home work to study the innards of this case. Such detailed documentation is a skill and I thank CSIM for educating me about this,” says Venkatesan.

Strategising social objectives has helped him build a vision for his trust. The mission building exercises gave him the much-needed clarity on organising all efforts and build team expertise to promote tribal welfare. CSIM has helped him visualise his work in that direction and in so doing, it has once again brought a renewed focus on self-empowerment. “All these small steps are critical to inspire the next generation to dream of a better future. When we hear children discuss about higher education and the courses they look forward to pursuing we are reassured about our work,” he claims. The team also promotes registration with the local employment exchange to secure unfilled job positions reserved for Scheduled Tribes. Venkatesan is now supervising a survey to study the scope of training tribal youth to appear for exams to government services. “Public Service Commission exams are a huge opportunity and training our children to crack them will also help next generation dream higher. Aspirations will push them to new heights and their success will promote welfare of the entire community,” he says, breathing in a huge sense of responsibility.

***Shanmuga Priya. T***

## **II. Inspiring Conversations**

*Interviews with Inspiring Personalities  
by Marie Banu*



## 1. Shri. A. Arun, IPS

*“It is a proven fact that Chennai is a safe place for women and children.”*



Shri. A. Arun IPS, Inspector General of Police, is the Additional Commissioner of Chennai Traffic Police. He had served as Commissioner of police, Trichy before moving to Chennai in November 2017. His earlier stints include Joint Commissioner, Traffic (North), Greater Chennai Police, and Joint Commissioner, Law & Order (South), Greater Chennai Police.

*In an exclusive interview, Shri A.Arun IPS shares with Marie Banu the traffic regulations and systems he initiated in Chennai.*

**What inspired you to become a police officer?**

I had a thought of joining either the Indian Defence Service or Indian Police Service since the time I joined College. I studied Mechanical Engineering and was a class topper. I was also active in extracurricular activities, especially Karate and Martial arts.

I realised that one gets to be isolated while in Defence service, whereas you become part of the society in Police service. Thus, I decided to become a police officer. After completing Engineering, I appeared for the Civil Service Examination. Generally, people choose Indian Administrative Service as their first option, but I chose Indian Police Service.

**Can you tell us about the traffic regulations and systems you initiated in Chennai?**

Earlier, the Traffic Police officers used to stop the violators, issue a challan, and collect the fine by way of cash. This was called ‘spot fine system’. Many thought that it was a bribe amount. There has been few cases where extra money was collected or receipt not issued by the traffic police officers. This gave room for a lot of allegations.

To do away with this, we introduced the ‘cashless e-challan system’ in May 2018. This system allows people to swipe their cards at Point of Sale machines already available with the traffic police. Those served with e-challans can make payments online through the web portal of State Bank of India, as well as that of Paytm. Fine can also be paid through the Paytm mobile app using a relevant QR code, or by way of cash at post offices, relevant courts and state-run e-sewa centres.

This system was introduced in Hyderabad much earlier, and only 40 to 50 percent of cashless payment has been reported. But, in Chennai, we have a record of over 97 percent of cashless payment being made. The public has welcomed our initiative, hence this success.

**Where do you derive your inspiration for such initiatives? Do you plan to introduce road safety in the school curriculum?**

Inspiration for such initiatives come from the public. We read a lot; travel to other countries, and get an idea of how traffic systems can be improvised.

While I was traveling in Australia, I did not find any traffic violators. I would like to narrate one incident when I was on a 300 kilometre road trip along with three other Police officers and an Australian driver.

One of my friends was trying to throw away an empty coke bottle on the sidewalk when the driver told him not to do so. He argued, “There is no one around in the entire stretch of the road, hence it isn’t wrong.” The driver said: “That is the same reason why I am telling you not to throw it as there is no one to collect it and put it in the garbage bin.” I was pleasantly surprised and asked the driver what made him think in this way. He said: “I learnt these values while at school and it was an important part of my curriculum.”

This made me realise that we have a responsibility to teach our children such values while they are at a tender age. We are now working on a school curriculum for road safety and are planning to make it mandatory.

**About the Traffic Exhibition hall in Commissioner’s Office?**

We have created a Traffic Exhibition hall in the seventh floor of The Commissioner’s Office in Chennai. My idea is to bring school children here and make them get familiarised with the Police Department. They should feel comfortable and develop an interest in our work.

The Traffic Exhibition hall exhibits boards with messages explaining the traffic signals, sign boards, road safety traffic equipment and their use. While the children will go through the

exhibits, the robot called ‘Rodeo’ will speak to them explaining the necessity of road safety.

**Is our entire city brought under 24x7 surveillance with the Third Eye campaign?**

The Third Eye Campaign is the brainchild of Dr. A. K. Viswanathan IPS, Commissioner of Police, Chennai. We have taken a lot of initiatives from the Traffic department which has been appreciated. Our target is to bring all the Chennai roads (332 small and big roads) under CCTV surveillance and have at least one CCTV for every 50 meters distance. We have achieved 80 percent of our plan and hope to complete this task in a month or two.

We have a monitoring system wherein every 50 cameras are brought under one unit. We have a list of people who have set up the CCTVs area wise and our team goes periodically to review the functioning of the cameras. In case of sponsors supporting a stretch of 50 cameras, we set up a booth and monitor it.

Live monitoring of all the CCTVs is not required and with over 2 lakh CCTVs in the city, this is not possible too. Whenever there is a problem, we go to that particular area and retrieve the CCTV footage for review.

The entire campaign is supported by the public and private sponsors. Now, we are also getting funds from Corporation, TASMAL, MP Fund, and MLA fund.

**People still fear to rescue an accident victim for the legal processes involved for the witness. Your advice on this?**

There is a “Good Samaritan Law” that offers legal protection to people who provide first-aid to accidental victims. The law aims to encourage people to assist the accidental victims without fear of harassment by police. It also protects the “Good Samaritan”

from liability, if unintended consequences result from their assistance.

Our traffic police personnel are well informed about this Law and they do not insist on witness for accident cases anymore.

**Our city is facing a lot of crimes against children and women. What are your thoughts?**

It is a proven fact that Chennai is a safe place for women and children. Unlike other cities, our city is a much safer place. Domestic violence is present, but the overall crimes have reduced considerably in our city.

**Any interesting case in your career which you would like to share?**

There has been many interesting cases that I have dealt in my career so far.

During 2004, there was a gang of criminal tribes from Stuartpuram, a hamlet in Nellore district, that used to break into several homes in Chennai while the inmates were present.

Then, I was the Deputy Commissioner of Police at Annanagar and handled this case. I visited Stuartpuram along with my team and camped for over a week. This led to capturing seven of the eight dacoits. Very interestingly, that was the last of the dacoity incident that happened in our State as there has been no such cases reported for the last 15 years.

When I was Deputy Commissioner of Police at St Thomas Mount, my team detected the criminals who were involved in the bureau pulling offences for over a decade. We were able to recover more than 500 sovereigns of gold and hand it over to the victims.

## 2. Shri. Arvind Ojha

***“Even the poorest among poor are ready to educate their girl children.”***



Arvind Ojha, is the CEO of URMUL, one of the most successful NGOs in India. He has been working in the desert of western Rajasthan for more than three decades on the issues of rural development focusing education, health, livelihoods, climate-change, promotion of people’s intuitions in the region. He is a global leader advocating for ending child marriage and ensuring gender equality. He is chairing the Girls not Bride-Rajasthan Alliance. Arvind was pioneer in initiating and promoting rural tourism with the focus of community development in the Thar Desert. His concern for desert issues and advocacy urged him to promote a research-based initiative-Desert Resource Centre.

***In an exclusive interview, Arvind Ojha shares with Marie Banu Urmul’s journey.***

**Can you share the changes you see over the last three decades?**

It is almost three decades now and I can see a lot of changes. Earlier there were no roads and no water in the desert regions. Also, there were no health or education services in this area. URMUL decided not to wait for these services to be provided, but started engaging in health care services for our project villages. We focused on safe childbirth, maternal and child health, and tuberculosis (as its prevalence was high in this region). Gradually, we extended this program to different desert regions of Rajasthan.

In 1987-1988, Rajasthan faced its worst drought. We had to relook at our focus area, and recognized livelihood to be more important for these communities with their incomes becoming rare. So, we worked with the District Administration and carried out famine relief works like pond construction. We understood that providing drought relief work alone was not sufficient and there was a need for drought proofing. For instance, ponds required cement lining so that the water could be retained for longer periods.

Another change is in the area of girl child education. In 1988, I conducted a study and found the women literacy was only 7% . We were once asked to manage a GOI project, which was to run 30 non-formal centres. But, we did not have teachers. It was a pity!

Hence, we focused on educating girls first. We initiated a project along with Lok Jumbish - an educational intervention of the Government of India started by Anil Bordia.

We started Balika Shivar in the border areas of Rajasthan in the police chowki premises. At first, it was a challenge to ask the villagers to send their children for residential training.

There are a lot of researches and evidences to show that parents do not want to educate their girl children as they have a lot of work they have to manage in the household – from care of siblings and

parents, to managing the livestock and doing household chores. We did not lose hope and tried.

We started with 140 girls and allowed parents to meet their daughters on Sundays. Confidence Building among the girls was a major area that we focused upon. We taught them communication skills besides academics. I am proud to say that more than 40,000 girls have been educated up to 5th standard and many have joined college. Some have become nurses, teachers, and sarpanches as well. The girls who were once shy, are now leading confident lives.

Two things were important in Balika Shivar. Community living was an issue due to caste factors. In our culture, we have community eating which develops culture and relationships. Hence, we brought in this system although it was difficult in the beginning. Now, we see a lot of change in the girls as they grow. They have made good friends with their peers irrespective of caste. Although they have to follow the caste system in their homes, I am certain that when they become mothers they won't. It is a long term social change process.

Secondly, it is a myth that the village community would not educate their daughters. After educating 40,000 girls we realized that even the poorest among poor are ready to educate their girl children provided they are assured safety.

**What were the innovative programs launched by your Trust?**

URMUL worked in Rajasthan canal areas and worked on settlements, displacement, water distribution, and channel constructions. We had two innovative programs. One was the Shiksha Karmi schools (200 in number), which was launched with the support of the State and Central Government, and Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

The people who were settling in the new canal areas were abandoning their villages and the schools were not put to use. Hence, there was a need for new schools in the regions where

they were relocated. URMUL was also the agency for training the teachers for these schools. We identified local people – boys who were educated up to 8th standard and girls who were educated up to 5th standard.

A question was raised in parliament if we were providing quality education, as the teachers were not qualified. Late Shri Narasimha Rao who was the Prime Minister at this time, formed a committee that was headed by Smt. Ananda Lakshmi and a comparative study was commissioned. The report findings revealed that our schools were performing better when compared to other government schools in all aspects of education (IQ, aptitude, reasoning, etc) because our school students were regular.

The other innovative program was remedial solutions for watercourse covering strategy in desert regions. The water channels in desert areas are constructed in contours or sand dunes and during summer the farmers on the tail end of the channels are affected. We found a low cost remedial solution for these watercourses and it was fantastic. The government was appreciative and World Food Organisation offered us support to cover more such canals. Now, you can see the change in these areas.

We organized canal yatra, which was not appreciative of the government though. But, when we submitted our report, some issues like water logging, and malaria were received well.

### **What are the crafts that are promoted by URMUL?**

There are a lot of good crafts in desert regions and we realised that it would be fantastic if we could revive them, as it will provide livelihoods for artisans. The caste hierarchy is comparatively very high in this region and artisans belong to backward castes.

The art of embroidery actually came from Pakistan during the Second World War in 1970s when around 20,000 refugees came to India. They lived in refugee camps for 17 years and on release

were allocated lands in the Bikaner canal area where there was no water. Hence, they engaged in cutting shrubs that were used to make coal, and also produced liquor. After URMUL's intervention, these women were engaged in embroidery, as they are good at it. They are now earning their livelihoods while at home.

There were a lot of charkhas (spinning wheel) lying in the rooftop of villager's homes. This meant that these people knew spinning. Bikaner is one of the biggest wool markets in India and there were Khadi institutions that were not functional. So, we bought sheep wool and engaged the villagers in spinning. There was a lot of wool remaining, and so we involved the weavers who were affected by drought and trained them in spinning. As the local market was affected, we explored urban markets and involved NID in designing and young boys from IRMA as well.

Old women were skilled in this activity and could work from their own homes. They could earn an income in a dignified way instead of digging ponds or being engaged in road works.

### **About farm stays in Rajasthan coordinated by your Trust?**

Urmul has partnered with Association for Fair Tourism and Solidarity and provide support for foreign tourists who wish to visit villages in Rajasthan. Local villagers in our project areas are identified to host the foreign guests, who are mostly from France.

In the beginning it was difficult to gain the confidence of villagers but now they are open to accommodate them in their homes and are learning from each other.

We have trained the villagers to provide basic hygiene requirements for their guests and have created an additional livelihood opportunity for these villagers. We encouraged them to construct a simple toilet for the sake of tourists, which they did. With the facility being available, the families have now

started to use it.

During the farm stay period, the tourist visits the local artisans and some even engage in agricultural work. We believe that they should see the beauty of the desert and also understand the development happening at the village level.

### 3. Smt. Bharati Bhaskar

*“The success of a person – be it a speaker or writer – is directly proportionate to the reading habit of that person.”*



Bharati Baskar is a Tamil Orator and is popular for her debate talk shows called Pattimandram. She is also a Senior Vice President at Citibank, Chennai. A Chemical Engineer from Alagapa College of Technology, Chennai, she pursued MBA from Anna University.

Bharathi Baskar started to participate in debate competitions since her school days. She is also a good writer and has written many short stories that were published in the Tamil weekly magazine Kalki. She pens many motivational articles in various magazines including Dinamani. She has authored a book named Nee Nadi Pola Oodikondiru which was serialized in Aval Vikatan magazine.

***In an exclusive interview, Bharati Bhaskar shares with Marie Banu her thoughts on gender equality.***

**Does the debating platform offer solutions to societal problems? What are your favourite topics to debate on?**

I don't know if we provide solutions, but we can definitely give a perspective and awareness about the problems and get people to think about it. My interest lies on issues related to women. It could be about women empowerment, safety of women, or about how women are seen by the society. These topics are very close to my heart. Hence, whenever I get the opportunity, I prefer to select one of these topics to debate on.

**Your thoughts on gender equality and women empowerment?**

Women empowerment is about the overall human empowerment that one is talking about. If a very large share of the human population is always constrained and restricted to kind of satisfy the other part of the society and not pursue the path of freedom that they think is very important for them, then I think it is a blur on humanity as a whole.

In the last 20 years, that I have seen, quite a lot of changes have happened. A lot of questions have gone away in the way we see ourselves. For instance, when I was 15, widow remarriage was an issue that was talked about, discussed, and approached with a lot of hesitation. But now, when I see the society around me, at least the urban society, I don't think there is anybody who treats this issue differently. The issue of chastity, is also viewed differently today. Things are changing, but problems are appearing in new dimensions for women every day.

**How can we ensure safety of girl children/women today?**

The brutality of crime against women has most certainly grown up in the last two decades. I think a very significant contributor

for crime against women and children is liquor. When we were young, there would be one odd drunkard walking down the street, or lying on the pavement. Today, this is a common sight, especially in the state of Tamil Nadu. In every crime scene, you will definitely see a bottle of liquor being present. Unless, as a society, we stand strong and fight against liquor, the crime rates will not come down.

The abuse of social media and easy access to obscenity have caused a moral derailment in the society. The way we bring up our children—sons and daughters—is also a reason. There is an unconscious bias. While we take a lot of care to see how our daughters are spending their time, who their friends are, what they are doing, and what they are viewing on their screen—we don't exercise the same caution with our sons. This difference is really the key to the solution that we are speaking of.

Boys should be brought up by asking the right set of questions and values need to be imbibed in them since birth. They should be made to understand that a girl should be treated like a friend, another human being, like a sister or a cousin. They are not creations of God made for man to enjoy and be served with.

Given the recent Pollachi incident, one of the culprit's mother is shown arguing that her son has done no wrong and that he has been victimized. This is how blinded one can get! For the mother, her son is a nice person and someone who cannot do anything wrong. Her own son is now a stranger to her. She does have a daughter, and I am sure that she has known her more closely. Such are the deterrents and unless addressed, I don't see the crimes against women going down.

### **Your advice to the budding debators?**

The success of a person – be it a speaker or writer – is directly proportionate to the reading habit of that person. Gone are the times when people used to have one or two ideas, and five or six jokes that they keep repeating in every place and claim to be

a speaker. Now, you are on Youtube all the time. People watch you and you cannot repeat what you have said before. You are constantly driven about talking about new ideas and only books can do that.

There is no prescription to a reading habit as all of us naturally tend to seek something which we are very close to. For developing language skills, I recommend people to read in the language that they aspire to speak or write. They can start with reading books they find attractive - like fiction - and slowly move on to reading non-fiction and philosophy.

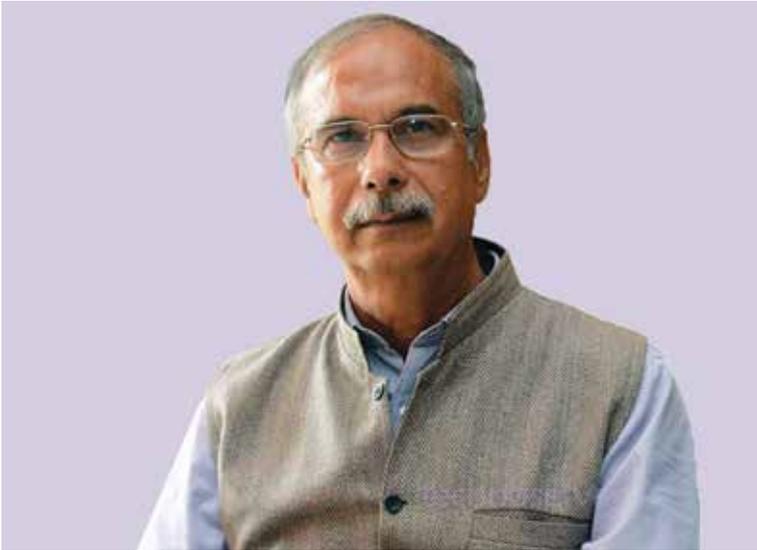
Reading habits should be cultivated when one is a child, else it is extremely difficult. If you want your child to be interested in reading, you have to read first. The child should see his or her parents reading books every day and discussing about the books they read. Advising the school to have a reading hour would not suffice.

If you start reading early, you will see your interests evolving. Start with bed time stories, child stories, and then graduate to mysteries, and teenage romance. You then search for a genre which interests you deeply.

I almost don't read fiction now. Whatever fiction I read is for memories of my past which I have enjoyed and I want to relive. What interests me is biography and deep philosophy. It is not necessary that one has to choose only one type of book so you can choose what interests you.

#### 4. Dr. Dinesh Tyagi, IAS

*“Common Services Centres helps to realise the ambition of Rural BPO in every gram panchayat in the country”*



Dr. Dinesh Kumar Tyagi is the Chief Executive Officer of Common Service Centre e-Governance Services India Ltd., a Special Purpose Vehicle under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.

Dr. Tyagi has had a distinguished record and belongs to Indian Administrative Services, which he joined in 1981 with Manipur-Tripura Cadre. During his tenure, he served as Secretary, Education, and Principal Secretary, Finance. He has also worked as Director in the Banking Division, Ministry of Finance. He was Custodian of Special Court, 1992 (Harshad Mehta Scam) in Ministry of Finance. He has been on the Boards of Syndicate Bank, United Bank of India and Indian Bank.

He also served as Director on the Board of various financial institutions such as Small Industries Development Bank of India.

*In an exclusive interview, Dr. Dinesh Tyagi tells Marie Banu about Common Services Centers scheme, its mandate and how it is delivering digital and financial services to the last mile.*

### **Can you tell us about the Common Services Centers scheme?**

The Common Services Centers (CSC) scheme is an integral part of the Digital India Programme. Based on a unique business model that is rooted in the involvement of community and Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs), CSCs provide last-mile access to digital technology, digital literacy and host of G2C and B2C services in rural areas of the country. We have over 350,000 CSCs across the country, and 60,000 of these are managed by women entrepreneurs.

### **Who are the Village Level Entrepreneurs?**

The Village Level Entrepreneurs or VLEs are the CSC operators. These entrepreneurs come from the community they serve. This provides a massive advantage to them as they are immersed in the context and know the community well with the ability to mobilize them in a campaign mode. This also enhances their credibility in the community significantly.

### **How is the CSC scheme connecting the rural masses to the digital economy?**

I believe, Indians, inherently, have entrepreneurial skills and this untapped potential is being leveraged and channelized through the proliferation of digital infrastructure and a shift towards a digitally integrated economy. With grassroots penetration, CSC provides access to education through e-learning; health through telemedicine; and financial services through banking, insurance and digital payments at a nominal cost.

**How is CSC contributing towards digital and social inclusion of underserved communities?**

Education is one of the main focus areas of CSC. We provide access to school, college and technical education for underserved communities. For instance, children and youth can pursue studies through National Institute of Open Schooling by enrolling and remitting the admission fee online, if they have had to discontinue schooling due to local, social or personal issues.

We provide online admission facilities and even provide support for admission tests for Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya. Over 25 lakh children enrolled for Navodaya Vidyalaya school admission last year. CSC also offers IGNOU courses and mock tests for banking jobs, police service, IIT entrance, and civil service examination. Recently, we have introduced an option for a student seeking admission in class 6 of Navodaya Vidyalaya to apply for a mock test by paying just 20 rupees.

We also do tele-medicine and have more than one lakh subscribers. We largely engage in providing homeopathy and Ayurveda consultations. Facilities for diagnostic and dispensation of medicine are also made available.

All CSCs are envisaged to be DBT - Digital Doctor, Digital Banker, and Digital Teacher. Haryana is a unique State where we have more than 450 services offered at CSC. Even taxes can be deposited here.

Any startup can access the CSC to deliver its product and services. We have evolved a policy to promote startups using our network and also encourage startups with rural innovations.

**CSC is providing support for conducting the Economic Survey this year. How do you think it is equipped for this?**

The 7th Economic Survey, covering 40 crore households, is

being carried out by more than three lakh CSCs. For the first time, the Economic Survey (Census) is being carried out using mobile phone technology. This will be a paperless survey and the result of survey would be instantly available to stakeholders. We are proposing to the government to conduct Census at shorter intervals. The 6th Economic Survey took two years for compilation, but with 1.5 million enumerators trained and certified in data collection at CSCs, we are certain that we can do it sooner.

The Census, if conducted through CSCs using technology, would cost less and will make available data that is current and of high value for making informed policy decisions. Rather than doing Census once in ten years, CSCs can help the Government in conducting Census once in two years.

**Following the MoU with Ministry of Panchayati Raj, how is CSC planning to transform all panchayats into ‘digital panchayats’?**

There are over 250,000 gram panchayats in India. CSC has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Panchayati Raj to transform all gram panchayats into ‘digital panchayats’. CSC will act as a catalyst in promoting Rural BPO in every gram panchayat. Gram Panchayat Bhawans will host CSCs so that all government services and social schemes are made easily available to villagers. Ministry of Panchayati Raj applications and data for all schemes and programmes that are run by the Central and State governments will be entered by the CSC personnel / staff.

All gram panchayat records will be maintained in digital format, and CSC will serve as digital literacy centres for elected representatives of gram panchayats. Online services to Gram Panchayats will be offered. We see this as a step forward in creating Rural BPOs in all gram panchayats.

**What has been CSCs contribution in the delivery of financial and social services in rural areas?**

Financial inclusion is an important area for us. CSCs have actively participated in the Jan Dhan Yojana and opened about 50 lakh new bank accounts. About 30,000 CSC across the country are working as business correspondents and delivering various banking services to rural citizens. During financial year 2018-19, banking transactions worth Rs. 21,800 crore and insurance premium of all insurance companies worth Rs. 83,087.89 lakh towards premium have been collected by CSC. Pension products of PFRDA are also delivered. More than 50 lakh persons have been registered under PM-SYM and PM-KMY launched by the Government recently. CSCs will also support in extension of pension schemes to shopkeepers, traders and those self-employed. Today, CSCs can help every person avail one or the other Government pension schemes and thus support the Government in promoting social security for all citizens.

We launched Aadhaar Enabled Payment Service (AEPS) with National Payment Corporation of India Limited (NPCI) which enables all CSCs to become inter-operable banking service delivery outlet. In this, any bank account holder can deposit and withdraw money, apart from checking balance. This has resulted in three lakh outlets providing financial services to unbanked and isolated rural communities and is probably the largest financial access point network in the world. There are a number of outstanding and inspiring stories that showcase how this initiative is bringing communities into banking system. For instance, there is a woman VLE in Haryana who disburses over one lakh rupees in a day. Earlier, many rural people who got DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer) into their account had to visit bank located 10 to 15 kilometers away in order to check their account details. Now, they use CSC as this is more convenient. There are even cases where people have not visited their bank for over two years now and meet most of the financial requirement through CSCs.

## 5. Shri. Gagandeep Singh Bedi, IAS

*“If CSR projects focus more on the agriculture sector, it would mitigate the distress of farmers.”*



Shri Gagandeep Singh Bedi, IAS studied B.E. (Electronics and Electrical Communication) and joined as a lecturer in Thapar institute of Engineering and Technology, Patiala in 1989. In 1991, he was selected for Indian Engineering Services and got a posting in Indian Railways. In 1993, he was selected in the IAS and was allotted Tamil Nadu Cadre.

He is presently the Agricultural Production Commissioner and Principal Secretary to Government of Tamil Nadu. He has held many prominent positions like District Collector of Kanyakumari and District Collector of Cuddalore. He also served as Commissioner of Madurai Corporation, Managing Director, Tamil Nadu Water Supply and Drainage Board, Chennai, Secretary of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries Department, Revenue and Rural Development. He is known

as Collector of Heroes for his hands-on leadership in crisis situations and was awarded NDTV Officer of the Year award for his handling of floods in 2015 in Cuddalore.

*In an exclusive interview, Shri Gagandeep Singh Bedi shares with Marie Banu how Government and NGOs can work together for agricultural development.*

**You are known as the Crises Manager par excellence. Can you please share your experience managing the tsunami programme?**

I was with my family at Hotel Tamil Nadu in Mahabalipuram, and we were in knee deep waters when the tsunami struck. The first scene I witnessed, when I returned to Cuddalore, was a large number of dead bodies—mostly women and children—lying in a government hospital. This really moved me! So, anybody else telling me to tackle the situation was secondary. The will and the inner urge to do something which can help these people was my only motivation to do my best.

I kept moving from Cuddalore to Cuddalore OT (the part where fishermen lived) and then to the villages—Samiyarpettai, Parangipettai, and Killai. I did not sleep until I organized identification and burial of the people who lost their lives in the disaster. It was devastating scenario.

At first, it was not sure whether the fishermen community in Cuddalore would go for cremation or a mass burial as they were mostly Hindus. I convened a meeting with the fishermen leaders at my Taluk office to discuss this issue. I asked them to decide on whatever they felt best, and they finally wanted to go for mass burials which was done in such extraordinary situations by them. The District Administration gave them all support in this regard.

**Was the coordination between Government and NGOs effective in tsunami rehabilitation programme?**

I would like to say that NGOs played a very important role in disaster recovery and rehabilitation process in the tsunami programme. Of course, at that point of time, there were only one or two NGOs in Cuddalore that were addressing the local issues. Therefore, in the first three days, it was mostly the Government that was coordinating rescue of the injured, hospitalization, clearing of the debris, arranging for mass burial, and conducting relief camps. However, after the news spread across the world, there were many Indian NGOs as well as International NGOs who came forward in a big way to help the affected people get back to the path of recovery.

I always ensured that the government and the NGOs worked on a common platform. From January 2005 to 2007, on every Monday afternoon, I conducted regular review meetings with the Government officials and the NGOs. I delineated the NGO's area of operation based on their capability so that there were no duplication of efforts or clash of interests. I also shared with the government officials what was expected from the NGOs.

It was an excellent arrangement as the government officers/engineers reviewed the work done by NGOs and shared their feedback as well as the best practices across the table.

**Do you think that the NGOs can also add value to the Agricultural sector?**

There are a lot of NGOs and volunteers who have experience in the social sector. But, they need funds for sustenance. Unlike the disaster scenario, funds are scarce for developmental projects. Moreover, there are very few NGOs who focus in the agricultural sector.

In case of Tamil Nadu, it is a water starved state and also affected by recurring cyclones and floods. Until three years ago, we had only seven to eight lakh farmers covered in this scheme. We took a lot of efforts after the launch of the Prime Minister crop

insurance scheme and I personally followed it up every week, like I did for the tsunami programme.

Today, we have 23 lakh farmers covered under the crop insurance scheme, which is a three-fold increase. I want this number to further go up and that we should benefit a minimum of 40 lakh farmers. Earlier compensation for farmers who were affected by disaster never exceeded Rs.800 to 900 crore in a year. But, for the last three years, the crop compensation that has been provided to the farmers has exceeded 7,700 crores in total. If there are more NGOs working in this area, I am sure that more farmers would be motivated to be part of this scheme.

We also need NGOs to motivate farmers to go for drip irrigation. Our government provides 100 percent subsidy for drip irrigation and our officers meet the farmers regularly to encourage them to use this technique. We used to have Rs. 70 to 80 crore rupees worth drip irrigation works earlier, and now it has increased to over 1000 crore rupees. If we have the support of NGOs, I am sure we will be able to double this reach.

### **Isn't it time we encourage Corporates to focus on agricultural projects for CSR?**

It is a very good suggestion! If CSR projects focus more in the agriculture sector, it would mitigate the distress of farmers. Some NGOs who have CSR funds are mobilizing farmers, creating awareness on crop insurance, and guiding farmers on pests and other diseases that might affect their crops. To name a few, MSSRF, Dhan Foundation, and Srinivasan Services Trust are doing very good work and we coordinate with them.

We would like more Corporate Houses and NGOs to come forward and be part of our governmental efforts in improving the lives of farmers.

### **What are the government's plans to ensure agricultural**

### **production in a sustainable manner?**

With the present drought condition in Tamil Nadu, the total area that is irrigated by bore wells and open wells is 17.5 lakh hectares. Out of this, the area under drip irrigation is only 4.5 lakh hectares. We have a huge gap that needs to be covered.

Secondly, the farmers should also bring in a change in their agronomical practices. Farmers still engage in cultivation of water guzzling crops like paddy, banana, sugarcane, etc. Whereas in dry areas, they can cultivate pulses, millets and cotton which consume lesser water.

We are campaigning in Ramanathapuram and Sivaganga district. We are also encouraging the concept of collective farming where small and marginal farmers can come together, collectively bargain for agricultural inputs like fertilisers, and share the water resources in the drought scenario. The intention is to engage farmers in dry areas to engage in agriculture and sustain their livelihood.

In Tamil Nadu we have been successful, and we are forming Farmers Producer Groups with 100 farmers in each group and ensure that they are engaging in collective efforts. If they are found to be successful, the government offers them an assistance worth five lakh rupees with which they can procure common machinery like tractors, power tillers and jointly use.

Another farming technique that is being encouraged is the Integrated Farming System. Usually, farmers engage in monocropping, however now we are encouraging them to have a portion of agriculture, horticulture, kitchen shed, farm pond (where he stores the rain water), and also animals in his or her farm so that they have a sustainable income. The Tamil Nadu Government has allocated 100 crore rupees for Integrated Farming System and we will like NGOs and organisations to assist us in motivating the farmers to change their mind sets and engage in such practices.

## 6. Selvi. Kavitha Ramu, IAS

*“Dance has taught me discipline and focus, Service has taught me the importance of time.”*



Selvi. Kavitha Ramu IAS is presently the Director cum Mission Director of Department of Integrated Child Development Services in Tamil Nadu. An University rank holder in M.A. Public Administration, she cleared Indian Administrative services and joined as Deputy Collector of Tiruvallur District, Tamil Nadu in the year 2002.

Kavitha Ramu has held several positions including that of Revenue Divisional Officer, Tirupattur, Vellore District, Joint Commissioner for Relief and Rehabilitation, District Revenue Officer, Tamil Nadu Road Sector Project, and as the General Manager for the Tamilnadu State Tourism Development Corporation.

Kavitha Ramu is a Senior Bharathanatyam Artist who has been performing as a soloist for the past 20 years. She has performed under the auspices of various reputed Sabhas in India and has toured abroad with over 625 performances to her credit. She had the rare opportunity of co-ordinating the cultural events for the opening and closing ceremonies during the SAF games held in Chennai in the year 1995. She is an A grade artist of Doordarshan and an empanelled artist of the ICCR.

***In an interview, Selvi. Kavitha Ramu tells Marie Banu about AbunDance, a video series on social issues.***

**About your childhood and education?**

I was born in the temple town of Madurai, and started learning Bharatanatyam at the age of four. My father, Shri. M Ramu, was an IAS officer and my mother, Smt. Manimegalai, worked as a professor of Economics before marriage. As my father was a civil servant, he was transferred every few years. Thus, I studied in nine different schools and when I was 12, my family finally settled down in Chennai.

At Madurai, I learnt Bharatanatyam from Guru Smt. Neela Krishnamurthy who is the sister and long-time Nattuvanar of the famous doyen of Bharatanatyam Dr. Padma Subramanyam. When I was eight years old, I performed at the fifth World Conference that was held in Madurai. This was my first major performance.

When I moved to Chennai, I met Kalaimamani Smt. K.J. Sarasa, legendary Bharatanatyam Guru who had developed the Vazhuvoor style of Bharatanatyam and was trained by her for 15 years.

**Your journey as an IAS officer and a Bharatanatyam dancer?**

To be able to continue with my passion despite the professional requirements has been an incredible journey. Dance has taught

me discipline and focus, service has taught me the importance of time.

I have been always dancing since my age of 5, and the only factor that did not change all my life was, dancing. I have never taken breaks during public examinations during schooling, nor in college. That was dance for me and it has always been part of my routine.

Having said that, there are some compromises I have made. I don't take up overseas tours over 15 days, I see to that all my season programmes (Margazhi music and dance festival held in December and January months) are slated only during weekends.

I have been a soloist performer predominantly, and when I have to stage a group performance, I choose my dancers who are flexible with their timings. My orchestra is also very supportive, and we have rehearsals at 7 am or after 8 pm.

### **About noon meal for the elderly through the Department of Integrated Child Development Services?**

Nutritious Meal to all the children, through the Department of Integrated Child Development Services has provided freedom from hunger and basic foundation for health and education of children without any hindrance.

Likewise, noon meal for Old Age Pension beneficiaries has always been there since 1983. But, many people were not availing the facility, either due to lack of awareness or other factors.

We are now making conscious efforts to take this programme across to the Old Age Pension beneficiaries, so that the spirit of the programme is captured and many people are benefited.

**Please tells us about the video series on social issues (AbunDance).**

The purpose of any art form is to take a message to people, be it through a religious story or a mythological story or a theme designed to propagate the message. I think it is the duty of artists to initiate conversations through Art and establish a dialogue with people. In that way, I thought it was about time I did something through dance, a medium I am most comfortable with, to establish a connect with people. That's how and why AbunDance happened.

I would like to reach out to people through a variety of mediums including dance videos, talk shows with prominent faces or even a lecture and convey a wider perspective and give a different meaning to it.

'AbunDance' is a video series through which I aim to explore various social and environmental issues that exist in our society, for instance, dowry, female infanticide, environmental issues, etc. I chose the name 'AbunDance' as dance is part of the word and also because there is an array of topics I would like to cover through this platform.

**Your advice for IAS aspirants?**

Time management is the key, so that there's no stress. You should lead a normal life while preparing for civil service examination.

Aspirants of any competitive examination for that matter, should not take any pressure unto themselves. Apart from the scheduled time that they have allotted for preparation, they should sleep enough, eat healthy, spend time with their family and friends and also allot time for television and movies apart for fitness.

## 7. Shri. T.S. Krishnamurthy, IRS (Retd.)

*“Profit within reasonable limits should be considered as a desirable condition for economic growth.”*



Shri T.S. Krishnamurthy started his career as an Indian Revenue Service officer. He served the government at various levels including Secretary, Department of Company Affairs. He was the first Indian Revenue Service officer to become a Secretary to the Government of India as well as the Chief Election Commissioner of India.

Krishnamurthy won gold medals in History, Economics and Political Science at Mysore University. He also completed a Masters in Fiscal Studies from the University of Bath, U.K. Post his retirement, he is a board member of various companies and NGOs, most notably, he was the Chairman of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chennai Kendra. He is the author of the book “Miracles

of Democracy”, published in August 2008.

***In an exclusive interview, Shri TS Krishnamurthy shares with Marie Banu how the quality of democracy can be improved in our country.***

**How can the quality of democracy be improved in our country?**

Unfortunately, Democracy is a misused term all over the world. Many claim themselves to be democracies, but they are run by leaders in an autocratic style. As far as India is concerned, fortunately, there are good as well as bad points as well.

I have made some suggestions in my book *The Miracle of Democracy*. Firstly, we need to change the present electoral system as it is aiding corrupt politicians. This is because of the First Past The Post system, which means that if you have even one vote more than the others, you get elected.

My first suggestion is to change the first past poll system to representation system where minimum 33 and one third percent of the votes polled to be a precondition for success in the election. For example, if you have a constituency of two lakh voters and if ten people contest we need to split the votes proportionately – i.e. 20,000 to each of the contestants. The person with 20,001 votes or more will represent the two lakh voters. The second is about people with criminal records to be barred from contesting elections.

When I was the Election Commissioner, I had put forth a set of 22 recommendations. One of them was: ‘If a person gets a charge sheet from the court of offences punishable with imprisonment for five years or more, such persons should be deemed to be disqualified from contesting the elections’. This unfortunately, was not accepted as all the political parties seemed to be happy with the status quo. Unless some dynamic political party takes a lead and brings about a consensus, it is unlikely to happen.

The third is to have a separate law to regulate the functioning of the political parties, like many other countries. As there is a law governing Companies, Partnerships and Trusts, we should also have one for political parties who have access to public funds. This law would spell out who can be members, how to deal with disputes, how to maintain accounts - whether the funds should be received in cash or not, and how to properly account for the donations received. Similarly, a regulation of party manifestos at the time of election is necessary as the politicians are promising freebies to a section of the voters without even indicating how they will find the money. In fact, we have told the Supreme Court that the political parties can promise to the voters public good i.e. a stadium or a road or a dam - which cannot be pin-pointed to a particular section of people. But, the politicians today are promising to provide various articles like laptop, grinders, television, etc. which are actually bribes and is different from public goods.

The fourth is about funding the political parties for purpose of elections. Unfortunately, the measure that the government brought in recently – the electoral bonds – is a regressive measure or a measure that is not in tune with transparency in election funding. I have also suggested a National Election Fund to which individuals and corporates can make a contribution (may be a limit can be set), and avail 100 percent tax exemption. In this proposed scheme, no individual or corporate should be allowed to give any donation to any political party and no political party will be allowed to spend any money for individual candidates except from the National Election Fund. If some of these changes are brought about, the quality of democracy can be improved in this country.

### **Your experience as Chief Election Commissioner of India?**

There is an impression that Election Commission has got all the powers to conduct free and fair elections, but it is not completely true. Although the Constitution gives authority to the Election Commission for conducting free and fair election, there are a number of situations where Election Commission is ineffective.

With the existing powers, Election Commission has the authority only to cancel or postpone an election.

We did not have any problems in conducting elections in Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Orissa and faced challenges in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Karnataka. When compared to other states, Kerala is better as there is no violence or hatred. It is necessary that the model code of conduct which we are supposed to implement gets some teeth.

In Anantapur, recently, a party member broke a voting machine in the polling booth. All that the Election Commission could do in such circumstances is to file a FIR with the police. But, the case becomes meaningless if the person, after the election, is from a ruling party as the lower level courts will quash the complaint.

The Election Commission should have some powers to disqualify or impose monetary penalties in case of serious violations, which could be challenged in the court of law. There were many instances where we had to be tough. For example, in Chapra constituency in Bihar, where Laloo Prasad was contesting we had countermanded the poll. In Haryana, the wife of the Director General of Police was contesting the elections. We asked the Chief Minister to transfer the DGP because he was directly dealing with the law and order situation. As he refused, we sent a message through the Chief Secretary that we would indefinitely postpone the election. In Kashmir, we had the terrorist problem. In order to bring credibility in the elections, we brought Urdu speaking teachers from UP and Punjab to 50 percent polling stations in Kashmir, and likewise in West Bengal. Of course, there were some criticisms. But, we went ahead with our plans and got good results.

**How do you find the present electoral system in our country?**

I retired in 2005, and things have changed considerably since then. On the whole, conducting an election has become very

difficult now. There are more political parties, more politicians and less effectiveness of the State police. Therefore, there is a demand for central paramilitary forces. These are some of the unfortunate developments. But, if we can bring about some of these electoral reforms quickly, many of the problems could be solved substantially.

There is also a criticism on the Election Commission appointments that they are biased or in favour of a political party, depending on who has appointed them. We have already suggested that the Election Commission appointments should be by a collegium which would include the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice of India or his nominee, and Speaker of the House of representatives or leader of the opposition.

### **Your thoughts on the present budget?**

I was looking for some major economic thrust activities although they are trying to create conditions for the benefit of economic growth. For example, a person who wants to come and invest in India faces a lot of problems in terms of judicial delays, frequent changes in the laws (which at times makes them to pack up and go), and the interference of the government. Once you have given an approval, you should give certain conditions which they must comply with. You can't be changing or interfering with what has been approved on.

Profits should not be viewed as a dirty word. Profit within reasonable limits should be considered as a desirable condition for economic growth. You must give incentives for manufacturing industries that can provide employment. You can also provide incentives for honest tax payers. Capital markets needs to be revived with incentives for ploughing back the profits from sale of shares in the capital market itself.

I would say that the present budget is an interesting document, but I do not find an extraordinary push to engineer growth. The attitude of the people, particularly the regulators, for fear of vigilance or audit action take an impractical stand. Many of them

are bureaucrats with no commercial or business exposure.

If they can bring a mix of bureaucrats and people with business experience – business graduates with 10 plus years of experience – and be inducted into regulatory organisations, then there will be confidence for people to do business in India. If there are decisions taken in good faith, you cannot question them.

## **8. Dr. Mohan Rajan**

*“By doing charity, you may lose money, but it comes back.”*



Dr. Mohan Rajan, is a renowned ophthalmologist in Chennai. He completed his MNAMS in Ophthalmology at the National Academy of Medical Science, 1998 and pursued DNB, DO Ophthalmology from Sankara Nethralaya in 1987.

An accomplished eye surgeon, he has restored the sense of sight to thousands of visually challenged people across the country. He is currently the Medical Director and Founder of Rajan Eye care hospital Private limited in Chennai. He is also the Managing Trustee of the Chennai Vision Charitable Trust.

Dr Mohan is the recipient of Best Doctor Award from the Government of Tamil Nadu for the services rendered to physically

disabled people in 2008; Rotaract – Paul Harris Fellow from Rotary International in 1997. He has also received The Euro Times Award for Surgical excellence in 2008 and Achievement Award from American Academy of Ophthalmology in 2015.

***In an exclusive interview, Dr. Mohan Rajan shares with Marie Banu the reason for increased need for eye health care.***

**About your interest in ophthalmology?**

Ophthalmology runs in my blood. My grandfather was highly trained in Ophthalmology, my father Late Dr. Rajan was a Professor in Ophthalmology in Government Eye Hospital –the world’s second oldest eye hospital. From the age of 10, I was assisting my father in cataract surgery.

In 1985, we started Rajan Eye care hospital with an aim to give quality treatment irrespective of caste, creed, culture, region or social status.

My wife is also an ophthalmic surgeon and both my daughters are also Ophthalmologists.

**Is the change in lifestyle affecting eye health of present day children?**

This is an important issue which I am trying to address in all forums. One in every five children are wearing spectacles. There has been an increase in myopia among children from 6 percent in 2007 to 15 to 20 percent today. In Singapore, the situation is worse where there has been 20 to 30 percent increase in myopia among children. This is because they have strong academic oriented programmes.

About 20 years ago, children were exposed to outdoor activities and there is a chemical called dopamine in sunlight that prevents myopia. Today, children are mostly in air-conditioned rooms playing video games. They are glued to television sets, or mobile

phones and tablets. They eat fast food which has less Vitamin A.

**Can you tell us about Netra Vahana project?**

The biggest problem in today's villages is poverty and along with that is the issue of blindness. Cataract is a major cause of blindness where there are 13 to 15 million people in our country being affected.

Now, diabetic retinopathy is another issue of concern as India is soon going to be the Diabetic capital of the world. It is expected that by 2025, 150 to 200 million people will become diabetic and 25 to 30 percent of this segment will have diabetic retinopathy.

Under the Chennai Vision Charitable Trust, the philanthropic arm of Rajan Eye Care Hospital, we run a Netra Vahana project. Cognizant Foundation has supported this project, which is the first of its kind in India. We conduct screening for cataract, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and refractive errors; offer free spectacles; and conduct eye screening in rural schools.

We have been able to take tertiary eye care treatment to the doorsteps of rural poor. For example, if a patient has diabetic retinopathy, all the required equipment like Green Laser, Fundus camera, and other equipment are available in the mobile ophthalmic unit which makes it convenient for the ophthalmologists to provide treatment at the camp site itself. This was not possible earlier as we used to bring the patients to the main hospital to offer advanced treatment.

Aftercare is essential for patients who have undergone the cataract surgery as a layer forms behind the lens over a period of time. We use the YAG laser to treat this and such minor surgeries are conducted in the mobile bus itself.

Till date, we have covered more than 500 villages in the State of Tamil Nadu and are now planning to scale out our operations so that we can reach out to more villages.

People think that by doing charity we lose money. But, I would say that it is the other way around. By doing charity, you may lose money, but it comes back. You have to make sure that your expertise and knowledge that you have learnt is given to everybody. My father used to say: “Keep doing the service, God will take care!”

### **What has been the success of Rajan – Rotary Eye bank?**

Corneal blindness is one of the major problems in our country. Approximately, there are about 3 million people who are blind due to corneal problems. Cornea is like a watch glass, when affected you will not be able to see the time. Similarly, the cornea is a transparent structure. So, when it gets affected with trauma, injury or infection, the cornea becomes white. This is called cornea opacity that blocks the light and the patient is not able to see. In our country we have approximately 2.33 million people who are blind due to corneal disorder. In such cases, we need to do corneal transplant surgeries.

60 percent of corneal blindness occurs below the age of 15 years, which means that you if can eradicate corneal blindness you can eradicate blindness among children to a large extent.

We started the Rajan Eye Bank in 1996 and subsequently got affiliated with Rotary and renamed it as Rotary- Rajan Eye Bank. We conduct free corneal transplant surgeries, mainly focusing on children, and also propagate the message on eye donation.

Cornea procurement is very less, although better than before. When we started the eye bank, we used to get only one pair of eyes in 10 days. Now, we are getting one pair of eyes every day. There are 550 eye banks in our country and all of them put together, we are doing 50,000 to 60,000 corneal transplants in a year.

The fear of eye donation continue in rural areas although considerably lesser than before. This is because many celebrities

have been involved in propagating the message of eye donation. Aishwarya Rai is the ambassador of Eye Bank Association of India, and we have been roping in sports legend Mr. Vijay Amritraj and other leading actors as our sight ambassadors. This has made a huge impact and led to increase in eye donations across the country.

**Your message for our readers?**

In our country, people are led by superstitions, false beliefs, and fear of donating eyes which we are trying to overcome through education. With 1.2 billion population in our country, we should be able to take care of the treatment of corneal blindness to a large extent.

Sri Lanka exports eyes to 35 different countries as they have surplus eyes. No religion is against eye donation, but no religion other than Buddhism has told that eye donation should be done after one's lifetime. That's the reason why we are lagging behind.

There is a National Eye Donation Fortnight which is celebrated every year from 25th of August to the 8th of September. During this period, we promote the eye donation programme and encourage people to pledge their eyes after their lifetime. I request the readers to join this movement.

## 9. Shri. P. Narahari, IAS

*“I learned that positive thinking, honest efforts and willpower can bring about incredible change to our society.”*



Shri P. Narahari IAS is an Indian Civil Servant and a writer. He is presently the Secretary & Commissioner, Public Relations Department; and Commissioner-Cum-Secretary, Urban Administration Department at Government of Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal.

Narahari studied mechanical engineering at Osmania University and was selected to work with Indian Engineering Services in 1999. He joined the Indian Administrative Service in 2001. He made Gwalior District 95% barrier-free in two years to help persons with disabilities, senior citizens, women easily access public spaces. Thus making Gwalior an example for other cities in India as reported by Satyamev Jayate. In Indore, as District

Collector, he focused on health, education and Smart Cities Mission. Indore also became the cleanest city in India under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan where Narahari played a key role. Narahari has authored two books, *Who Owns Mhow?* and *The Making of Ladli Laxmi Yojna*.

***In an exclusive interview with Marie Banu, Narahari IAS tells about his initiatives to benefit the elderly and girl children.***

**What was your inspiration to join Indian administrative services?**

Indian Administrative Services (IAS) is considered as top level services in our country. For me, joining the Indian administrative services was not about, ‘Just getting a job’. In fact, I had many other options of getting government jobs. I joined Indian Administrative Services with a vision and a specific goal of serving the nation.

I hail from a small town of Basantnagar, Karimnagar District which is now in Telangana. When I was growing up, I noticed a common man in our country struggling with various issues – be it access to services or benefits from government schemes. I realised that only administrative bodies can help such people to find a solution.

Development schemes and activities can be paced up for growth and progress of rural regions. Hence, I joined Indian administrative services so that I can help a common man by providing him access to government schemes, policies and programmes thereby leading to the betterment of society. Nothing is more satisfactory than doing a job where you can contribute for our nations’ development and help its citizens.

**What steps did you take to make Gwalior district to be 95% barrier free thereby benefiting the elderly and persons with disabilities?**

It reminds me of good old times. It is embedded in our culture to offer special care and facilities to our elderly and specially-abled people (Divyaang). It is our responsibility to provide them a better and safe environment.

As the Collector of Gwalior, this was an effort to provide a barrier free environment so that the local society need not have to struggle in managing their day-to-day matters. The key focus were on ramps, railings, low-rise toilets, drinking water facilities that are low enough for wheelchair-bound persons to reach.

We have building codes that specify what kind of infrastructure needs to be created. We called the organisations, especially government agencies, and trained and educated them on the specifications needed. For example, the railway and bus stations frequented by the public for their day-to-day activities needed to be disable-friendly.

After the training, the individuals were divided into four to five groups and are then asked to visit various institutions to conduct an 'audit act' to determine if the institutions were accessible to the elderly and specially-abled. The findings were discussed with the institutions mentioning the areas where they lacked accessibility and were given time to carry out the recommendations. A lot of follow-up work is done to ensure that the work is being carried out. With good follow-up, a lot of positive things happen.

What we have found is that while people were aware of the building codes, it is actually the absence of training and information that led to poor infrastructure. We received support from almost everyone - government officials, social workers, and the common people - for this initiative which led to its success. I learned that positive thinking, honest efforts and willpower can bring about incredible change to our society.

I firmly believe that the very purpose of Administrative Bodies is to serve the people, and to provide them with the right solutions

for their problems. We should take note of the general problems and prepare a solution oriented programme ahead. The goal should be to find a solution before the problem gets bigger. We should not wait for people to come and ask for their right. Deliver it before they ask!

**About “Laadli Lakshmi Yojna” that you initiated in Madhya Pradesh?**

I was born in a small town and there was a time when people, especially the economically backward families, were worried when there was a girl child born in the family. The cost of her education and marriage was a matter of serious concern and they treated the girl child as a burden.

There were cases of female foeticide and female infanticide that I read about and this troubled me much. Both girl and boy children should be treated equal and I decided to do something to put a stop to the discrimination that was prevailing in our society.

When I was serving at “Mahila Evam Baal Vikaas” Department, I had the chance to do something for our daughters’. I prepared the first draft of Laadli Lakshmi Yojna and everyone welcomed the scheme. In this, a girl child would receive each year 2000 rupees from the time of admission in the sixth standard, 4000 rupees on admission in the ninth standard and 7500 rupees when she gets admitted in the 11th standard. During her higher secondary education, she would get 200 rupees every month and on completion of 21 years she would receive the remaining amount, which would be more than one lakh rupees.

Today, more than 10 states are executing this scheme, although with different names. The smiles I see on the face of the girl child’s parents and their family members are priceless.

**Your thoughts on effective use of social media.**

Social media is a very powerful and an effective medium of

communication today. Now, people have more options of communicating with each other. One can connect to the masses easily through it. Social media is revolutionary as long as it is not misused for defaming someone.

If a common man wants to convey something to me or he needs to ask me for help and due to some reasons cannot meet me directly –he can still convey his/her message to me directly through social media.

**Your advice for IAS aspirants?**

Well, I want to convey my young friends who are aspiring to be a part of Indian Administrative Services that they should focus on achieving their goal of serving our country. Their goal should be bigger than just passing the civil service examination.

One should develop a strong affinity towards social welfare and nation's development. To be an active part of this whole process he/she should help people in every possible manner. This thought should always be in your heart and mind. You will be the game changers who can bring positive change in this country. Have courage to face the challenges. Wherever you go, create a positive environment and try to benefit more and more people.

## 10. Swami Nityanandagiri

*“Meditation is washing the thoughts.”*



Swami Nityananda Giri is the Chief Patron of the MSDS Trust. Swamiji, a chemical engineer in his poorvashram days, severed his worldly connections in 1963 and took up intense spiritual sadhana. He came to Sadguru Gnanananda in 1971 and was accepted by Him as a Brahmachari disciple. He received direct guidance from Him and studied Vedanta under Swami Vidyanda Giri. Well versed in Vedanta, Swamiji continues the tradition of teaching the scriptures. He is very much interested in mysticism from all traditions. He was often invited to participate in inter-religious and inter-monastic dialogues around the world. He has travelled widely lecturing on Vedanta and Yoga.

Swamiji had the privilege to compile the teachings of Sadguru Gnanananda under his personal direction titled Gnana Inba Veli. Another book “Sri Gnanananda Darsanam” authored by him

gives a very good account of the life and teachings of Sadguru Gnanananda.

***In an exclusive interview Swami Nityanandagiri talks to Latha Suresh and Marie Banu about the power of introspection.***

### **What is meditation?**

A Lebanese man asked what is meditation. I said, “Meditation is washing the thoughts. When one washes the thoughts, the thoughts are changing and along with it the thinker is also changing. Good thoughts make you happy and the bad thoughts make you angry. Mano Maya - our mental state keeps changing and we should watch over it.” He again asked me how can one can be conscious and be watching.

Watching means being a witness to it. For example, if a person is a witness to a murder, he has nothing to do with the murder but can identify with it. Behind our mortal, we have something immortal inside us, which we can be contacted and controlled. We have to train our mind and for this we need japa (meditation). When we train our mind, it is capable of separating the true self from our pseudo self. The pseudo self is the same in everyone – you, me and in Osama as well.

### **Your thoughts on the power of introspection?**

A story in Gnanananda goes like this.

*Once a stationmaster a disciple of Gnanananda brought one of his friends, a rich landlord, along with him to his ashram.*

*He did not believe in God and once asked Swamiji with reverence, “There is a saying that - without God’s will nothing can be done. So, if I am doing anything wrong, then it is God that is doing it and not me!”*

*Swamiji replied: “Why worry about it. But, are we doing anything wrong?”*

*Landlord: “I argue with a lot of priests and have also injured a priest.”*

*Swamiji: “You have done the right thing”*

*Landlord: “But, the puranas say that it is wrong.”*

*Swamiji: “The puranas are rubbish.”*

*Landlord: “No, my conscious says that it is wrong.”*

*Swamiji: “What is conscious? Where is God? He is within us and tells us what is to right and what is wrong. But do we listen to Him? It is the consciousness within us which is God.”*

This transformed him.

Unless one introspects nothing can influence change. Swamiji Chinmayananda asks us to write a spiritual diary. It is not a diary of events. It is about writing a diary after introspection - when we got angry and when we were happy. We should cultivate the boldness of going and apologizing to the one whom we have hurt. In each religion, there is transcendence. Swami Gnanananda taught people to go beyond religion - to a contemplative and spiritual level.

### **Your advice for present generation?**

When we really talk to our youngsters today, they will change. Parents must give more time to our children. Educate them in proper schools. Tell the children the rituals and its meaning, instead of blindly following it.

The purpose of religion is to bring about an order and practices. For example, Marriage - it talks about a husband and wife should live together and bring up their children. In the case of divorce, the children are the sufferers.

Adultery is one of the Ten Commandments. But, our Supreme Court has passed an order legitimizing this by taking western examples. This is not a good thing to say!

A book titled 'Our culture' by Sri Raja Gopalachari says culture means restraint. A cultured person knows where to stop.

Religion is at one level, but we should go beyond religion. It prepares you for a higher spiritual life. This has been neglected.

## 11. Smt. Rajathi Salma

*“I want to create a dialogue with women and make them aware of their rights.”*



Rajathi Salma is one of Tamil’s most important contemporary poets. Overcoming orthodoxy, marital violence and imprisonment in her own home, Salma has become an international literary figure and spokesperson for women’s rights. Her work articulates the nuances of repressed desire and sexuality, as well as bringing life to the often-invisible domestic space inhabited by many Indian women. With two volumes of poetry, one novel and a collection of short stories, Salma has made her mark as a distinctive Indian literary voice.

The late Lakshmi Holmstrom’s English translation of her novel *The Hour Past Midnight* was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Prize and long-listed for the Man Asian Prize. As well as being a woman of letters, Salma is a committed public servant and

activist, running an organization for the promotion of women's rights and education in rural India. She is the subject of a multi-award winning documentary film, *Salma*, by British filmmaker Kim Longinotto.

Salma is the author of two books of poetry: *Oru Maalaiyum Innoru Maalaiyum* (An Evening and Another Evening) (2000) and *Pachchai Devathai* (Green Angel) (2003).

***In an exclusive interview, Rajathi Salma tells Marie Banu how she uses her writing for women empowerment.***

**About your interest in writing?**

I grew up in my hometown Thuvankurichi, a village at Tiruchirappalli in Tamil Nadu. I could not pursue my schooling after the age of 13 as this was the custom in my community— girls can't go to school after they attained puberty.

My parents were liberal intellectuals and they understood the complexities of identity that I might face, but were compelled to encourage some form of conservatism within me. There were always certain things that I couldn't wear; certain things that I couldn't eat; and certain topics I couldn't discuss. I lived within those confinements for much of my early life.

I felt very lonely and wanted to study. I started reading all I could get hold of. I spent two hours a day in the library nearby and my brother used to also bring me books from here.

After marriage my husband and his family did not allow me to read or write. So, I would wait until everyone was asleep at night before sneaking to the toilet to write.

We had a small box for sanitary napkins and I used to hide my pen and papers here. I wrote on a pen name Salma, as I did not want to disclose my identity. In the morning, I would seek the help of

my mother and my maid to post my writings to magazines. They used to also secretly deliver the response letters to me. A lot of comments that I received on my writing/ poems made me feel confident.

**Why do you choose to write mostly about women?**

I read a lot of literature, mostly Russian literature that was translated into Tamil, Walt Whitman, Kaleel Gibron and Poplon Neruda. I learnt about the issues that were happening around the world and realised that this was totally different to what women in my community/village were experiencing. I felt a conflict within. This influenced me to write about women and the changes that I wanted to see happen. There is a need for social awakening and a woman certainly deserves a better treatment!

I am concerned about the social pressure on women that curtails their freedom. Some women do not understand these issues as they accept these restrictions as part of their religious and cultural beliefs. There is a need to sensitise them and make them realize that no religion states that women needs to be suppressed. I want to create a dialogue with women and make them aware of their rights.

**Are the present laws adequate to protect the rights of women in India? Your thoughts?**

Although there are laws to govern rights for women, it comes to effect only when there is an issue. There is a rising incidence of crime against women, which can't be denied. What is required is the change in people's mindsets.

The value of gender equality needs to be inculcated since childhood and can be achieved through education. Families need to treat their children equally. This is what I have been emphasizing in my writing!

**Can you tell us about your Trust?**

In 2010, I launched a Trust “Your Hope is Remaining with an aim to achieve gender equality and voice against any form of discrimination against women. Social order with justice and liberty are our twin principles and we work for development, capacity building, enlightenment, and empowerment of women in Chennai and Trichy districts.

We are also engaged in creating awareness on the importance of education especially girl child education.

## 12. Shri. N.K. Ranganath

*“With a growing population and depleting water resources, we need to rethink our approach.”*



Ranganath NK shares with Marie Banu an integrated approach to manage water and wastewater

Shri Ranganath N K is the area Managing Director, INDO region, Grundfos. He joined Grundfos in February 1998 and established Grundfos India in March 1998. He has more than 36 years of industry experience covering marketing, sales, design, project management, finance and human resources.

Prior to joining Grundfos, Ranganath was the Director of IAEC Industries. His first job was with Eicher Tractors in sales. He has been involved in technology transfer to India from other countries

including Denmark and his focus has been on Water and Energy Conservation.

He holds a Degree in Mechanical Engineering from College of Engineering, Guindy (1978) and Post-Graduation in Business Administration (P.G.D.B.A.,) from XLRI, Jamshedpur (1980).

Ranganath is currently the co-chair of the CII National committee on water and the Southern regional Chair for the committee on ease of doing business. He has been a member of CII National Committees on Manufacturing, Water, CSR and Skill Development. He also has held positions of: Member of the Executive Council of Indian Green Building Council (IGBC), Past Chairman of Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), Tamil Nadu Council, Past Chairman of AEEE (Alliance for an Energy Efficient Economy) and Past President of Madras Management Association.

*In an exclusive interview, Shri Ranganath NK shares with Marie Banu an integrated approach to manage water and wastewater.*

**Grundfos is focused on promoting the UN Sustainability Development Goal (SDG) 6, which focuses on water and SDG 13 which focuses on climate change. Can you tell us about your efforts in these areas so far?**

We operate our business with sustainability as a core mindset and have anchored our innovative solutions in order to contribute to the UN's Sustainability Development Goals (6 and 13). We have a three-pronged approach towards these SDGs.

Firstly, from a business opportunities perspective, we have identified specific demand-supply gaps for sustainable products and have been working towards bridging this gap. Secondly, from a risk perspective, we have analysed our risks to evaluate any damage to the environment and understand best practices that can be followed. Thirdly, from a community perspective,

Grundfos has been collaborating with various stakeholders such as NGOs, governments and our own employees through constructive dialogues and platforms.

Since 2008, we have successfully managed to reduce water consumption by over 34% and reduce our CO2 emissions by 31% globally. From 2014, we have also been able to help over 1.6 million people globally access clean drinking water. These are just a few testaments of our commitment to creating an environmentally sustainable future.

### **About the solar-powered pumping systems in 100 villages in India launched by Grundfos Foundation and Sunlit Future?**

India has over 700,000 water deprived villages. Understanding the implications of water scarcity and its impact on communities, we partnered with Sunlit Future in 2014 to provide 100 solar pumps to 100 villages.

The solar-powered pumping systems with Grundfos' SQ Flex pumps will ensure a stable water supply for each village. The SQ Flex pump motor is constructed especially for energy sources with varying voltage, such as solar energy or wind power. Furthermore, the pumps are extremely energy efficient and long-lasting.

Grundfos India already has thousands of solar pump installations across Maharashtra, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. Through these solar pump solutions, Grundfos India has helped create a positive impact on the socio-economic lives of thousands of people in rural India.

The project was undertaken in four phases across villages in Odisha, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. This '100 pumps, 100 villages' initiative positively impacted over 50,000 people in these states.

**With government planning to give a push to renewable energy sector, are you seeing an increase in demand for solar-powered pumps in the country?**

The Indian government's ambitious target to reach 450 GW renewable energy capacity has definitely rejuvenated the interest in the sector. Solar energy solutions are driving the growth due to some of the lowest tariffs in the world.

The Prime Minister's KUSUM scheme has further increased the availability of solar pumps at subsidized costs to farmers. This has helped increase awareness and large-scale adoption of these pumps in off grid or remote areas. With over 2 lakh pumps installed till date, we are seeing an increased interest in making efficient solar pumps a preferred alternative.

**Your thoughts on integrated approach to managing water and wastewater?**

With a growing population and depleting water resources, we need to rethink our approach towards water management by engaging with stakeholders and implementing the right technology. The Ministry of Jal Shakti has been able help us set water goals and come up with a unified strategy to tackle challenges.

A shift towards a circular economy where water is reused multiple times will help optimize water usage, reuse and consumption. Wastewater treatment is a critical component in a successful circular economy. Collaborative efforts are needed to ensure that wastewater treatments are a mainstay in our homes, offices and municipalities. Wastewater should be treated as a source of water and therefore water should be priced similarly to electricity.

**Can NGOs associate with Grundfos in taking your mission forward? If so, what are the processes involved?**

We are always on the lookout for the right partner to help us

augment our community campaigns. In the past, we have worked with several NGOs like Hand in Hand and Sunlit Future and other local NGOs to create awareness, provide training and improve access to clean, drinking water.

We are also working on restoring water bodies in Chennai – thereby improving the water quality and recharging the water table in these locations. Besides, we work with the CII on promoting water stewardship and increasing awareness on water management and conservation.

### **III. NGO Profile**

*Stories of uncelebrated people whose non-profit organisation strive to make a difference in the lives of the deprived.*



## 1. Agal Foundation Ode to Young Trash Ambassadors



As the guitar strings play music in rhythm, the trash ambassadors sing the Agal Anthem:

*“It’s I! It’s I! It’s I who keep my city clean (2)  
Roll over the oceans, roll over the seas  
You and I can make our city clean”*

These are 5th graders from Chennai becoming Trash Ambassadors to keep their city clean. And there is a story behind how it all began in the first place.

For a textile retailer Karthikeyan and a Singapore based retired banker/ content developer Vajidha Hameed who were born and brought up in Chennai, the floods of 2015 was not just another phase of devastation that would pass.

What started off as an accidental meeting in one of his shops where Vajidha came to buy bedsheets for flood relief transformed to a passionate social entrepreneurial journey for both. The reason for the nasty flooding was many, but a major problem area was the humungous amount of solid waste dumping and industrial discharges that contaminated and clogged the water bodies.

Another man-made disaster which could have been avoided only if humankind was concerned about how garbage could be managed.

The hassles always fade, and people tend to go back and forget what led them or will possibly lead them to such bad catastrophes again but not for Karthikeyan and Vajidha. They did their bit of research and brainstorming as to why the disaster was uncontrollable. Had the drainage systems, waste disposal and dumping and accumulation of trash had proper channels earlier, the flooding could have been controlled since the water would not have clogged. Had there been proper ways to store rainwater, the disaster would not have got as bad as it did.

“Somewhere something has to CHANGE” told Vajidha Hameed after contemplating and discussing about this. While most of India is prone to becoming a littering yard, the same “us” would not dare to litter a street in a foreign country for the stringent rules those countries follow. “Well it’s not only the rules, but the mindset that leads someone to litter or not. In order to change the mindset, it’s crucial to touch the grassroots and bring about a mind shift change to the younger generation by talking to them so that while they grow up as responsible citizens of the country, cleanliness will become a way of living” says Karthikeyan.

Clean living must become a way of life. Our smallest actions could bring about the biggest changes. This led Vajidha Hameed to design a beautiful content catering to 5th graders. This gave birth to Agal Foundation on February 2016. The foundation was started with a necessity and vision for reaching out to 5th grade students. It was important to design a module that is very interactive, playful for the children. This was done through activity-based learning programmes and activities by volunteers and teachers. Three modules run over a period of 23 weeks, one hour/week. The aim was to bring in an inclusive fun-loving activity. And it worked! Trash Ambassadors from 5th grades started to rise. The module is called “**Trash the trash Champs**” and all the kids welcomed this with all their heart which was the ultimate success of the programme. Currently Trash the Trash Programme runs in 4 different schools across Chennai.

The schools Agal partnered with started integrating these methods in their own waste disposal systems bringing about changes. “Reduce, reuse, recycle” became the mantra. Slowly, the practices became infectious when the parents of these children came to teachers with good testimonials on garbage disposal. The impact these children brought forth was deep. This started to prove how effective Agal’s module was.

Another programme “Breaking the Taboo” a seminar, that Agal foundation held a year back had a huge impact on college students to working professionals who were women. The primary aim of the seminar was to bring in an understanding of how to effectively dispose sanitary napkins in the most hygienic and recyclable manner. Women experts from various spheres came together to talk, discuss and through light on the same. Apart from this, Agal also has conducted programmes with Loyola College, Chennai to raise awareness on waste disposal and its rightful management.

Agal foundation has innovative programmes coming up in the future like the “Trashinator Contest” which would be conducted across various colleges. The aim of the contest is to identify if there are potential products that could be developed from trash by students and how innovative that could get in terms of products. Karthikeyan believes that it would motivate these trash entrepreneurs to come up with unique innovation by identifying their talent and recognising them. This would embark a journey to build a business out of trash for many entrepreneurs.

Recently “Trash the Trash Project” of Agal Foundation got attention globally. Paris Peace Forum, a global platform for governance projects held in November 2018 invited Agal Foundation to speak on their project having noticed the simplicity of the programme that came with high impact. The programme could be implemented in schools across the world to bring about change and build trash ambassadors. Unfortunately, due to constraints, Agal could not make it to the Summit.

The project has been received well by every school that has

launched it. But the dream of Vajidha Hameed and Karthikeyan does not stop with 4 schools or 100 schools. In order to infiltrate and make this a way of life, it is essential to reach multiple schools across the country with this project. And that's what they are striving to accomplish. These founders are aiming to digitalize the content to expand its reach in the future. Vajidha and Karthikeyan are superheroes in all true sense because they are nurturing a mindset that has ripple effect on all who is touched.

*Angela Anish*

## 2. Ajeevika Bureau

### Engaging with Migrant Workers



Urbanisation has not only given birth to many new cities, but has also brought rural distress and foot loose migration to our focus. While the data from 2011 census testifies this, it also shockingly points out the lack of an institutional response to the rights and needs of migrant workers. “Migration is no longer seasonal in our country. It is circular, being characterised by the way industry recruits workers. Workers move from one city to another depending on the scope of employment and this is the form of migration more prevalent in our country now,” says Ms. Amrita Sharma, Director of Ajeevika Bureau.

Acknowledging the vulnerability of migrant workers, she insists, is the first step towards an institutional response the sector needs. A state level study in Rajasthan revealed how migration, widely prevalent, was seen as a means of survival and the vulnerability of these workers being capitalised by the destination cities. Aajeevika Bureau (AB) was established in 2005, in Rajasthan, to provide the platform for a dedicated interaction with migrant workers and build an institutional voice for migrant labour in the country. AB’s work began with the tribal belts in Rajasthan but the very nature of their target population required them to be available in both source and destination cities. Working across migration corridors in Rajasthan,

Gujarat and Maharashtra, AB's approach covers both rural and urban settlements.

Making themselves available for the migrant workers through 15 walk in resource centres in the three states, AB has designed all its services fully aware of the implications faced by work force in the informal sector. "Migrants workers are largely absorbed by the informal sector where there is hardly any proof of employment or a contract, promising certain benefits from the employer. With no entitlements guaranteed or demanded, their vulnerability is manipulated and used by contractors. In fact, this is the reason why migrant workers are preferred over locally available labour," explains Mr. Santosh Poonia, Programme Manager at AB.

AB intends to demonstrate the possibility of a holistic institutional response that not only addresses the needs of migrant workers, but also makes way for their welfare by providing lasting solutions to their economic, social and legal problems. AB offers a range of services starting from issue of identity cards, legal aid services to bring back stolen wages, emergency response to hazards on work sites, connecting workers with social security schemes, etc. The Legal Aid cell has registered 12,429 labour dispute cases and wage repayment of 17.18 crore rupees has been facilitated. AB's Labour Helpline is a huge success and has been taken over by the Government of Rajasthan to be able to intervene directly where needed. Also, the identity cards provided by AB have been ratified by the Government of Rajasthan, allowing the workers to access a range of government services through the same. Over one lakh migrant workers have been registered with government photo identity cards in Rajasthan.

While workers were focussed on source and destination areas, AB also began to look at the dependents left back home by these workers. "While men migrated in search of work opportunities, women, children back home struggled to claim their entitlements in the absence of male members. They had to be educated about their entitlements and other social welfare programmes like Public Distribution System, Integrated Child Development Scheme

(ICDS), National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (NREGA), admission in government schools, etc. AB stepped in as this was an integral part of their approach,” says Amrita. So far, 12000 women have been mobilised and with their support, 8500 families have been linked to NREGA, 10000 families have been linked to PDS entitlements.

The most significant of AB’s contribution to this sector, she feels, has been the shift in perception surrounding migration - from that of a negative phenomenon to a valid livelihood strategy that needs to be acknowledged. “If we do not acknowledge and engage with them, the large work force that is invisible, will never be brought to light,” she warns.

AB and team have successfully influenced donor priorities as well, encouraging them to build portfolios to support the issue. Incubation support is also provided to interested NGOs to scale the model. AB has a dedicated research team that has been gathering evidence from all its interventions to show the potential for replication in other parts of the country. AB has helped more than 30 organisations across 10 states in India set up their migration programmes. Their expertise has also guided state and central government institutions set up migration support centres. Their publications have helped mainstream the concerns of migrant workers across the country. AB published the first of its kind state migration profiles for Rajasthan and Odisha, now being widely used for policy advocacy in these states.

Urbanisation and migration are processes that feed each other, with industry being an important player in these processes. A multifaceted engagement with government departments and industry is essential to ensure that workers behind these developments live a dignified life, with complete access to all their entitlements and that their work is valued. AB’s model has demonstrated the potential of a systematic response and will go on to lead the way in mainstreaming concerns of women migrant workers as well. “We are now trying to reach out to adolescent girls and protect them from sexual harassment and gender bias in

wage distribution. It has been a long road and very challenging to work with a population whose essential characteristic is to move. We have not surpassed all the challenges, yet we grow day by day, learning from our work,” smiles Amrita.

*Angela Anish*



### 3. Chudar

#### **Bridging gaps in teaching and learning**



One of the oldest challenges that our education system has been facing is that of transitioning from rote-memorization to ‘meaningful learning’. Rote memorization affects long term knowledge retention. Rote learning is essentially memorization that is based on repetition. The thought behind it is that the more one repeats information, the quicker that person will be able to recall the information when needed. Multiplication tables, the alphabet and some basic terms used in every subject for example, are taught by this method. Meaningful learning on the other hand focuses more on engaging with the subject matter, thinking critically and understanding how individual concepts work together. It follows therefore that leaning heavily on memorization often obstructs deeper learning; much of the information students learn this way is later lost.

Unfortunately, in most schools, the lessons end before students can reach this level of deep learning. Surface learning may lead to passing tests and getting a good score, but doesn’t lead to the creation of a knowledge base that will keep a student in good standing for a long time to come.

Combating rote memorization through innovative teaching-

learning methods is Chudar, a Chennai-based organization that sets up after-school centres catering to underprivileged children. They develop innovative educational content in Language, Mathematics and Science to help improve children's learning. We got in touch with Padmini Sreenivasan, Director of Chudar Programs, to learn more about their work. She says, "Chudar was founded with the vision of eliminating rote memorization and ensuring that children, particularly first-generation learners from underprivileged backgrounds, attain the skills and confidence necessary to face the future by the time they graduate from high-school."

Chudar's founder Dr. Ravishankar has been working in the field of school education for at least 13 years now. An alumnus of IIT Madras and a Ph.D. from Carnegie Mellon University, USA, Dr. Ravishankar's passion for education has informed every aspect of his illustrious career. Previously engaged with AID India, he directed large-scale programs to improve quality of education. As a resource person with UNICEF and NCERT he was often invited to make presentations on the field of education at conferences in India and abroad. Later he was a full-time faculty at IIT Madras, before throwing himself headlong to work on his brainchild, Chudar. Some of his other achievements include holding three US patents from his stint at IBM.

While his earlier work focused on improving foundational literacy and numeracy, Dr. Ravishankar realized that rote memorization in higher classes was the main reason why children in Tamilnadu did not learn well. This problem has been confirmed in studies conducted by the NCERT which show that in spite of high enrolment and infrastructure, Tamilnadu fares poorly in learning outcomes. In response to the above, Chudar has come up with three programs:

- After-school centres across Chennai
- School-intervention program in 20 Government and Government-aided schools
- Block-level partnership with 25 schools in Thiruporur and Kattankulathur blocks

Chudar members were part of the recent curriculum revision exercise by the Tamil Nadu State Government and Chudar's input was recognized with a mention in the middle-school Math textbooks. Says Padmini, "As resource persons we have trained more than 1000 teachers through large-scale teachers training camps organized by the Government".

For middle and high-school children in the age group of 11-16 years, Chudar has developed unique content in Math, Science, and English. "Our methodology is synchronized with the state curriculum and it helps children assimilate concepts and skills quite easily" says Padmini. At present these programs have directly touched 4800 students and counting.

The programs of Chudar are based on a few key features:

- Focus on learning outcomes
- Fun and exciting activity materials and worksheets
- Technology aided education
- Community participation through melas and learning festivals

When asked about what they consider to be the success of their programs, Padmini says "We have measured the impact of our intervention through pre- and post-assessments conducted by teachers themselves and are happy to report a 60%-70% improvement in the average skill-levels of children. Also at the end of every term, we conduct a declaration event for students to showcase the skills that they have learned. There have been several instances of students proudly demonstrating in front of a big crowd, brimming with confidence, surprising all their teachers and parents. Recently for example, a student from a municipality school in Alandur who previously had difficulty in Maths ended up doing all sums correctly, thus leaving his teachers pleasantly surprised!"

Recently Chudar has started helping students explore meaningful options post-school. Says Padmini, "We placed Shaveethira, a class 12 student from a government school in Avadi, in Zoho University

to train as a programmer after assessing her aptitude for it. The fact that she comes from a disadvantaged background, makes her achievement that much more remarkable.”

Revitalizing education systems is by no means an easy task. Chudar faces its share of difficulties too. Padmini shares, “Overcoming the rote-learning practice itself is the greatest challenge. The system only reinforces examination and marks, neither of which really reflects true learning. On the program front, impact largely depends on motivated teachers in government schools. Even when teachers are motivated, various constraints posed by the system or authorities makes it harder for them to be innovative in their work. In our after-school centres, we have community-based tutors who are also products of the same system and therefore it becomes that much harder to train them on alternative approaches. Also, like any other NGO, Chudar faces a dearth of funds and long-term commitments from donors.”

Ruminating on the state of education systems Padmini adds, “Many parents, especially from underprivileged sections, believe that better education for their children is their passport to a better future. Schools should focus on imparting meaningful learning as opposed to rote memorization.” As for Chudar, Padmini lays out their roadmap for the future when she says, “Our vision for Chudar is to impact 10,000 children in Tamilnadu over the next 3 years by working closely with the government at block and district levels. We hope that by working with the government, we can get teachers to internalize approaches to improve concepts and skills.” A worthy cause to get behind indeed!

*Archanaa Ramesh*

## 4. DIYA FOUNDATION

### Making Impossible Possible



Seeing is Believing. Holding on to that phrase I stepped into Diya in Kalyan Nagar at Bengaluru, my mind as a clean state. I was welcomed by Melanie, a young girl wearing a red sweater who was seated poised and composed. Diya gave a sense of belonging to anyone who entered the building. Everyone was busy as a bee engaged in genuineness and passion with the work they were assigned to. It was either paper bag making or candle making or chocolate making or jewellery making; I was directly led to a classroom of students who were eagerly waiting for their psychologist to start the session. I met shy smiles and eager eyes in that room, while the trainer took them through a lesson on emotions through role plays which helped them unveil their hidden feelings. Through some funny moments and innocent conversations, I made my way again to other spaces of Diya.

Diya Foundation was started in 1999 as a vocational training centre for adults with intellectual challenges from the heart of a passionate individual, Maria Santamaria lovingly called as Sarah. When she started Diya Foundation in the basement of a church with 3 adults with intellectual disabilities, she had no clue as to what would unfold in the future.

While most are unaware of the employment potential of intellectually challenged, Diya Foundation strives to enhance self-awareness, build self-esteem and independence of these individuals by helping them develop their potential to engage in productive work. By doing this, they enrich the quality of life and bring dignity to adults with intellectual challenges.

Sarah's commitment and determination took Diya Foundation and the team to a whole new level. The organisation now stands tall with 45 adults with intellectual disabilities, all of them confidently making an impact in this world that would have otherwise marked them unproductive.

In the year 2013, Diya Innovations came into existence. Their students are into making a variety of corporate and individual gifting options - chocolate, candles, a line of household linen, decorative lighting options, interesting crafts from recycled paper, bottles, etc. Apart from production and packaging, training is also provided in data entry, screen printing, housekeeping, hospitality, office assistant, and retail sales.

I was lucky to have met them all as they eagerly awaited their dance trainer to come and teach them some moves. They were enthusiastically learning dance to showcase for an upcoming event. Tony, one of the students showed me his expertise in Photoshop and their trainer Jerusha was kind enough to take me around and show different activities at Diya Foundation.

Sarah showed me how one of her student updates her about her culinary skills at home through WhatsApp. Sarah had many stories to tell about each one of her students and their remarkable transformations at Diya. She is exceptionally proud of her students and believes their dreams will come true. Mark, she says, takes time to comprehend verbal instructions well, but he is exceptionally good at tasks performing them with such precision and care, if you can show him how to do them.

I met volunteers who have been with Diya for more than a decade

and selflessly teaching them stitching and other life skills. “These beautiful souls don’t grumble about anything unlike us,” says a volunteer adding that- “They love what they do and do it with all attention and commitment. That makes me want to train them.”

Suman John, Co-founder at Diya Innovations led me through the process of how each product is crafted beautifully at Diya Innovations and how important it is to stay unique with what they do. “It’s beautiful to see the end products at Diya and how innovative they get every time. Catering to the requirements of corporates is challenging, but it only gets better every time with the deep dedication of these gifted individuals. Over 100+ companies (Cisco, Toyota, Myntra, MTR) have been supporting Diya in showcasing the work of the disabled through gifting Diya’s products to their employees and clients,” says Suman.

Students are also trained in gardening, cooking and other activities that will make them independent. Many of them are also offered job placement placed in companies. “There is a lot of stigma around how adults with intellectual challenges can attain nothing and will remain to be a burden to their caretakers. Diya Foundation is here to flip that stigma and tell the world that there is a lot of things they can do. Acceptance and awareness come first,” says Sarah.

While Sarah narrates each person’s story to me, I can see the sparkle in her eyes. I can see the passion driving her to do more for them. I strolled through each door to see only laughter, fun, commitment, friendship and much more. Like Sarah said, there are little things that they cherish – a simple step, a mere activity, a simple pleasure of attaining a milestone. These little things are the bundle of joy they keep close to their hearts.

While I sat at Diya contemplating, Mohan, one of the students came to me smiling and asked me to come see how neatly he folds the paper for the gift bags and insisted that I take his picture while at work. Then he went to his other friend Harsha, who was too shy for the photo, but still came as his friend kept insisting. It was beautiful to see how friendships bonded them.

During various activities these students undertook, may it be the dance, the paper bag making, the computer class, the role plays, there was immense peer support that kindled a sense of confidence in them making them want to achieve the unachievable. Heading back home, I thought- there are miracles and then there is Diya...

*Angela Anish*



## 5. Mithra

### Embodiment of Ability



An organization's history is as important as an organization's future. When tackling social stigma and superstition along with advancements in medical research, it becomes doubly important to keep a note of every step made towards progress. It is with this intention that when talking about Mithra, it seems important to start with the story of its founder, Sr. Mary Theodore OAM.

#### **“God's Donkey”**

Sr. Mary Theodore OAM was a nun from Australia. She had trained as an administrator and served in World War II before opting for the religious life. As a member of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, she travelled to India in 1951. She worked in many places in India as an educator and a social worker. It was in 1977, after years of interacting with hundreds of poor children with intellectual and physical disabilities that she decided to establish MITHRA- a care and rehabilitation centre for disabled children without discrimination of any kind. She saw herself as that most humble of servants that did whatever God required for

his poorest children and hence gave herself the moniker “God’s Donkey”. True to the nickname, she would go on to tirelessly work in the service of children and adults with disability for 61 long years, until her passing in 2012. She was the first Area Director for Special Olympics and introduced the value of sports and games to these differently abled. As the first President of the State level umbrella organisation “Federation of Organisations for Persons with Disabilities” she was instrumental in organising the first State level conference in which the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu announced the historic monthly financial assistance scheme for the differently abled. In her lifetime, Sr. Mary Theodore’s work was recognized with various prestigious awards, the most notable one being conferred with the Order of Australia Medal (OAM) in 1991. Her work not just touched the lives of thousands of people with disabilities in India, but also inspired hundreds of her admirers in Australia to take up service of others. It is Sr. Mary Theodore’s story that is written all over the premises of MITHRA today.

MITHRA caters to the needs of children and young adults afflicted with cerebral palsy, on the Autism spectrum, Down Syndrome and multiple disabilities. Says Dr. Sukumar the Director of MITHRA, “Our priority is to those from the poorer sections. We are open to everyone irrespective of religion, caste, creed or gender. Our aim is to make them (the persons with disability) as independent as possible and to improve their quality of life.”

Their programmes are five-fold. They have an Early Intervention programme through Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy and Speech Therapy. The campus has a Special School where basic concepts at pre-primary and primary levels are taught. Those with academic potential are encouraged to study further through the National Open School system which offers flexible and structured learning, making them eligible to appear in the Std. X and XII examinations. The Vocational Training programme provide them with skills in craftsmanship such as paper-bags, bath towels and floor mats, embroidery and tailoring, perfumed and decorative candle-making, vegetable and fruit cultivation and gardening. The organization relies on the strength of their volunteer base to fulfil many of these programmes.

Recognizing the need for young adults, especially girls need to possess essential life skills, MITHRA, in collaboration with the Theo Foundation provides training to young women on their personal hygiene needs. They also learn cooking, house-keeping, laundry and bakery. MITHRA operates a hostel facility with dedicated boys' and girls' dormitories where safe living and nutritious food is provided.

The perception about disability has changed a lot in the past 40 years. When asked about some of the palpable changes today, Dr. Sukumar observes, “When Mithra was started there were few organisations working in this sector. Governmental effort and support were negligible. There were no separate laws for the disabled and they were clubbed together under the act for the mentally ill. Awareness about rehabilitation was lacking. Today a separate act for persons with disabilities has been enacted, a National Trust for persons with disabilities at the central level assists and coordinates the work in the States; a separate department with district level offices look after the needs of the disabled and more institutions both in Chennai and the districts have sprung up in this sector.”

### **Stories of Success**

Over the years, MITHRA has had several success stories. Prabhavathi, a woman with muscular dystrophy came in as a child and over the years, completed 12th grade through NIOS and then acquired a B.A in Sociology through the Tamil Nadu Open University. She gained proficiency in computer applications and is now employed in Mithra itself teaching computer basics to other children.

### **“Wabhi-Sabhi Café”**

Young adult women who were trained in the Life Skills programme organised a pop-up food-stall called Wabhi-Sabhi café to exhibit their talent in preparing snacks and refreshments. The pop-up received rave reviews from well-wishers and parents who enjoyed the dishes and the girls earned the appreciation of all including the

chief guest Mr. Ravi who is the Chief Chef at one of the luxury hotels in Chennai.

Being a voluntary charitable organisation in the disability sector, MITHRA's work is very human resource centric with a lot of manual work. Dr. Sukumar says that getting qualified professionals who are able to volunteer their time and energy into these activities is tricky. "Our challenge is to provide sustainable services to more people from poorer sections who cannot afford to pay for our services. This places a greater pressure on our fundraising skills to meet the ever-increasing recurring costs of these services"

Dr. Sukumar's vision is to create avenues for workforce-integration and self-employment for trained adults of MITHRA. He is researching new and innovative vocational training models towards this end. "Most parents worry that there may be no one to support their dependent offspring, after they (the parents) pass on," says Dr. Sukumar. He aims to build an assisted living facility that would address this specific need, soon.

*Archanaa Ramesh*



## **6. Rural Caravan**

### **Enterprising Rural Development**



Studies contend that rural poverty is not completely understood and as a result, rural development is not holistic. The very perception of rural poverty has emerged from various observations, but with limited contribution from the people who live in rural areas. The relationship between rurality and rural poverty needs a fresh perspective that can look beyond existing strategies and enable the process of holistic rural development. “Rural Entrepreneurship offers this window of opportunity suiting the needs of a large work force, whose occupation is seasonal and struggles to provide income throughout the year,” says Mr Liju George, Co-Founder of Rural Caravan, a social enterprise based in Nasik, Maharashtra.

Founded in the year 2016, Rural Caravan aims to enable human development at the grass roots level through small, local enterprises that look beyond needs, to resonate with strengths and aspirations of the community. Exploring the tribal belts of Palghar region in Maharashtra, they came across the village Amale, untouched by conventional development. “People’s pride in their culture and traditional knowledge got us working on different engagements that could build on such strengths. Rural Tourism was the idea that directed us, as the people were delighted to share about their lives. We believed that a tourism enterprise as the vehicle for rural-urban

engagement will serve many purposes, most of all, it allowed both rural and urban people to look at each other's lives from a personal level, and the potential market each was to the other," elaborates Liju.

Convinced of the potential of such an enterprise, Rural Caravan set on to develop the capacities of the members of Mahalakshmi Self Help Group in hospitality management. As different groups came in, the villagers were able to identify needs of the visitors and accordingly arrange desired services through locally available resources. When an all men groups came in, they came up with the idea of building a shed for accommodation. Then came the women's group that prompted the idea of building restrooms. After all such pilot trips, the Mahalakshmi Self Help Group's tourism enterprise became equipped to attend to the needs of visitors from all age groups.

Tourism, like agriculture, was seasonal too. The tourism venture could hardly run during the summers. The region was characterised by heavy seasonal migration to Mumbai, seeking work in landfills, brick kiln furnaces and others. "The challenge of job creation for our workforce and the stress on urban resources due to the mass seasonal exodus were big concerns that affected every village. Cities cannot handle this pressure and therefore alternate opportunities must be created at the village level," asserts Manish Nair, Co-Founder of Rural Caravan. The team was then seriously concerned about creating yearlong opportunities for the people of Amale, a hamlet with only seventy households. The focus now turned to the mapping of local skills and resources, around which small scale, profitable enterprises could be built upon.

Then came the improved cook stove enterprise that made Amale Indoor Air Pollution (IAP) free in 2017. IAP and its effect on women's health provoked the team to introduce new models. A design was then chosen based on the villagers' feedback and they were trained in co-creating the improved cook stove through practical training programmes. They built and installed a unit at the cost of two thousand rupees. Having covered the market in

Amale, the enterprise is now set on to explore new markets in the neighbouring villages. “Rural India is a very difficult market to penetrate and who better can break these obstacles than the rural people themselves,” claims Liju. Rural Caravan went on to build an enterprise in wild honey rearing too. The support in branding and packaging has opened up a wider market for this produce.

Development of enterprises was always accompanied by a conscious effort to help villagers see the rural urban linkages and market opportunities from rural to rural and rural to urban regions. As both can drive growth, it was up to people’s aspirations to recognise their path. Building community enterprises and identifying the right people to drive them threw upon numerous challenges to Rural Caravan. As a process focussed institution, the team had to deal with a beneficiary group for whom time was infinite. “Redirecting their behaviour to operate within a desired framework was a daunting task, but very rewarding,” he smiles, adding that such behavioural changes are a crucial part of the change Rural Caravan intends to bring about in the course of Rural Development.

From this stature of a hand holding institution, Rural Caravan dreams of building platforms for innovation and connecting rural people with their mentors, customers and other significant stake holders. In order to encourage the culture of collective decision making and community level dialogues that enabled everybody’s participation, Rural Caravan also intends to strengthen panchayat structures. A big dream and a long journey to help all of us see rural India for what it really is!

*Shanmuga Priya.T*

## **7. Sightsavers**

### **Making the Blind Visible**



According to the WHO nearly 36 million people in the world suffer from blindness. India alone is home to around 8 millions of them, with most living in the poorest parts of the country. “Over 75% of all blindness is avoidable, that is, it is either preventable or curable,” says Mr. R N Mohanty, CEO of Sightsavers India. An eye-opening fact indeed.

Sightsavers works to eliminate avoidable blindness and to ensure that people who are irreversibly blind are supported adequately to lead lives of independence and dignity. The organisation focusses on collaborating with various state governments to scale up operations in three broad areas: Eye Health; Inclusive Education and; Social Inclusion.

Sightsavers International or the erstwhile Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind was started in 1950 by Sir John Wilson. Blinded at age 12 in a science lab accident, Sir John Wilson believed that disability should never overshadow one’s identity. The organisation started its operations in Africa to prevent a condition called “River

Blindness” caused due to a bacterial infection found commonly in African region. In the 1960’s, during his visit to India, Sir John observed merely a handful of organisations working for the blind. India at that time did not have any national programme or plan for people with visual impairment. Thus, Sir John’s organisation started its work in India in 1966. In the initial years it worked closely with the National Association for the Blind (NAB).

Dr. Rajendra Vyas, one of the pioneers of the NAB, started working with Sir John from 1967 operating mainly from his residence in Bombay (Mumbai). The organisation was registered in 1970 as the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind, under the Bombay Trust Act and Dr. Rajendra Vyas became the first Regional Director for Asia.

What causes avoidable blindness? For instance, Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) may be a major reason of preventable blindness in the countries of Africa, but the same is not true for the Indian subcontinent. In India, cataract, refractive errors and glaucoma are the leading causes of avoidable blindness.

Mr. Mohanty explains, “In India, good quality cataract and refractive services are accessible to only half the people who are in need. This is largely due to a lack of social or family support and direct or indirect cost associated with the surgery. Unless eyesight deteriorates to a level which significantly compromises normal human functioning, people tend to undermine the need for treatment. Children often find it hard to articulate the problem. Resigned interest in school and interpersonal activities, coupled with falling grades can be seen as a symptom of eye problems.”

## **EYE HEALTH**

Sightsavers ensures availability of affordable, quality eye health services in rural districts, urban slums and government schools. They focus on raising awareness about eye health, training health care workers, school teachers and community volunteers and

strengthening their capacities. They routinely conduct screenings for mainly Cataract, Refractive Error, and Glaucoma. Subsequently they provide referrals, check-ups and wherever needed, free surgeries, distribution of spectacles and contact lenses, training of new eye-care personnel and after-care for surgical patients.

## **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

“Blindness creates an endless cycle of illiteracy, poverty and social exclusion, making blind children one of the most vulnerable groups of people,” explains Sightsavers India’s website. The key objective of the Inclusive Education Programme is to raise learning outcomes of Children with Visual Impairment (CVI) through mainstream education. Sightsavers aims to promote a positive and enabling environment in schools, families as well as communities to support the holistic education of CVI.

14-year old Kiran hails from Dumka district of Jharkhand. Visually impaired at birth, Kiran barely attended school, until Sightsavers, in association with Chetna Vikas, intervened. She was given a tab to facilitate her learning through technology; her parents and teachers were trained in such assistive devices as Braille Slate, Abacus and Taylor Frame, that enable teaching for the blind. With this support, shortly Kiran mastered the usage of these devices and excelled at school, even going on to become the Cultural Minister of the Bal Sansad Committee of her school.

## **SOCIAL INCLUSION**

Sightsavers’s National Social Inclusion Programme emphasizes three priority areas that includes economic empowerment, strengthening Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs) and enabling environment for People With Disabilities (PWDs). While highlighting the many achievements of this programme, Mr. Mohanty points out, “The state level DPO of Rajasthan was recently registered in the name of APNO SANSTHAN under the Rajasthan Societies Registration Act, 1958. This is a long awaited initiative. Though Sightsavers facilitated the process, the state

DPO members played a critical role, gathering all the information and addressing all queries.”

“In the past two years Sightsavers has strongly focused on strengthening the DPO and has facilitated capacity building sessions on vision building, advocacy, fundraising. The members plan to now strengthen the DPO by developing a fundraising plan for effective execution of the activities and the next step is to access government as well as other funding opportunities to take up their future plans and ensure sustainability,” he says.

Sightsavers’ Equal World campaign calls for political leaders and global organisations to ensure that the one billion people with disabilities around the world, 800 millions of whom live in developing countries, can claim their rights and participate fully in society. The petition includes a call to the Indian government to make all public places fully accessible by 2025 (as requested in the national Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016).

The latest endeavour of Sightsavers India is the India Fellowship Program (IFP). The motto of IFP is to groom young ophthalmologists through an innovative course of mentoring and surgical exposure to expand their perspectives on rural eye health and to shape the youth into promising and skilled ophthalmologists.

When asked what his vision for the future of Sightsavers India is, Mr. Mohanty says, “Sightsavers envisions a day when ultimately we are no longer required. In the meanwhile, we would like to bring down the prevalence of blindness to 0.3 percent in the 100 districts across the nation.”

***Archanaa Ramesh***

## **8. Sona Sarovar Trust** *Aspirations from Slums*



Life in Indian slums always reminds us of the consequences of planning rural and urban development separately, unmindful of the forward and backward linkages that influence lives of the underprivileged families. Right from the sense of belonging, people from slums have dual roles and responsibilities that keep them from pursuing a better, happier future. “Children are the most affected in such areas. Adults know priorities and adapt accordingly but children always look for fun, play, learning and a meaningful bond with family, community. The very way of life in the slums is antagonistic to this aspiration,” says Ms Sona Kumar, Managing Trustee of Sona Sarovar Trust in Mumbai, Maharashtra.

A retired Assistant Manager from the Reserve Bank of India’s Central Office in Mumbai, Sona believed that educated and privileged individuals must understand the other half and help alleviate their conditions of life. “The intention is to help. All other variables fall into place when you look for an opportunity to help someone in need. For me, it started with a physically handicapped girl who was crippled due to polio and felt miserable about not being able to move around independently. When I saw her walk with callipers and handle business through the sewing machine we

had provided, I felt a strong resolve to touch many such lives. Thus was born the Sona Sarovar Trust in 2007”.

A decade long volunteering experience with an NGO introduced Sona to the challenges of rural life. The journey continued with many projects on rural rehabilitation, sanitation, solar energy and income generation. Sona and team soon recognised the critical link between poverty and illiteracy so decided to focus on child education in the neighbouring slums. Slums are a breeding ground for all anti-social activities and children in slums were exposed to all such dangers on a daily basis, affecting their lives and aspirations. Now that the Trust wanted to improve their lives, entering these communities and building a strong bond with adults and children alike, was inevitably the first significant step.

Play was the best possible way and establishment of tuition centres let the team further interact with the community. “When you work in slums you begin to realise that life in the slums is not just about insufficient infrastructure. Rather, it is about neglect at the individual, family and community level that discourages aspirations outside these slums. We had to annihilate this neglect to create a long term impact in the children’s lives,” says Sona, whose team designed moral education classes for the children. “It is important for these children to grow up to be good human beings and responsible citizens, in order to create room for change,” she adds.

According to Sona, one of the biggest challenges in working with these children has been the movement of their parents between native villages and the city. The situation forces children to discontinue education and engage in labour occasionally, which in the long term becomes their vocation. “They are not bothered about missing their final exams. Parents are not interested in attending parent teacher meetings in the schools,” laments Sona. The Trust enables such children to complete their classes through supplementary examinations. With illiterate parents finding it hard to allocate earnings for education, children dropping out of schools

is a usual phenomenon, further increasing the risk of exposure of anti-social activities like drug peddling, liquor supply and gambling. In a quest for engaging them meaningfully, the Trust began to celebrate children's birthdays and festivals regularly.

Simple excursions and occasional visits to restaurants and movie theatres keep the excitement intact, ensuring good attendance in the tuition centres. "When we ensure that children attend regularly, it becomes easier to take care of all their needs in a holistic way," she says. In an effort to improve their health, the Trust began to distribute calcium and vitamin supplements. "A child developed lump in his throat due to some reason and the momentary apprehension about the medicines we distributed scared us. We soon switched over to distribution of fruits and other healthy foods," Sona recalls. Regular medical camps guide the distribution of health foods and other follow up initiatives like treatment of cavities, distribution of power glasses, etc. With camps becoming a regular feature, the Trust learnt that children were unaware of basic hygiene. Workshops followed to educate children about hygiene, menstrual and reproductive health. The awareness created, along with scholarships ensured that girls attended schools regularly without dropping out.

Sona and team now accompany their children to interschool cultural competitions, sports tournaments and marathons. "We identify their interests and provide the right kind of preparation throughout. One of our girls has won more than fifteen races. Looking at children's interest in marathon, we also help in registration and provide professional shoes," says Sona, adding that catering to children's small needs has now given them the position to shape children's future aspirations. Sona Sarovar Trust has touched the lives of more than thousand children over the years and looks forward to building a model in the Anand Nagar slum in Jogeshwari, Mumbai. "Children must grow up to be happy, rational individuals. Our trust dreams of a day when slums do not characterise children's identity and aspirations. It sure is a long road ahead, but worth all the efforts today," she says.

*Shanmuga Priya. T*

## 9. Umeed

### Up-cycled Sustainability



If you were to summarize the work of Umeed in a nutshell, calling it ‘self-sustainable’ would perhaps be the most appropriate term. For four years now, the organization has been training women to develop a unique skill set, which in turn has created a sustainable community. Based in Hyderabad, Umeed has touched the lives of 30 women and their families (totalling to around 100 people) in the last year, alone.

“What we do is train women in making handicrafts out of upcycled newspaper, to create beautiful, handmade and eco-friendly lifestyle products,” says Gauri Mahendra, Co-Founder, Umeed, “Our range of newspaper products are hand-crafted by a group of women from marginalized communities of Hyderabad who are determined to change the social and economic conditions for the better.”

The products that come out of the programme are truly reflective of the work Umeed does, with women. For instance, the use of newspaper is an indicator of the reluctance for wastefulness while the vibrant colours of the products reflect on the journey of self-empowerment embarked on by each of the women who have been

trained. “It’s all been ingrained through love, hope and courage,” says Gauri.

How does it all come together? Umeed begins by running a series of community surveys once a year, to understand the need of a given community. The purpose of these surveys is self-explanatory — to determine whether the need of the community in question is the same as that of the solution the organization hopes to be working on. It is of course also reflective of the need of the women and their families. “Apart from connecting with women in this way, we also get a lot of women to join us through word of mouth given that we’ve been around for the last four years,” says Gauri.

The initiative itself draws inspiration from The Barefoot College in Tilonia, Rajasthan. “It’s one of the world’s best examples of how sustainable communities run,” says Gauri, “We learnt how newspapers were being used by the community to create various kinds of products. We realized that a lot can be done with newspapers.” What was of course a major advantage was the fact that using newspapers as raw material meant that input costs were zero since readers and homes that subscribed to these newspapers were willing to donate their used stacks of newspaper. “That’s how these newspapers became a unique raw material, which gave us the flexibility to create various kinds of household utility products,” says Gauri, “What’s also wonderful is the fact that it also helps up-cycle waste, and thus saves the environment from the devastating use of plastic.”

Umeed’s goal is rather simple: make the venture completely run by women belonging to the community. “We have been focusing on not just skill-training but also the development of a very progressive mindset of our women,” says Gauri, “Along with the focus on skill and mindset, we have made sure our women are given enough exposure opportunities to explore a world in business beyond skill-training and hand-crafting of products.” The organization’s biggest goal in 2019 is to equip these women with resources to manage an enterprise and allow it to grow sustainably.

Hand-crafting isn't the only avenue of work that Umeed is planning for. The organization will begin a holistic programme for unskilled women belonging to low-income communities, which focuses on skills, values and the mindset for local industry. "The programme would be more like a fellowship for the women of the community, who would then become more employment-ready, post-intervention," says Gauri.

The question, however remains: what is the scope of scalability and how challenging is it, to scale up? "It's always challenging," says Gauri, acknowledging that there will be a great deal of effort to make it happen, "It's more challenging when you are diversifying your operations with the aim to reach more women and increase impact, but without diluting the quality that comes with any of this."

For now, the organization is working on the challenges that come with scaling up, such as bringing on board like-minded partners in the social and industry sectors. "We believe that only collaboration among sectors can address the challenges we face, while fighting for the cause of empowering women," says Gauri.

While that task may not exactly be the easiest one at hand, the results are more satisfying than one can imagine. In the last year for instance, Umeed has supported nearly 20 women towards earning a living for themselves, which in turn has contributed to family income. Given the vast presence of women along the length and breadth of the country, many of whom are breadwinners for their families, the potential to do good work, is simply endless. Helping these women help themselves and thereby providing each community with a much-needed boost is perhaps what Umeed will continue doing, in the pursuit for creating self-sustainable communities.

## **10. Vanam**

### **Resilience and Afforestation**



Humankind is more vulnerable now than ever due to new and complicated challenges posed by development practices and climate change alike. We have reached a juncture where resilience must be understood as a survival strategy. By survival, we are compelled to think of all flora and fauna in order to protect the delicate balance that has allowed human existence. “Where better to start with, than trees in a drought prone region,” asks Mr Sky V Sundararaj, Founder Secretary of Vanam India Foundation in Palladam, Thiruppur.

Adhering to the message of Perur Adhinam Santhalinga Swami Adikalar delivered on his 90th birthday, his devotees and friends decided to start a movement to plant more trees in the drought prone district of Thiruppur. Given the situations faced due to persistent drought conditions over the years, the response was spellbinding. Support came in from far and near and the team was overwhelmed when everybody felt the need to recreate greener communities. Very soon, the team decided to drive this initiative into a movement in order to have a long and wider impact. “There had been enough incidents for people to realise how important it was to stay closer to nature. Mankind cannot go away from nature nor can it live without

it. Unless we choose a way back to nature, we are jeopardising our very existence,” he warns.

Vanam India Foundation was established in 2015 to take Adikalar’s message forward. The dream of a greener Palladam drew individuals from all walks of life to plant and adopt trees. “Planting trees is not as straight forward as it sounds. We purchase water to nurture the trees. Drought has affected our ability to enable a natural revival,” says Sundararaj, adding that the foundation has planted over 3.5 lakh saplings. The organisation’s strength lies in its resolve to ensure that every sapling planted gets to grow into a tree, without succumbing to heat or diseases. “It’s a huge responsibility to work towards a greener community. We prepare ourselves and our team of tree protectors and volunteers through regular workshops where knowledge on plant growth and strategies are shared and learnt,” he explains. The Vanam team has travelled across India and other countries like Israel, Vietnam and Cambodia to learn about farming, irrigation practices in dry and drought prone regions.

Dreaming for a better future is a collective responsibility and it calls for the participation of younger generation too, as they will be responsible for protecting the results of today’s efforts. Vanalayam is an eighteen-acre piece of land donated by one of the Trustees, Mr Ganeshwar, dedicated for the plantation programmes. School children and other volunteers are invited here to learn about nature friendly lifestyle. “It is very important to show our children the ease and need to adapt to nature friendly practices. Unless they see it happening, they won’t know that it is possible and practical too,” says Sundararaj. It must also be noted that the team takes conscious efforts to plant native species of plants that were lost due to different reasons and also those at the verge of extinction, to protect biodiversity.

While planting trees is a regular programme at the foundation, the team also works on other aspects that support the success of these programmes in the long term. Rainwater harvesting, for instance, is a pressing need in Palladam. Depleted ground water resources and dependence on external sources has affected regular life so

much that when the idea was proposed, people took to it earnestly. Vanam India Foundation, with the technical support from Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai promoted the use of filters that recharge ground water tables naturally. More than 250 households in Palladam have adopted this practice and as a result, they manage all their drinking water needs throughout the year without depending on the supply of water by the City Corporation. “This is a big leap for us. Given the scarcity, we could actually quantify the impact of rainwater harvesting. Where there is need, it is only a matter of awareness that can trigger the change,” says Sundararaj.

The cause Vanam works for and the reach it has had so far did not come easy. The team had to confront many challenges and the availability of water was the most pressing of all. This perhaps is also the reason why rainwater harvesting, and drip irrigation methods are extensively studied, practiced and promoted. Different irrigation methods are also analysed and taught to local farmers through practical workshops. While knowledge helped a great deal in overcoming this challenge, Sundararaj feels that sourcing funds was a greater impediment to their cause and remains to be. “Our work does not promise income. It only involves expenditure and results are only in the long term. Hence, the struggle in raising funds,” he admits.

Despite the challenges and struggles involved, Vanam India Foundation continues to work with determination. Convinced that only trees can lead us back to nature, their endeavour encourages everybody to dream of a greener neighbourhood. “One cannot imagine nature without trees. Trees provide us clean air, recharge ground water, prevent soil erosion and provide food. Survival of all other species depend on trees. Let us protect what we have and plant as many as we can. Because, we have to!” he insists.

***Shanmuga Priya.T***

## 11. Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra

### Voice of Biligirirangana

*“All the wealth of the world cannot help one little Indian village if the people are not taught to help themselves” – Swami Vivekananda*



Taking inspiration from Swami Vivekananda’s life and words, Dr. Sudarshan started the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK) in BR Hills region near Mysore in 1981. During his childhood, Dr. Sudarshan was deeply impacted by the principles and life of Vivekananda Swamy. After graduating from Bangalore Medical College, he took a different path, a road that was less taken indeed. He started working for the upliftment of the tribal community, called Soligas, that dwelt in the forests of Biligirirangana (BR) hills.

The BR hills are home to rich variety of flora and fauna that are unique to Eastern Ghats and Western Ghats. It is a protected reserve under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. The forests here act as a large corridor between both Ghats linking the largest population of Asian elephants and tigers.

Initially , Dr Sudarshan established a clinic on top of a rock in a

small hut where he lived. The tribal community was not accustomed to seeing outsiders and kept their distance. There were ailments that were not curable for the tribal people and slowly the doctor built the trust of the tribal community. Through cure and medicines, he slowly found a place in their hearts.

From a clinic on a hut, VGKK grew to a 20-bedded full-fledged tribal hospital that offered free medical health care. The campus houses a telemedicine and mobile medical unit, and conducts community based preventive, promotive and rehabilitative programmes through local health workers. The organisation also conducts a tribal auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) programme, and training programme for Dais.

VGKK has developmental experiences with the Soligas for more than 35 years. It proudly reflects the might of a dexterous team and endearing volunteers. The organisation is committed to the holistic, sustainable development of tribal people keeping in mind their socio-cultural background and their rights.

VGKK has also reached out to other tribes in Chamarajanagar and Mysore districts of Karnataka, as well as those in Tamil Nadu, Arunachal Pradesh and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The long-term goal of VGKK is to create an empowered and self-reliant tribal society rooted in its culture and tradition. The organisation concentrates on development with Health, Education, Livelihoods and Biodiversity conservation as a means of sustainable development and empowerment.

From health programmes, VGKK has expanded its focus to education of tribal children. More than 500 children attend the school at BR Hills which has a hostel facility for 200 students. Notably, there are four non-formal schools in these remote forest areas. VGKK also has centres for industrial training, nurse training, forestry, and a school of drama. Environment education and conservation education are also nurtured in school. Three among the first batch of students have graduated with a PhD and have returned to serve their community.

“I want to ensure that the tribal children carry with them their extensive traditional knowledge. Hence, our school children are also taught to farm and cultivate herbs and vegetables.,” says Sudarshan. “In order to sustain the livelihood of the tribals, through our vocational training centres that was set up in 1982, we train them in the production of natural resources like honey, herbal medicine and amla. The community are also taught cane and bamboo crafts, agarbathi making, bee keeping, and carpentry using lantana. They are also involved in compost making, seed fairs and campaigns that promotes organic farming. By adopting an holistic approach, the tribal community now feels close to the nature,” he adds.

In order to build a stronger community, Soliga Abhivrudhi Sanghas are formed at village, taluk and district levels. These Sanghas’ addresses local problems and take part in planning and implementation of development programmes along with the Government and other agencies who work in this area. Village Resource Centres in collaboration with ISRO have been established for tele-education, tele-agriculture, livelihood opportunities and e-governance.

“Earlier, the tribal community were vulnerable and had no voice. They often fell prey to outsiders who took advantage of their ignorance on land rights related issues. Things have changed now. The Soligas are literate and are aware of their rights. Most of them have claimed back their land,” says Sudarshan.

It was sheer determination of Dr. Sudarshan that led VGKK to where it stands today. Dr. Sudarshan is the recipient of the Right Livelihood Award (1994) and Padma Shri (2000). It all started with him helping the tribal community at Nilgiris as a student with Dr.Narasimhan. With a clear mind and a dream, he took the tough road and has made a difference in the lives of the tribals.

*Angela Anish*

## 12. Word

### Committed to Gender Equity



Gender and development is an interesting intersection with different segments that need varied attention from both beneficiaries and influencing stake holders. As new social frames emerge, the discourse on gender has only widened to include every woman marginalised or missed out due to one reason or another. An elaborate analysis of these reasons and their manifestation with changing times continue to prove the relevance of organisations working for gender equity.

Women's Organisation for Rural Development (WORD) in Pothanur, Namakkal is a 28-year old organisation that has raised the question of gender equity in every new social frame that has emerged. "The fight for gender equity consumes a lot of time because in some backward regions and communities our first priority was to convince women to respect their social roles and contribution to family status. Deep rooted in Gandhian principles, we had to try every opportunity to witness the awakening in women," says Mrs. Sivakamavalli Muniyandi, Secretary of WORD.

Founded by her husband Mr. Muniyandi in 1991, WORD

endeavoured to empower rural women by improving their education, livelihood, and thus, their standard of lives. “Empowerment is a very personal journey and this understanding formed the basis of WORD’s interventions. We started at a time when infanticide and foeticide were both very high in our district. We organised campaigns and street plays from village to village. We counselled women who approached us, both individually and in groups. In a span of three years we began to see the impact of our rigorous field work. But, this success was a stepping stone to next level. Girls, once born had to be protected from oppression and ill treatment within and outside families,” she adds. WORD dreams of a child marriage and child labour free Namakkal district and the success in Thachankadu village where no child marriage has happened since 2018 has been a great motivating force behind this dream.

Adolescent boys and girls groups, along with community support groups comprising of influential individuals from respective villages have been formed in 25 villages to help monitor the prevalence of child labour and child marriages. “These groups give us the key information needed to plan our actions as and when needed,” she says.

WORD felt the need for a holistic approach so that women headed families too made their way into education and livelihood opportunities. Education was the first priority and efforts started with the establishment of supplementary education programmes as tuitions were unaffordable. As children, specially girls showed retention in schools, WORD developed focus on educating communities about women’s rights and legislations. Field presence was a big boon to WORD and their eventual liaisoning support to help women access benefits from government schemes helped them reach many more villages. Women’s self-help groups and the ensuing micro-credit and income generation programmes gave a new identity to their work. More than 311 self-help groups have been formed and over fifty lakh rupees have been enabled as credit through bank linkages for income generation programmes.

“Women can never be empowered unless they earned and managed

their resources. It was very important for us to work with women farmers so that they can take a firm call on organic farming, which is the sustainable option in the long run. We organised training and demonstrations on their lands on preparation of organic fertilisers, vermi-composting and protection of seeds,” explains Sivakamavalli. In doing so, WORD intended to prepare a new generation of women farmers who advocated for the long term benefits of organic farming. The impact was so strong that even after the project period of 15 years, women continued to practice organic farming and also taught their children. Alongside, WORD also helped 405 landless dalit families acquire 132.65 acres of farm land. “Women from marginalised groups faced double discrimination and we wanted to ensure their access to livelihood,” she says with commitment.

The thinking behind this led to promote kitchen herbal gardens (500 established so far) so that rural women always had access to basic health care within their reach. “Soon, we saw the revival of traditional medicine and the readiness with which communities took to it only explained how necessary it was for them,” says Sivakamavalli, adding that their journey has been very organic and community oriented, each leading to the other, step by step.

WORD runs an old age home and a day care centre to support women agricultural labourers and seasonal migrants. They also ensured that these institutions reached out to abandoned elders and children in the district. Such an institutional support, they believe, helps in letting women explore as many opportunities as possible. “When we saw women seeking opportunities we wanted to make sure that their quest was not disturbed by traditional roles in their households. This little space proved to be very beneficial for them and our inmates were provided timely care and attention with all requisite facilities,” she says.

Apart from these programmes, WORD also focusses on building household, school and community toilets and bore wells. “Discussion on women is never complete unless their access to water and sanitation is addressed. These are critical initial steps

before we look into respectful maternity care under Sustainable Development Goals. WORD took this at a community level so that migrants and abandoned women also benefitted,” she adds.

It has been a long journey for WORD since 1991 and the presence of community women in its Executive Committee and General body reiterate their commitment towards gender equity. Sivakamavalli feels that the evolution of WORD was defined not only by changing gender needs, but also by the women who came forward to think ahead of their times. Women and WORD together feel this is a great responsibility and will continue to support each other in this endeavour.

***Shanmuga Priya. T***





## **IV. Positive Energy**

*Yours Energetically*  
*by Ms. Bhuvaneshwari Ravi*

*Ms. Bhuvaneshwari Ravi is trainer, facilitator and coach of the Positive Energy (PE) program. She is a spiritual seeker with a vision of transforming her own energy state from surviving to being. In this journey she has gathered deep insights and is continuously working towards creating a pathway for more seekers. With years of exposure to spiritual practices like yoga, reiki, and personal development interventions like coaching, she is working in the Organization Development and Leadership Development space.*

## 1. Transformation - breaking free from your mold

*Committed to Gender Equity*



*It ain't easy to break out of a mold, but if you do your work, people will ultimately see what you're capable of. Too often, people find it easier to make assumptions and stick with what they believe. They put you in a place and it makes their job easier. The good people constantly search for something different. – Christopher Meloni*

When we create a mold, it is for efficiency and to create scale. With humans, getting into a mold means following the norms set by the society, by our parents, operating from a pre-defined set of beliefs and fears. Would this bring the best in us?

Inside each of us is a dream, a longing to do something more than the norm. It does not always have to be big or grand, but it is not something that can happen if we are limited by our undistinguished beliefs and fears.

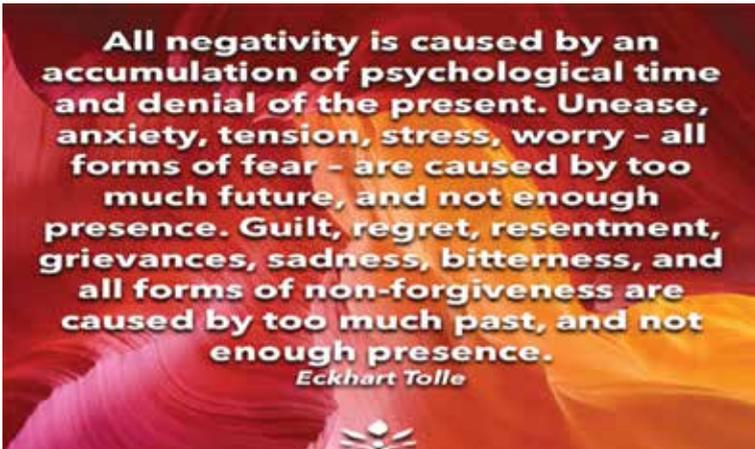
Transformation is breaking free from such a mold. It is using our energies not to fight the mold but to invest it to build the new. We

would still create a mold, however, this new mold is the one we have created, not just blindly taken on what others have to give us. When one willingly walks the path of transformation, then it marks the beginning of knowing oneself as a possibility. It marks the end of the limited. Possibility is catalytic.

So how does one get access to the possibility catalyst--- by transforming thoughts, emotions and the physical dimension of comfort. Thoughts transform by creating periods of performance and rest. Rest is an important element. Emotions transform by creating acceptance consciously. Physical transformation can happen by respecting the body and its needs.

*Being fully ourselves always wants to happen in us and requires our active participation. It's not something out in front of us that we're working on, or measuring ourselves against, it's not predictive, not a "get-to" thing—it's declarative, a "come-from" thing, a place to stand, a matter of saying.- Landmark Insights*

## 2. Psychological time and Clock time



The title of the article draws from “The Power of Now”, written by Eckhart Tolle. This distinction of time enables one to make time his or her partner. One of the important dimensions of life is time. The way we undertake things—whether thinking, doing, achieving, planning, engaging---everything requires time and increasingly we all need efficiency and effectiveness. More with less is the mantra. It applies to time as well. Taking charge of this important dimension of life, is to be more in clock time.

Psychological time is the time spent judging, worrying, indulging in regretting the past, experiencing guilt and so on. While we would be doing things in the outer world, our inner world is engaged in psychological time. This split in attention undermines our capacity to deliver effectively and efficiently in the outer world. It cuts off our experience of the here and now.

On the other hand, clock time implies being present to what the current moment is offering one. As psychological time is on auto mode for most of us, we become aware of how our thoughts stayed in the psychological realm once clock time is “lost”.

Clock time might involve activities such as preparing a report for a meeting on Friday, or getting the kids ready to take them to a doctor's appointment in the afternoon. Psychological time by contrast would be worrying about possible outcomes of presenting your report on Friday, or fretting about what the doctor's report will be this afternoon.

*Acceptance is a segway to clock time. Every time there is a trigger that takes one into judgment, regret, compulsiveness, or worry, creating acceptance offers the possibility to smoothly transition into the clock time. In other words one can perceive the happenings in the moment, generate deeper connect without colouring one's views and experience.*

*Take the first step----observe and then accept!*

### **3. Being Deliberately Developmental**



This term is coined by Robert Kegan & Lisa Lahey, authors of the book “An Everyone Culture.” The authors use the term Deliberately Developmental Organisations (DDO) to describe companies that invest in their people’s personal growth alongside performance pursuits. In this article, the term is extended at an individual level.

An individual who is deliberately developmental, manages to hold achievement and personal development together by keeping an eye on the bigger picture and thinking about the values and unconscious needs underpinning what s/he is pursuing.

In day to day life, one can get immersed in “running the race”. It is about moving from one milestone to another. It could be about acquiring, of achieving and of being seen and heard.

No sooner we choose to be deliberately developmental, then we are running the race yet we can simultaneously “switch on” the awareness of why, what and how of our actions. This is a conscious process of going beneath habits and challenging oneself to accept one’s shadow/limiting mindset and stop blaming others, and external factors.

***Kegan and Lahey say,  
“PAIN + REFLECTION = PROGRESS.  
For development to occur, the individual should feel  
some pain – pain to question, examine, test, and  
consider their own limitations and the consequences of  
those limitations.***

The book refers to “Working on your backhand” as a term to help individuals confront and conquer mindsets, that are holding them back from greatness. Being deliberately developmental means, individuals challenge rather than avoid or hide their backhands and reflect when they miss these practice opportunities. A deliberately developmental individual opens up dialogue with others to seek feedback and creates stretch in what they regularly do.

The authors also refer to people typically performing two jobs: the one they are paid for and a hidden one of trying to look good by covering up mistakes, managing expectations, and pretending to have answers. Being deliberately developmental stops energy loss and the drain that happens because of the two jobs. Individuals can instead use their energies to see possibilities hidden in their limitations!

## 4. Here and Now



Here and now is a simple phrase, yet so difficult to bring into one's experience. Recently, I was part of a learning process which placed emphasis on the "here and now". When the need to be in the here and now was expressed, it seemed logical and innocuous. During the course of the learning process, when participants strayed from the here and now, there was immediate reminder about it. Bringing the "here and now", to the task became elusive. What does this mean? I noticed, in the way I thought, and the words I shared in the group came from a past reference or a future reference. In fact all this was happening to all of us.

From experiential events of doing a primary task related to exercising leadership, in the here and now opened up new definitions and experiences of leadership and personal authority. I could connect into aspects of me that I had kept hidden and the aspects that I overdid which came from my conditioning rather than the need of the "here and now".

Many of my conventional ideas of managing and leading were busted. Working in a "laboratory" like organization along with a mix of people of different origin, gender, caste, age, interests and life experiences with a sharp focus on the here and now, shifted me and has made me far more expanded in my life outside the

laboratory. It brought forward the unconscious parts that I was not tapping into while exercising my personal authority, something that had nothing to do with leadership position or title or what I thought was important. I stepped away from blame, of complaining and belonged to a space of initiation and involvement. The end result mattered but was not overwhelming.

I got access to new learning by a powerful process of drawing myself in to here and now. The process of sharing hypothesis and interpretations when we strayed and belonged to the past or future was very endearing yet thought provoking.

“To dwell in the here and now does not mean you never think about the past or responsibly plan for the future. The idea is simply not to allow yourself to get lost in regrets about the past or worries about the future. If you are firmly grounded in the present moment, the past can be an object of inquiry, the object of your mindfulness and concentration. You can attain many insights by looking into the past. But you are still grounded in the present moment.”

— *Thich Nhat Hanh, The Art of Power*

## 5. Patience

***“Every time you practice the act of patience, you relinquish your attempt to grasp what you can’t control.”- Paul Wilson***



All of us understand the value of patience. However, accessing patience when required is hard. How do we release ourselves from this pressure so as to exercise patience when required?

*A hermit well known for his austerity had been practicing in a cave for twenty years. An unconventional teacher named Patrul Rinpoche showed up at the cave, and the hermit humbly and sweetly welcomed him in. Patrul Rinpoche said, “Tell me, what have you been doing in here?” “I’ve been practicing the perfection of patience,” the hermit answered. Putting his face very close to the hermit’s face, Patrul Rinpoche said, “But a pair of old scoundrels like us, we don’t care anything about patience really. We only do this to get everyone’s admiration, right? We just do this to get people to think we are big shots, don’t we?” And the hermit started getting irritated. But Patrul Rinpoche wouldn’t stop. He just kept laughing and patting him on the back and saying, “Yeah, we sure know how to dupe people, don’t we? We really know. I’ll bet they bring you a lot of gifts, don’t they?” At this point the hermit stood up and*

*screamed, “Why did you come here? Why are you tormenting me? Go away and leave me in peace!” And then the Rinpoche said, “So now, where is your perfection of patience?” So that’s the point. We can create the ideal situation in which we have a very high opinion of ourselves, but how do we do when it comes to the big squeeze?”*  
From *Start Where You Are : A Guide to Compassionate Living* by Pema Chodron

When we experience pain we react with impatience. It is a strategy we have used to cope with pain. By choosing impatience we are not really dealing with the pain we feel within and we also go through external disturbance as a result of showing impatience.

Patience begins with self where we learn to relax with the restlessness of our energy—the energy of anger, frustration, and excitement. When we are unable to handle our energies, it turns into impatience and spills out with unintentional consequences.

Can we choose to acknowledge our pain? Can we choose to invest in hope instead of despair? Can we choose to share our expectations, support and allow things to unfold? All in service of patience.

## 6. The Power of Choice

*“Be miserable. Or motivate yourself. Whatever has to be done, it’s always your choice.” – Wayne Dyer*



We know we can exercise our choice, yet get trapped in our automatic reactions to events. Despite our intention to change we fail to bring forth the power of choice. What we need is a bridge to cross from where we are, a place of choicelessness to a place of choice, or empowerment.

The bridge is made up of three lens;

### 1. Realistic Optimism

Using this lens requires asking yourself two simple questions when you experience that you are reacting. The first one is “What are the facts in this situation?” The second is, “What’s the story I’m telling myself about those facts?”

## **2. Reverse Lens**

This lens requires viewing the world through the lens of the person who “caused” the reaction in you. It doesn’t mean sacrificing your own point of view but rather widening your perspective.

With the reverse lens, you ask yourself, “What is this person feeling, and in what ways does that make sense?” Or put more starkly: “Where’s my responsibility in all this?”

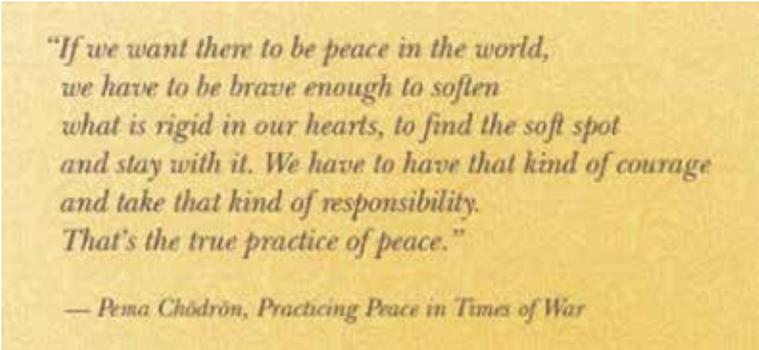
## **3. Long Lens**

When your current circumstances are beyond the first and second lens, the long lens provides a way of looking beyond the present to imagine a better future. Begin with this question: “Regardless of how I feel about what’s happening right now, how can I grow and learn from this experience?”

## 7. Gap between Intention and Action

*“There is always a gap between intention and action..”*

— Paulo Coelho



*“If we want there to be peace in the world,  
we have to be brave enough to soften  
what is rigid in our hearts, to find the soft spot  
and stay with it. We have to have that kind of courage  
and take that kind of responsibility.  
That’s the true practice of peace.”*

— Pema Chödrön, *Practicing Peace in Times of War*

To me this gap emerges from the gap in “applying oneself”. Setting an intention engages the intellectual strength and that is a muscle we all exercise all the time. However, when action needs to emerge, we have to go beyond the mind, learn to regulate our emotions and bring our physical being into the “playground”- which I call as applying oneself. This is a less used muscle for many of us.

Applying oneself – webster’s definition is to make oneself work hard in order to complete something successfully. Applying oneself happens by demonstrating trust in one’s intention, staying grounded in courage, developing action as everyday practice and exercising response-ability.

Thinking is an overused faculty and when we think of action, it generates assumptions, perhaps fear or confusion and then the energy to take action reduces. The first step to action our intention is to not to think about action but act. An important ingredient is trust and faith in the intention so that one can act. Trust is an “inside” emotion and what is seen on the outside is courage.

Everyday practice of one's intention is another important ingredient of taking action. The gap emerges because we reserve action for another day!. When there is an intention, there needs to be action every day. Even if it is a small one, it is action taken.

And another factor for taking action is in exercising the ability to respond- Responsibility. Taking action is not duty, it is not thrust from the outside. Taking action is Response-ability, in other words it is the willingness to cause shift or change connected to the intention. Staying grounded in response-ability makes one take action rather than just think of action.

*5 frogs are sitting on a log.*

*4 of the frogs decide to jump off. How many frogs are left?*

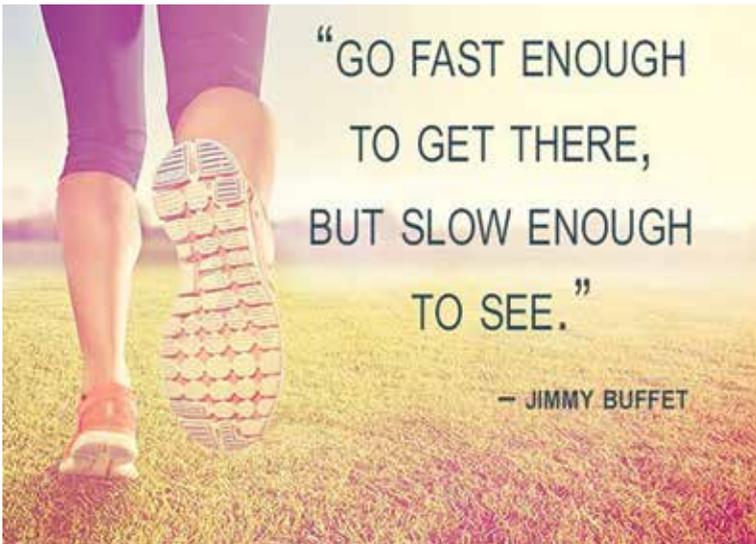
*Did you answer 1?*

*The correct answer is 5. Do you know why?*

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## 8. The Challenge of Pace

***“The leader who listens is the one society needs most. They don’t force their commands on people. They pay attention to their demands and set the pace for the change that society truly needs.” — Israelmore Ayivor, Leaders’ Ladder***



To do something at a speed that is steady and that allows one to continue without becoming too tired is the definition of pace. This is perhaps something we all need in today’s world as we often feel stressed and run down.

Apart from benefitting at an individual level, right pacing helps in relationships as well. When we do not pace ourselves appropriately, one can be restless or impatient and can feel out of sync with others. On the other hand, being slower than what others need could appear like lack of initiative and engagement. At an organizational level, one cannot expect things to go well at the flip of a button. Moving too fast can bring the risk of resistance and increased chances for costly mistakes. Moving too slow, can get people frustrated.

Setting the pace is a process of pitching it right, not too fast and not too slow. How does one do it?

1. Be clear about direction and expectations about results
2. Design daily rituals to achieve results and be disciplined in following it
3. Learn from results
4. Set aside time for reflection- to arrive at an understanding of right pace
5. Take feedback from the team/well wishers
6. Deeply Listen- walkthrough the field of action, sense what preoccupies people, what could be barriers to pace
7. Develop the willingness to pause or accelerate depending on the situation and not on own need for completion

## 9. Having a human moment



*Intentionally paying more attention to someone may be the best way to encourage emergence of rapport. Listening carefully, with undivided attention, orients our neural circuits for connectivity, putting us on the same wavelength. That maximizes the likelihood that the other essential ingredients for rapport -- synchrony and positive feelings -- might bloom. - Daniel Goleman, from "Social Intelligence"*

In today's world, full attention is impacted by multitasking, self-absorption and preoccupations. As a result we are less able to notice other people's feelings and needs, let alone respond with empathy. In the absence of full attention, we have many lost opportunities for human moments!

The power of understanding creates an opportunity for a human moment. Understanding others does not mean that one has to agree with the other's feelings or point of view. Instead, it means that one recognizes the other's point of view, and accepts that it is different. Having a human moment is possible with practicing attunement. "Attunement is attention that goes beyond momentary empathy to a full sustained presence that facilitates rapport. We offer a person

our total attention and listen fully.” We seek to understand the other person rather than just making our own point.

Two keys to manifesting attunement and causing a human moment are: physical presence and emotional and intellectual attention. Listening well and paying attention to as many cues as you can notice. It’s easy when someone else is talking to be preparing your response to what they said. Practice just listening, asking for clarification of any points you don’t fully grasp. Then, consider how to respond. By just listening, you’ll gather more information than if you’re busy developing what you want to say.

Put down your electronic device or note pad, look at the people around you, notice who talks to whom, and how people respond to each other. What expressions are on their faces? Does the group atmosphere feel tense, relaxed, or bored? Who speaks more often? Who rarely speaks?



## **V. Trendsetters**

*Stories of most dazzling trendsetters  
and lesser known changemakers  
who have brought about social change.*



## 1. 3R Lab

### No Child Left Behind



Learning disorders, prominently Dyslexia, are a common, but routinely misunderstood condition. Dyslexia is a difficulty in reading and writing where letters and words appear disoriented to the individual. While this has been proven over and over to be unrelated to intelligence or eyesight, yet people, both the general public as well as those in highly prominent positions in society often make light of the issue. Children are regularly bullied at school and stigmatized for finding reading or writing, a difficult skill to acquire. “Study hard! Don’t be lazy!,” “Put in more effort,” “If you can tell it, why can’t you write it?”- these are some of the oft repeated snide remarks that children with learning difficulties face at school and sometimes even at home. At college level, the lack of empathy is even higher. As a result, children suffer most from a loss of self-esteem rather than anything else. “When self-esteem is absent, teaching anything becomes irrelevant” observes Arun Fernandez, founder of 3R Lab.

“Intelligence is a state (of mind), not a trait,” remarks Dr. Jayashree Ashok, Academic Director at 3R Lab, as she explains how mainstream education more or less ignores the different

learning modalities of children, while loosely classifying them as “intelligent” and “dumb” based on scores alone. “Children thrive in an education system that focusses on what a child CAN do, instead of focusing on what every child MUST do,” she says. This is at the heart of BRS’s (Blink Research and Services Private Limited) 3R Lab. The Lab (named for the widespread 3R- Reading, wRiting & aRithmetic concept) is a one-to-one and group intervention program for students with learning difficulties including, but not limited to dyslexia. It focusses on equipping students with learning aids and virtual study modules, anchored by trained remedial tutors. Their objective is to create a platform that nurtures children’s individual potential.

In India, an estimated 10-15% of school going children have a learning disorder. That adds up to roughly 38 million children. Remedial education is available in just a handful of places within the country. “How can we possibly attain the desired 1:5 teacher-student ratio for 38 million children?” wondered Arun, who identifies himself as dyslexic and is an alumnus of a prominent remedial school. He says this number-check is what led him and his team to develop the 3R App, an independent learning resource that aims at empowering children as well as their parents with a host of information related to the screening, understanding and addressal of specific teaching-learning challenges, while providing a forum for expert advice and regular updates on recent developments in this field. “With this app, we hope to reach out to the millions of children, making them self-reliant when it comes to learning,” says Arun.

Timely screening and access to remedial education helps with addressing learning disorders. Remedial education comprises of a series of tested, proven and scalable teaching-learning techniques and tools that with trained tutors help children find the learning modalities that best suit them. Multi-sensory learning, the Orton Gillingham method, the VAKT (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic and Tactile) model, the Thinking Skills Program are just some of the aspects of remedial education.

Arun and his team members, many of whom have suffered the

brunt of a society that refuses to understand learning disorders, are accomplished professionals in diverse fields, ranging from sports, arts, logistics, technology, to social work. When asked how they managed to cope with the stress of being the outliers in their homes/schools/friend-groups, they offer interesting answers. “I channelled my frustrations into sports and dance, and I excelled at it,” says Bharath Raj, Director of Operations at 3R Lab. A former college level athlete and a stellar dancer, Bharath says that you need an anchor to fill in for any ‘deficiencies’ from within. For him, that anchor was sports, dance and youth service groups that gave him a sense of community. Exploring these other facets of his personality gave him the confidence to say, “Even if I fail, I will be okay.”

Ajay Subash, Operations Director of CHILD, a sister program of BRS and the 3R Lab, says that it is his interpersonal skills that drove him to fight the odds and handle rejections. He says, “At school, even though I wanted to make friends, I would invariably be filtered out. I learned that I only had a space at every school until the month of July each year. From July, the first of the examinations begin and thus I would be cast out for my ‘poor performance’”. He eventually found his personal space inside a lecture hall, thanks to his gift of the gab and his ability to connect with people.

“For high performers, failure is critical. For people like us, failure is usual. I have grown so used to failing that I don’t get intimidated by it anymore,” says Arun with a laugh. He believes in what he calls ‘falling forward’. “I believe if I attempt something that I have never done before, then failing is nothing but progress.”

Dr. Jayashree Ashok, who also founded CHILD, says, “Teachers teach in isolation.” A former Principal at Alpha to Omega Learning Centre, an internationally acclaimed remedial school, she believes that teachers need to be supported with creative freedom and access to continuous learning in order to cater to diverse learners.

3R Lab currently reaches out to over 240 students across schools in Chennai. An extensive team of academic, technological and creative consultants work on the development of content and

services. The Lab operates during school hours so that students are free to pursue their other interests during the rest of the day. The 3R App is currently being incubated at IIM Bangalore. 3R Lab is looking for technology partners and for successful individuals with learning disorders who can contribute to the cause. More importantly they are looking to build a more inclusive community for diverse learners so that they might, in fulfilment of their mission, ensure that no child is left behind.

*Archanaa Ramesh*



## 2. Alaap

### Afforestation in the Himalayas



With human development becoming the benchmark for progress, the comprehension and realization of social inclusion has taken many forms. “This understanding must go further towards environmental inclusion, without which poverty alleviation will be superficial,” warns Ms Sheeba Sen, Founder of Alaap, an eco-social enterprise based in Nainital, Uttarakhand. Hailing from Lucknow, Sheeba grew up in a middle class family. She studied International Relations and Law from the London School of Economics and Oxford University respectively. She worked with an international law firm for more than three years and all along felt an ‘inner urge’ to come back to India.

“I personally felt I belonged here. I wanted to come back and do something more meaningful to others’ lives,” says Sheeba. Soon after marriage, her life in Mumbai introduced her to the coffee farmers. “I got to meet someone who worked hard to clear the supply chain for coffee farmers from the control of middle men,” she adds. Her experience with the coffee farmers gave her a fresh insight about poverty. Having seen the supply

chain in operation and the levels of interferences that reduced the revenue to farmers, Sheeba felt that lifting farmers out of poverty was nobody's priority. It was not a concern that drove all operations, but she was more disturbed by the fact that the poor were themselves not inclined towards investing in themselves. "Poverty disarms people from thinking logically and investing in their development. That is why we have inter-generational poverty. Poor lose the will and strength to move ahead in social ladder," she laments.

A summer vacation in the Kumaon district of Uttarakhand in 2012 not only served to be an exhilarating experience, but also helped Sheeba get in touch with local organisations. Inspired by the work of Aarohi, an organization working since 1992 to empower the mountain communities, Sheeba visited many villages and understood life in the mountains, especially the routine interaction people had with forests, and the dependency. Soon, she started working for Aarohi in their community and youth initiatives. Extensive field visits exposed her to the challenges faced by grass root organisations. After about four years with Aarohi, Sheeba felt the need for a new approach that will focus on the critical relationship between rural life and ecology. "It was time this linkage was analysed deeply. Human development problems are messy and complex. In order to have a holistic look, ecology must be factored in. Rural life, culture, livelihood and ecology are all connected; poverty stands right at the intersection of this web," explains Sheeba.

Sheeba founded Alaap in 2017 with the mission to re-forest the Himalayas through community action. Alaap aims to address the triple threats of environmental degradation, large-scale migration and lack of reliable livelihood for the mountain communities through creation of native forests. Native forests, not only enhance biodiversity in the region, but also arrest animal-human conflict and desertification. The farming culture in the mountains, affected by drying rivers and erosion due to monocultures, is also revived, giving way for people and nature to live in harmony. "This is a big dream. Harmony between human and nature has

been compromised but it is high time we all worked towards it,” she asserts.

Currently, Sheeba and team are working in the villages of Champawat district to turn it into a carbon negative region in the next ten years. A community action group, comprising of farmers, Village Development Officers, and officials from the District Government Departments were brought together and trained to carry out the process. They were not only capacitated to identify different species, but were also trained on the chemistry between different plants, trees, soil, and other fauna. On completing the PNV (potential natural vegetation) mapping, species dominant in the region and those that grew along, were identified. Backed with a complete understanding of how the species interact, saplings were planted in the region chosen by the community.

Alaap follows the Miyawaki method of afforestation where a number of different types of trees are planted together in a small pit. By doing so, it reinforces the richness of the land and allows plants to interact naturally. Seven thousand saplings have been planted in Champawat so far.

With an inherent participatory approach, Sheeba believes Alaap will demonstrate the impact of investing in people. Otherwise, she believes, creation of native forests is a long term, one-sided exercise. Therefore, building Eco Leadership is the focus of Alaap in order to inculcate the values of a self-sufficient eco system.

Workshops with youth from the community have been designed to encourage a sustainable lifestyle that can meet the needs of people and forests together. This promotes a culture that allows for preservation of native forests. “A long-term initiative, recognition of Eco Champions is a crucial step forward for Alaap to show the strength of this model. Small nurseries are set up as a means of employment for the local people. All requirements for creating the forests are sourced locally, from within the communities. By doing so, the communities are well aware of the effort and also come forward to contribute in other ways possible. That is why

we call it creation of both tangible and intangible values with the community,” she says.

Alaap dreams of seeing people from the mountain communities participate in making policies that govern the management of forests and their lives amidst them. Their newsletter, Van Jagriti, is a step in that direction, spreading awareness on legal issues and advocacy for Van Panchayats. Collaborations with colleges and other like-minded organisations are also underway to keep the process of co-creation open to participation from all stake holders. “Together, only when together, we can preserve and build new forests,” says Sheeba

***Shanmuga Priya.T***



### 3. Anthill Creations

#### IT'S PLAYTIME!



Clichéd as it might sound, all work and no play make Jack a dull boy. We've read the line several times over and have mused over it a few times before. Pooja Rai probably did too, before she decided to take things a step further and co-founded Anthill Creations along with her batchmates from college. A social enterprise that aims to design "inclusive and interactive playgrounds", Anthill leverages the power of play, and brings about a sense of development through what is essentially playtime. "When a child plays, he or she learns to use creativity and imagination," Pooja explains, "Playtime helps a child's personal, social and emotional development." She continues, "When children are waiting for their turn by the swing, for instance, they are learning self-control and patience. When they help each other climb bridges and monkey bars, they learn team work."

So, the key to ensuring teamwork could well lie in creating play elements that encourage collaboration — like a 3-way see-saw or balancing beam. "This helps children learn many life lessons which we don't learn inside classroom on how to work with difficult situations, how to keep our ego aside if we want to play with other children, or the fact that joy comes at a very little cost," says Pooja, who is also the CEO at Anthill Creations, "This only goes on to

underline how powerful the act of playing is. What we learn in our early years define the kind of person we become as adult. And if we can teach our children to be more empathetic, loving, caring and risk-takers through play, we will be creating a better world.” Aside of cultivating these traits through its take on playtime, Anthill also ensures that designing inclusive playgrounds — ones that can be used by differently abled children — translates to a sense of empathy and better sensitivity among children.

Is it a problem, then, that most schools don’t allocate enough time for play? Or that most schools don’t have proper playgrounds? “When there is lack of resources, play takes a backseat,” says Pooja, “When a child is not even getting food to eat, classes without teachers, it becomes very difficult for government schools & low-resourced schools to give enough importance to playtime.”

But if recognizing and leveraging the importance of playtime is one part of the story, the fact that Anthill does it through sustainable means, is another. At what the enterprise calls a “design library”, Anthill brainstorms on what goes into the holistic development of a child. Part of the process involves creating sustainable, easy-to-scale playgrounds.

“Our construction materials are lighter and the construction process quicker,” says Pooja, “Ensuring this, we at Anthill create playgrounds at a super-fast pace — just a four-day period — with do-it-yourself designs.” Using sustainable and low-cost materials, Anthill also ensures that its “playscapes” are one-fourth the cost of a usual playground, which uses materials like steel, wood or plastic. ““Across the world, over 981 million tires are thrown away each year, and even less than 7% are recycled. We use these scrap tyres and other recyclable materials like oil drums to create beautiful playscapes,” says Pooja.

Through the process, Anthill also ends up empowering communities. The organization creates community leaders and changemakers by using local community volunteers for most of

the project work involving building its playscapes. “The modular designs that we have for different play units are easily replicable and a do-it-yourself process, with a step-by-step process is built by us,” says Pooja. What this means is that the end product is pretty much automated.

Cluster transformation is another area of interest for Anthill. “What this means is that we build hundreds of playgrounds by transforming urban and rural spaces into hubs of activity and play, in government schools and public spaces,” says Pooja. A case in point is the organization’s restoration of fallen coconut trees as a result of Cyclone Gaja, across several areas in Tamil Nadu. “We will be working on the rehabilitation project and build playgrounds for children. Play is the best way to bring normalcy especially after such a traumatic event for children,” she says.

The organization is also building inclusive playgrounds for the visually challenged. “It’s about catering to all five senses through sound and textures,” explains Pooja, “We are also open to a partnership model, where we can train the local people to build playgrounds in their own communities.”

The target for Anthill is to build 10,000 playgrounds in the next five years, touching the lives of five million children. “We want to enable community champions, and make play accessible to every child,” says Pooja.

As exciting as these plans might seem, Pooja feels there is scope for change in the way present-day playgrounds are designed. “There is so much scope for innovation in design and material,” she says, “The act of playing has to evolve with society. It has to be an integral part of our everyday lives. Be it office spaces or shopping malls, there should be a play area where children can be left to be themselves without a guided adult supervision.”

While the scope for learning outside the classroom is immense, the need for creating environments where children can discover

and learn on their own is more a priority now than ever before. “Children are naturally curious and if we give them the right environment, they can grow and learn on their own,” says Pooja, signing off..

**JS**



## **4. Deepalaya**

### **A Holistic Approach**



Good quality education. In a nutshell, that has been the key goal for Deepalaya ever since its inception. Providing this education to the needy to let them stay self-reliant has been the go-to strategy of the organization. “While we educate children, we also work with their family members, their siblings, community leaders and other stakeholders. We have designed different programmes to meet their needs, be it health, vocational skills or initiatives relating to women empowerment, inculcating a habit of savings, etc.,” says Jaswant Kaur, Executive Director, Deepalaya. “Our main objective has always been of promoting self-reliance and ensuring a just and equitable society for all through our projects,” she adds saying, “Deepalaya has come a long way over the last 40 years and has supported many lives. Yet we feel the urge to strengthen our projects, produce more effective and tangible results.”

The focus at the organization has been on children and in the education sector. In fact, over 70 percent of the organization’s expenditure is child-related. “We have diversified our activities

into other sectors like women empowerment and health over the last more than two decades,” she says, “Yet, our approach remains the same. We have always started our projects visualizing a needy child. In fact, because of children, we have been able to start our initiatives in the states of Maharashtra, Telangana, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala as well.” The NGO is now planning to expand to Rajasthan. The key beneficiaries however remain the same: children.

Deepalaya has been implementing various programmes in formal, non-formal and remedial education to underprivileged sections, through two formal schools and several learning centres in Delhi, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. “We have been able to begin another project with South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) to improve the quality of education in one of their schools located at Okhla water sewage treatment plant, Delhi,” says Jaswant.

When the NGO expanded in Punjab recently, it adopted four government schools in Mohali. The organization has also created a niche in digital education with the help of an innovative programme called TABLAB which is being implemented in 26 government schools in Mumbai, UP, Telangana, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh. So far, these initiatives have touched the lives of 3.2 lakh students all of whom are socially and economically deprived, thanks to its affordability.

While education has been the backbone of Deepalaya’s work, the organization concedes that it cannot be the be-all and end-all to self-reliance. The youth have been equipped with marketable skills so that they are able to earn a living. Deepalaya through different vocational programmes have enabled more than 13000 students to start earning for a living.

Community healthcare has been another focus area for Deepalaya. The organization has been conducted health education programmes, health camps, immunization programmes, eye check-up camps and cataract operations, tuberculosis and cancer detection programmes, and reproductive and child health

services. “The services have been provided in several parts of Delhi, Haryana and UP to more than 7.5 lakh people. We have collaborated with renowned agencies like AIIMS, Cansupport, Delhi AIDS society, Pathfinder International etc. for conducting these activities,” she says.

Deepalaya’s next project has its priority on point: to develop a positive attitude among parents and the community at large towards those with physical and mental health challenges. “As on date, Deepalaya has reached out to over 4,200 children with disabilities. They have received services like Physiotherapy, Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Pre-Vocational and Vocational training. We have a special unit at Sanjay Colony, Okhla Phase-2 in Delhi, where children with various disabilities have been enrolled. Cases here are varied. They range from mild and moderate, to severe disabilities. Depending upon the type and severity of disabilities, the special children are given different kinds of treatment,” she says. While progress has been varied from case to case, it has been encouraging overall. “Several students have taken up jobs in computer operations and tailoring after undergoing treatment,” she adds.

To work towards gender equity, in which women become equal partners in taking crucial decisions that affect them and their families, Deepalaya conducts awareness programmes for men and women, capacity building programmes for women, specific economic empowerment programmes for women, establishing & managing income generation programmes through micro credit, national level workshops on topics related to gender equity. Till date, Deepalaya has formed over 1400 SHGs with more than 16000 members in 3 states of Delhi, Haryana and Uttrakhand.

In keeping with its focus on children, Deepalaya has also started a children’s home for boys and girls, registered under Juvenile Justice Act 2000, which provides for residential accommodation, education, vocational skills, healthcare, latent talent development and rehabilitation of street children, children of sex workers, children of life convicts, highly mentally retarded needing constant medical care in an institution

“The key target/goal as of now is to align our projects with the sustainable development goals. Although, we are working on many of the SDGs, our main target is to adopt a structured approach and support the government in achieving these goals,” she says.

Deepalaya has had a good mix of donors and partners that caters to its funding. “We have not restricted ourselves to donations. Over the last few years, we have been able to collaborate with the corporate for their CSR projects. We have been more dependent on indigenous funds than foreign funds. In fact, we do not have many government grants. This is one area, we need to improve upon. However, we are running our activities in government schools without financial support from the state governments,” she says.

On the expansion front, Deepalaya has a policy of what Jaswant describes as “spiral growth”. “Despite our wish to expand our activities in a similar fashion, one thing that has always played a crucial role is the financial support.” With its foray into Mohali, the organization now wants to enhance its activities and strengthen projects in Punjab. “We are also exploring villages close to Jaipur in Rajasthan. But these are at a very preliminary stage,” Jaswant signs off.

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## **5. Dreams Alive**

### **Dreams Come True**



When Dreams Alive began in 2008, it had a mission with three ‘S’s in mind. “Our volunteers were working to serve humanity, under the project Smile contribution Campaign - supporting children and the elderly by providing vegetables. “Our volunteers were equally contributing for environment missions — Saving Earth, we have planted around 7K trees till date through our Project November 2 Remember, which was a campaign to remember our soldiers and HiFi – Help in Farmers Interest, to provide a helping hand to farmers and support them to improve agriculture,” says Sankara Mahalingam, Founder, Dreams Alive.

“Karthik was playing dual roles, a student as well as seller to support his family. We first met him while he was selling pens at Trichy railway station in year the 2010. He has been selling pens to chase his dream of education since class VI and his endurance finally paid him fruits. Dreams Alive supported Karthik to complete his diploma education and it was then we decided to bring in a third S - to support Transformers. This led to the formation of the Education Sponsorship Programme for deserving students,” he adds.

“Our focus is always on the dire need of the society and also the

desire of our community members. Every initiative of ours has its own story of a start or a spark. We do gifting during Diwali (Butterfly Smiles - BS) which was actually started to support a group of volunteers who were teaching street children in North Madras and we thought gifting them will improve their attendance,” says Sankara, “This initiative is now bigger and running successfully for last nine years. This year, we did in Mumbai, Tuticorin, Madurai and Chennai and we also reached out not only to children, but also to corporation workers, security staffs, cancer affected kids and construction workers children and so on.”

The organization’s current major project involves restoring a large number of water bodies in the Delta region, where no other NGOs or institutions were working towards the interests of farmers. “In our last ten years we have been successful as a team in any project we have taken but most importantly in Educational Sponsorship Program which enabled us to support most deserving student community who were struggling to complete their education. As of date we have supported 131 students and spent more than 22 lakh rupees approximately towards education support,” says Sankara, “Many students are placed in jobs and many are now donors for Dreams Alive. We don’t take a goal of supporting specific number of students every year, but focus instead on ensuring all students who have been referred by our community members are supported to a maximum extent. A few students come to us during their last year of graduation as their parents would have passed away.”

The organization’s first initiative was to distribute snacks and packets to children’s homes. Nearly 1,500 people donated biscuit packets every week, which were distributed to the homeless. Initially, the project was named ‘Snacks Contribution Campaign’, before funds were collected to provide vegetables to these homes. This meant the campaign was now called ‘Smile Contribution Campaign’. As on date, Dreams Alive supports five homes in Chennai and one in Coimbatore where it has been providing vegetables every week for the past eleven years.

“LuLu (Light up Life up) is an aspiring initiative of ours that helps provide alternative energy-based lighting facilities to villages without electricity,” says Sankara, “We have lit up villages in Bihar, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and J&K where we identified and supported deserving villagers with solar lanterns.” This project remains the most fulfilling one for Dreams Alive as it showed the power of technology and alternative power. “People in these villages never saw a source of light aside of the sun or moon or their kerosene lamps,” says Sankara, “When we provided a 3-Watt solar lantern, it brought energy levels up.”

Dreams Alive’s primary goal, Sankara says, is to be a transparent NGO and venture into unchartered territory. “Our donors have been with us since inception and we don’t have too many corporate donors,” he says, “We want our NGO to be the NGO of masses where our donor is proud of their contribution irrespective of their value of donation. The NGO also wants to be a strong implementing partner for Corporates.

“Our work will continue to make many ‘Dreams Alive’,” says Sankara. With no full time staff for 10 years, without sending regular emails for seeking funds and with very minimal administrative expenses Dreams Alive has pulled off projects valued at 80 lakh rupees. “Thanks to our community and their trust on our work. If you see many of our volunteers, they’re like migratory birds drawn to our cause, which they have been doing since inception,” says Sankara, “Each of our programmes has a unique donor and volunteer base and we feel gifted and blessed to work with such amazing people who we call dreamers.”

Dreams Alive now has its priorities straight. Its immediate plan is to complete Project HiFi in the Delta region. “We have also taken a specific drought-hit zone, with the intention of restoring water bodies in the area,” says Sankara, “Identifying 40 ponds that need our intervention is the first step.” The NGO has already completed restoring 3 ponds in partnership with farmers association as well as villagers. As part of Battle of Buffet event, the NGO has raised

around five lakh rupees and is looking forward to working with corporate entities and their CSR initiatives. “We will then take up greening initiatives and watershed management,” says Sankara while signing off, “We want to achieve our tagline which is to make and create #watersurplusdelta.”

**JS**



## **6. Each one Educate One**

### **Education: The Elixir of Life**



It's something most of us are acquainted with. We grew up learning about it in our schools, through social awareness programmes, and have read about, extensively — India has a literacy problem. While the country has had a disparity between the literate and the illiterate, several efforts have been taken to improve this ratio. For several years now, the Each One Educate One initiative has been working tirelessly at doing just this.

“One of the biggest challenges we see is the magnitude and scale of the problem. Even today, 70% of our nation’s population lives in rural India and much of these parts have limited or no access to quality education,” says Deepika Amirapu, Trustee, Each One Educate One, “This offers an opportunity to us to tap this large under-served population by bringing quality education into these communities and making them part of the growth story and contributors to nation building.”

While it's no doubt that the country's prolific growth has turned an entire generation into an aspiration-driven class, Deepika fears that the situation has also resulted in a growing divide — between those

with and those without access to quality education. “This much touted growth also comes with the risk of a perception that the benefits of this growth is trickling down to the underprivileged. We find this perception as being the first roadblock in any conversation on this topic,” says Deepika.

The commercialization and rapid scaling-up of institutions like health and education Deepika feels, is partly to blame as inhibitors to inclusivity. “A new paradigm of viewing education as a service to society is one of the factors that can reduce the rampant commercialisation of education,” she says, “This will go a long way in fulfilling our promise to the nation’s children of their right to quality education.” In a nutshell, that is exactly what Each One Educate One does — viewing education as a service and an obligation to society.

While Indian literacy rates have seen a steady climb from 61.5 percent to 70.5 percent between 2004 and 2014, the world literacy rate is a far superior 86.3 percent. “At Each One Educate One, we believe that good education, good health and good nutrition are the three parts of the new essential trinity that must become the basic right of every child,” says Deepika. She adds: “Only when society is able to give children these three basic rights, can it demand them of their responsibilities when they grow to become citizens of the country.”

While India’s growing literacy rate is a step in the right direction, the Each One Teach One initiative believes we can do better. “Our focus is on the quality of education that we are giving the children today, keeping in view the kind of citizens they will turn out to be tomorrow,” says Deepika, “By this measure, we would look at students not being just able to read and write but being contributors to the society.”

It’s not just education that Each One Teach One focuses on, but value-based education as well — or as Deepika puts it: “holistic personality development”. The schools it supports, for instance, focus on promoting human values early on in a child’s growth and development. These include values like truth, conduct, peace, love

and non-violence. “The hope is that as the child grows, these values manifest into civic and constitutional values of a global citizen,” says Deepika.

For all these lofty plans, there are a set of medium-term targets that the organization has set for itself. The first of these targets deals with the parameter of Scale. “We want to scale up the number of beneficiaries who the program has been able to bring into the ambit of education,” says Deepika, “From supporting 5,000 children in partner-institutions, we want to sponsor 15,000 students across existing and new schools by 2022.” The second is Expansion: “Each One Educate One will, by 2020, have its overseas chapters to support the cause of education in countries where it is still not a basic human right or entitlement for children,” she says, “Presently, members of the Foundation from UK, USA and Australia support students studying in the existing partner institutions.”

The third goal is that of Awareness: “We want to emphasize on the importance of rural education and the need for a serious intervention by society to bridge the increasing urban-rural divide as far as access to quality education is concerned,” says Deepika. Another approach being adopted by the organization is that of championing values based education and its adoption as whole-school approach. “We try doing this by creating awareness among the key stakeholder groups like parents, teachers and the government,” says Deepika. Perhaps the most important step to achieving all this lies in advocacy: “Each One Educate One, through its partner schools, has been involved in influencing government legislation to introduce values based education in the government schooling system,” says Deepika.

The organization draws inspiration from the works of Sri Sathya Sai Baba especially in free healthcare and free education. “His work is a testimony to how these models can work in the present day,” says Deepika. And in keeping with the approach of value-driven education, the fundamental value at the core of Each One Educate One is that of “community involvement”. Deepika says, “It draws its inspiration from the timeless idea of ‘Vasudaiva Kutumbakam’ (the entire world is one family). Hence, in every activity or program

by the foundation, societal involvement is paramount.”

Another aspect of Each One Education One that has stood out as a beacon of success is the foundation’s sustainability story. “It’s a reality in many of our schools today where those who work for us from local areas are already stakeholders,” says Deepika, “They help in running of the school and sponsoring children’s education. These individuals have realized the value that these schools are adding to the community, and come forward to contribute towards purchase land, construction of buildings and other infrastructure.” As India continues its march towards 100 percent literacy, there’s no doubt that initiatives like this one will play a key role in that journey. “We should be able to get there (100 percent literacy) in the next two decades,” says Deepika, signing off.

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## 7. Farmer Producer Organisations

### FPOs in India: Introduction



Farmers Producers Organizations (FPOs) are legalized form of farmer owned institutions, which consists of farmer members with common interests and concerns. It is an entity formed by primary producers, like farmers, milk producers, fishermen, weavers, rural artisans, craftsmen, etc. It can be established in the form of Producer Company, a Cooperative Society or any other legal form which provides systems for sharing of profits/benefits among the members.

The idea is conceived to let small farmers leverage the power of aggregation and economies of scale, both at demand and supply sides. This was thought of solving a larger goal of ‘Doubling Farmer’s Income’ and make required correction in open market price of commodities. In past one decade more than 6,000 farmer producer companies were registered in India, under various Government schemes, support from NABARD, NRLM program etc. Recently, our new financial minister Ms. Nirmala Seetharaman announced that government is looking forward to form 10,000 new producer organization and support the old ones.

## **Support to Existing Producer Organizations**

NABARD created Producers Organization Development Fund (PODF) to provide financial/non-financial support to Producers' Organizations for facilitating improved credit access, ensure adequate capacity building, market linkages and need based hand holding services to meet their 'end to end' requirements and thereby ensuring sustainability and economic viability.

Producer organizations are also supported through Small Farmer Agri-Business Consortium (SFAC) for initial capacity building, systems and process management and some machines at later stage. Some other agribusiness companies along with financial institutions are also helping the Producer Organizations through local NGOs for capacity building and help strengthen their governance structure. There are various schemes launched by Government of India for the support of FPOs; these include:

- Equity Grant Fund Scheme
- Credit Guarantee Fund Scheme
- Scheme for Creation of Backward and Forward Linkages
- National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NLRM)

The union budget 2018-19 was much focused for promoting and strengthening Farmer Producer Organizations. These measures will help promote FPOs towards prosperous and sustainable agriculture sector with increased agriculture productivity through efficient, cost-effective and sustainable resource utilization. Some of the examples were launch of "Operations Green" for onion, potato and tomato crops with an allocation of Rs. 500 crores. The initiative aims to address price fluctuation in vegetables for the benefit of farmers and consumers. Another step taken by the Government was 100% tax deduction for FPOs with annual turnover of up to Rs. 100 crores, this step is expected to encourage enabling environment for aggregation of farmers into FPOs.

**Very Few Success Stories - Why?**

FPOs being managed and run by farmers, that too small holder farmers are overburdened with expectations from government, private players and even the financial institutions.

Government wants to leverage this collective approach and reach extra mile in its political agenda. Private agribusiness companies are looking at this opportunity to surpass middlemen and help gain more margins, with higher income for farmers and themselves. Banks too want to get into this ecosystem but are confused with the treatment of loans given to these producer groups.

Farmer producer organizations as per their design and legal format are treated as companies and hence treated as private sector organization by Financial Institutions, which requires collateral, goodwill, regular cash flows and strong governance for receiving loan. While on the other hand, these are farmers' collective and hence there is a possibility of loan waiver from the government any time; which may disrupt the overall loan portfolio of any bank. In other way we can deduce that Producer organizations are regularly in need to two parallel support, i.e. Capacity and Capital with Compliance as a cross cutting factor. These organizations need a functional support in Capacity to run producer organization as a private company and funding to help these create a monetary cushion to manage risk in adverse situation and cash dry phase during the year.

Some of the challenges faced by these new generation institutions are linked with its basic design, i.e. farmers' inefficiency to act as managers or CEOs of the organization, understanding of various resource optimization techniques, update with best Agri-practices and representation of farmers as a group in organized market. This calls for a strong handholding and capacity building initiatives, which can be governed by local authorities but delivered through local institutional development civil society organizations or other capable institutions working with farmers. Farmers do face

challenges related to customized and affordable financial services, which currently are not provided as per their future cash flows. They also face a problem in selecting the CEO, whether from inside or outside there is always a risk.

FPOs are failing due to various reasons, to summarize most common are mentioned below:

- a. Professional Management
- b. Access to credit
- c. Risk Mitigation strategies
- d. Access to Market
- e. Improper Infrastructure
- f. Technical Skills
- g. Awareness

### **Way Forward**

With all given circumstances, governments are banking upon FPOs to achieve their target of “Doubling Farmers’ Income”. Government, NBFCs, civil societies and other financial institutions have invested in FPOs, looking at its future role in rural development. FPOs have potential to act as a catalyst of change in economic system of our country.

FPOs can perform as expected, only when its management systems, governance and capital structure are strong. Other external factors like infrastructure development, market and financial accessibility, credit affordability, efficient commodity pricing mechanism etc. need to be managed by government at equitable pace. Here are few steps which can make a difference in medium to long term.

**Step 1** – Regular capacity building of FPO board members and other key appointments on Management Practices

**Step 2** – To come out with standardized scoring method of FPO; including financial, management, social and environmental score

**Step 3** – Converging rural, agriculture and farmer development policies with FPOs

**Step 4** – Improvement of risk management systems in FPO

**Step 5** – Suggest capital structure of FPO in different phase, and support it in financial linkages

**Step 6** – Intra FPO learning and development platform to be started

**Step 7** – Increase role of FPO in social development activities

**Step 8** – Integrating role of FPOs in strengthening rural entrepreneurial ecosystem

**Step 9** – Link FPO with nearby agriculture university and management institute

These above mentioned steps are guided towards developing FPO as center of integrated development for rural population, especially farmers. These steps will increase their capacity to consume more capital and help it to play an important role in economic development.

*Dr. Agyeya Trippathi*

## **8. Magic Bus**

### **All Aboard the Magic Bus!**



Since 1999, Magic Bus has worked tirelessly with children and youngsters across India, plagued by poverty. The aim was simple: transform a childhood full of challenges to a more meaningful life by imparting skills and academic know-how that would help them make a decent livelihood for themselves. The NGO has looked at targeting children between the age group of 12 and 18.

Speaking of challenges, there are plenty. Some of these include child labour and child marriage. Most children, according to the organization's website, complete their secondary education and go on to become first-generation salary-earners after having secured a job in the organized sector. The organization's youth-centric livelihood programme goes a long way in connecting aspirations with potential, and thereby capitalize on market opportunities that are up for grabs. The organization has focused on employability skills in an attempt to trace out potential at the workplace, based on a child's strength and mobility.

Magic Bus story began exactly 20 years when it was founded by Matthew Spacie in 1999. Since inception, the NGO has transformed the lives and future of nearly one million children.

The organization now boasts of 5,500 young leaders who are in the process of mentoring other children by way of sports activity-based sessions to children across 798 schools. A total of 42 “livelihood centres” across the country have seen 10,000 children trained, and nearly 7,000 of these children placed in the organized sector. The organization also has presence in Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The story of Magic Bus traces its origins to a Sunday in 1999, when a group of slum children in Mumbai clambered onto a bus. They were heading to the beaches and hills on the city’s outskirts — an escape from the dreary everyday life in Mumbai that they were contending with. It was their first taste of change, and an introduction to the opportunity of more change that lay ahead. They were a team and this was their ‘Magic Bus’.

Magic Bus rolled into Chennai in August 2012 thanks to a football tournament that was organized in the city. A total of 45 children from various neighbouring districts took part in the tournament, which saw kids play real football, albeit on a smaller scale. In the end the participants posed proudly with their certificates and medals. It was a start.

Magic Bus started its operations in Tamil Nadu in 2011 and the focus zones of impact were on education, health, gender, personal social development, right to play, and life skills. This was especially important since the organization was focusing on its ‘Sports for development’ initiative. Sports for development on all the above zones were implemented under their childhood to livelihood’ project. As the uniqueness of playing a sport is a tool to development, Magic Bus managed to pull something off along those lines, for these children.

In Tamil Nadu, Magic Bus has so far reached out to nearly 16,000 children. But the organization wants to hit 25,000 and plans to reach out to nearly 25,000 children. They are looking to implement our ‘childhood to livelihood’ project in districts like Thiruvallur, Villupuram, Thiruvanamalai and Ariyalur as the crucial requirement

of life skills is required for rural children and youth, hence these pockets within the state.

The group's expansion plans will be scripted based on its progress surrounding its proposed outreach to 25,000 children in Tamil Nadu. Magic Bus focuses on delivering a quality programme, that will have strong development outcomes in education, health and gender, by way of which they can work consistently to bring about impact in the lives of children and the youth. Based on this outreach, their scope for expansion will be looked at and planned, accordingly.

In its journey so far, Magic Bus has seen many a success story. It has also boasted of some inspiring journeys and stories that have been scripted by the children that it has taken under its wing. This includes accounts of standing up against domestic abuse, the fight to find a job in pursuit of dignity, and creating inclusiveness and interest in sports. In India, the organization has impacted 3.75 lakh children and over 1,000 youth. It has spanned 22 states, 80 districts and 930 schools. The organization has set up 42 livelihood centres and 1961 communities. Its overseas record is also extremely impressive. In Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar, Magic Bus has touched the lives of 6,000 children through 80 community coordinators. It has created 40 communities across three states and three districts, in all.

Through the journey of Magic Bus, the NGO has accounted for a 37 percent increase in children attending school regularly. What's more? Less than five percent of girl students have dropped out of by Class 8, while 95 percent of these students do not get married before the age of 18. Nearly 70 percent of students trained in Magic Bus' livelihood programme are placed in salaried jobs and earn an average income of Rs 10,287 per month.

All these efforts have resulted in a better tomorrow for a million children across the length and breadth of the country, and the global neighbourhood. While most children have lived in abject poverty

and haven't been exposed to academics or sports, the opportunities provided by Magic Bus has helped most of these children and youth to lead better lives, with scope for education and employment. By expanding across the country, and reaching out to more schools and districts, the organization has proven time and time again how quality outreach always helps bring cheer and a better life to those captured by the throes of poverty.

*JS*



## **9. Pratham**

### **Educate, Innovate, Create**



Universal preschool education to Mumbai’s slums was the objective with which Pratham began. Make no mistake: it was a daunting task, but when achieved it led the NGO to believe that it could replicate the model in multiple cities and villages.

“As we grew, we encountered new gaps, new experiences, and began to build new ideas to address some of these gaps. By 2005, in just 10 years of existence, we had expanded to more than 10 states, launched the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), and developed specialized initiatives aiming to tackle key challenges in the Indian Education landscape,” says Devyani Pershad, Head, International Collaborations, Pratham, “The years beyond saw continued growth and innovation, coupled with rigorous research and evaluations, to test impact and scalability of our innovations.” The organization’s approach: identifying gaps in existing systems and efforts and developing low-cost, impactful and scalable solutions to address these gaps has been successful. Today, Pratham’s programs operate across verticals like education, vocational training, technology, vulnerable children, research and advocacy.

“Pratham’s methods and models have at least two major characteristics: one is related to frugal use of resources (manpower and materials), often using what is locally available or can be locally generated. The other has to do with prudent use of time and fast paced speed of change,” says Devyani.

Impact at scale is a core area of Pratham’s belief. Most programs are implemented on a large scale to not only reach as many children as possible, but also create a model for state governments, thereby leveraging resources and investments in the sector.

“Today, we see ourselves as an innovative learning organization working to improve the quality of education. We now have interventions ranging from building foundational skills in early childhood years, helping children catch up in elementary school, widening children’s exposure to the world through digital learning, to enabling high school drop-outs complete secondary schooling,” says Devyani, “On the research side, over the years, the ASER reports facilitated by Pratham have become a key annual feature of the education landscape. Our vocational training programs cater to youth and prepare them for entry-level jobs in the organized sector.”

There is a two-pronged approach that Pratham adopts in the education sector: direct implementation and government partnership. While direct interventions have Pratham’s team members leading the teaching-learning process, the interventions create LIVE laboratories and demonstration sites to prove that progress for children is possible in a short period.

“We continuously engage with governments at the state, district, and city levels. We believe that working together with the system and catalyzing government resources is essential for achieving the goal of every child learning well,” says Devyani, “In recent years, Pratham is active in over 20 states and reaches an average of 5 million children every year.”

Pratham's conviction is simple: when schools and communities support children and families, children learn well and thrive. The organization has believed in developing a learning ecosystem can support children's learning. "Our work involves working with children, families, and schools to build sustainable solutions. Our approach starts with identifying, articulating, and analyzing a critical challenge," says Devyani, "We then begin to work towards finding a solution. Our engagements involve experimenting with assessment methods, developing appropriate teaching-learning methods, designing contextually relevant materials, engaging family and community members, leveraging data and evidence, and designing delivery models for large scale implementation." However, should this continue, all stakeholders will have to come together to enable an environment of learning.

Pratham's hybrid learning program involves getting children aged between 10 and 14 in a village to form their own groups of 5 to 6 children each, to co-create a learning space within the community. "Digital devices and content placed directly in the hands of children providing them with opportunities and choices to learn on their own," says Devyani, "Community based children's groups engage in choice-based learning and are guided by the coaches and youth members in the communities. The communities are organized to facilitate and support the learning activities and assessments."

Pratham's programme is expected to enable children to prepare for school, work and life. Fully conscious of the premise that children can be motivated to learn by themselves, the students learn on tablets and do projects before presenting them before a LIVE audience or on video.

"Pratham programs have touched millions of lives, having reached more than 50 million children over the years, through a combination of large-scale partnerships with government and direct work by Pratham teams," says Devyani, "Today, on an annual basis, Pratham programs directly impact more than 1 million children and youth, and partnerships with government reach more than 5 million children."

The last decade and a half have been spent by Pratham in understanding children who are “left behind”. “We have worked hard over the years to develop, evolve and refine an effective and low-cost method that helps children to catch up,” says Devyani, “We know how to do it ourselves and we have helped many others do it too (government partnerships). Our approach has spread to other countries too. Despite being “behind”, millions of children have been able to “catch up”.

As Pratham is all set to begin a new innings, there are three key challenges that it will have to deal with: move on from “catching up” to “leap forward”. “Our investment in early years has already begun – across all our locations we are developing an understanding of what should be done with young children even before they come to school so that they are guaranteed to succeed,” says Devyani.

The second challenge lies in how to help children acquire basic literacy and numeracy. “We are learning to sustain these gains,” says Devyani, “We are learning now how communities can transform themselves in such a way that they provide strong support for children’s learning.” The last challenge: get technology to broaden horizons. “It helps with going “beyond basics” and developing ways to explore the wide world beyond textbooks and classrooms,” says Devyani before signing off.

**JS**

## **10. Samarthanam Trust**

### **Making Inclusivity the Norm**



The first blind Chartered Accountant, an IIM graduate, a Padmashree awardee and a National awardee- these are just the beginning of a long list of accomplishments achieved by Samarthanam Trust, one of India's foremost non-profits for persons with disabilities. A CRISIL rated organization, Samarthanam is affiliated to the World Blind Union, has 13 centres across India, one in the US and another in the UK.

A person with disability is only 'disabled' as long as the environment around them caters exclusively to able-bodied people. Our world has still a long way to go in terms of adapting to the needs of its diverse peoples. Organizations like Samarthanam, however, show us the way by enabling highly productive, accomplished individuals with disability to thrive in society.

### **Accessible Education**

Samarthanam's "Barrier-Free Residential School" at Bengaluru, Karnataka caters to children with physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities and those from underprivileged backgrounds. Apart from smart classes, audio-visual aids, locomotor aids, assistive devices and arts sessions, the school also has an early intervention

programme and a flagship “Guardians of Dream” scholastic awards programme. Samarthanam’s upcoming projects at cities like Bengaluru, Mysuru, Ananthapur and Dharwad aim towards establishing a barrier-free ecosystem with completely accessible infrastructure, with disabilities access education, skill training and residential facilities.

The Higher Education Programme provides financial support for the differently abled as well as the socio-economically challenged, helping them to pursue their dreams. Samarthanam is drafting a proposal to introduce CCC - Competitive Coaching Classes to help the students prepare for competitive exams in the Government, Banking and Insurance Sectors.

Samarthanam’s digital libraries in Bengaluru, Chennai, Guntur and Vishakhapatnam are the first of their kind in India. As of today, their inventory boasts of 5137 audio books, 4121 Braille books, 1867 PDF books and 128 books in ePUB format. Alongside the digital library, Samarthanam operates a public library and a mobile library for book-loving children and adults.

The Trust also operates 13 Skilling Centres across India including Bangalore, Ballari, Gadag, Dharwad, Belagavi, Anantapur, Guntur, Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Pune and Kochi. Of the 3580 candidates trained so far, the Trust has had a 64% placement rate. Samarthanam plans to expand its reach to North Eastern states and raise awareness on the skill-development programmes for the disabled.

“Disability is only for those who do not believe in themselves,” says technology advocate Siraveni Bhaskar. Though orthopedically impaired since birth, Bhasker enrolled at Samarthanam after a brief demo on the training module. With the help of Hyderabad LRC skilling programme he secured an internship in a photography business. Being an industrious and hard-working intern, Bhasker proved to be a great assistant and also helped two of his friends from Samarthanam enrol as interns. “Samarthanam helped me become who I am today. I need to give back to the society the same

encouragement I received from Samarthanam,” says Bhasker.

### **Breaking the ‘access’ glass ceiling**

Inclusivity is at the very core of Samarthanam’s work. “An inclusive attitude needs to be inculcated in people from childhood,” says Founder Managing Trustee Mahantesh G Kivadasannavar, adding that “It changes how we as a society view disability. It is the first step towards enabling and empowering people with disabilities.” A scholar of English literature and History, a cricketing enthusiast, an avid traveller and motivational speaker, Mahantesh leads by example. When he, along with his childhood friend Late Sugur Paramashivaiah Nagesh, started this Trust in 1997, their collective vision was to create a society free from discrimination, where persons with disabilities are contributing members, living with dignity and respect. The Trust is today fulfilling that promise through its wide-ranging services that create a positive impact on every aspect of an individual’s growth- educational, economic, social and cultural.

Technology is one of the great enablers of these times. “I am certain that the assistive technology will hugely benefit people with disabilities and bring about tremendous positive impact with increased access to assistive services, higher chances of education and employment while reducing healthcare costs, offering opportunities for improved decision making and socioeconomic benefits,” says Mahantesh.

### **Excellence in Sports**

Promoting sports and cricket for the blind have been the founding principles of the organization. Samarthanam students actively participate in a variety of sports and to use the medium of sports to unleash their potential. Prema, a 14-year old student of Samarthanam ID School used to be a restless kid, unable to focus on any one activity for more than a few minutes. She started regular physical activity and eventually rose to being a sports-star. Her

concentration levels greatly improved. Today, Prema’s parents are proud of her progress. “Learning new languages, traveling and meeting new people has become part of her routine,” says Prema’s mother.

An ultra-marathon was organized by Samarathanam Trust in which five visually impaired athletes took part. The athletes completed a 155 km run, from Mysuru to Bengaluru, which in itself is a magnificent feat.

Cricket Association for Blind in India (CABI), the sports arm of Samarathanam, is the apex body governing cricket for blind in India and is affiliated to World Blind Cricket Ltd (WBC). CABI has been organizing cricket tours and tournaments since 2010 and working on blind cricket awareness. The fifth ODI World Cup Blind Cricket Championship 2018, was played in UAE and Pakistan, where India beat Pakistan in the finals. The IndusInd Bank Blind Cricket Conclave was held in New Delhi to present the future of blind cricket. More than 150 representatives from various organizations and 80 cricketers participated in the meeting. The inaugural edition of the Nagesh Trophy, named in honour of Late SP Nagesh, Founder of Samarathanam was held at Eden Gardens on February 10, 2019. The Indian Blind Cricket team is the only team to win all the International Championship formats. Blind Cricket has produced marvels like Shekhar Naik, former Captain of Indian Blind Cricket team, who was awarded the Padma Shree and Prakash Jayaramaiah, Vice-Captain of Indian Blind Cricket team who received the National Award for the Best Sportsperson with Disability.

### **Building blocks to illustrious careers**

“Parisara” the dry and e-waste waste management programme, provides employment opportunities to persons with disabilities. Through its Wellbeing out of Waste (WOW) initiative, Samarathanam Trust reaches out to 35 wards in Bangalore and has recycled around 2.6 lakh tones of dry waste since the project’s inception.

“Sunadha” comprises a group of artists with disabilities who

perform on various state, national and international platforms. Garnering acclaim, the troupe travels to various countries, delivers performances and promotes inclusivity in the field of classic Indian arts. Veerabhadra joined Sunadha in 2012. This offered him an opportunity to identify himself as a disabled artist. He underwent a three-month soft-skills and computer training course to improve his chances of employability. He is also the music teacher at Samarthanam where he helps out primary school students learn music. A shelter for women in distress under the project “Swadhara”, a working women’s hostel in Bengaluru, supported by the Karnataka government’s meal scheme “Vidyaprasad”, both provide safe spaces for women who have undergone a plethora of challenges.

Kusuma, a visually challenged accountant hailing from an impoverished family in Kanagpura, beat several odds to get the job of her dreams. She lost her father early and was forced to give up a hard-earned job at an FMCG company. Chancing upon an advertisement in “Prajavani” a local Kannada daily, she learnt about Samarthanam’s six-month LRC/Nasscom training programme. She joined the programme in 2018, where she received training in spoken English, computer skills and e-commerce, among other things. Her hard work and dedication finally paid off in January of 2019, as she landed a job at Accenture through the Samarthanam Placement Cell. Apart from her day-job, she also pursues her passion for writing by regularly expressing her thoughts on Prajavani. She hopes to be a chartered accountant in the years to come.

### **Every disabled person is employable**

Samarthanam provides a disabled-friendly working environment for all staff. Employee welfare is pivotal and services like health check-ups, eye and dental camps, yoga sessions, health awareness programmes, blood donation and health insurance schemes focus on the well-being of the team. The campus premises is completely accessible, providing a comfortable working atmosphere to its differently abled employees who constitute 34% of Samarthanam employees.

Samarthanam, draws a large number of volunteers from corporate and educational institutions as well as individuals. Its diverse initiatives garner a massive volunteering crowd from corporates who look forward to contributing to the society as part of their CSR.

Acknowledging Samarthanam's efforts towards building an inclusive society, the organization was honoured with National Award thrice, CNBC TV18 India Business Leader Award, CavinKare Ability Award for Eminence, NASSCOM Social Innovation award, NDTV Spirit of Sports Award, Aryabhata International Award and many more. Samarthanam is one of the few non-profit organizations to receive Special UN Consultative Status in 2015. By the year 2020, Samarthanam Trust expects to support 100,000 people with disabilities, a massive number by any measure.

*Archanaa Ramesh*



## 11. Taxshe

### Drive Safe



It was a horrific incident of rape in a well-known app-based cab service that prompted Vandana Suri to think of a solution to concerns surrounding the safety of women and children in cabs. “Child sexual abuse has always been a major concern for all mothers, and as women we often find ourselves unsafe on roads, in public transport,” she says, “I thought it was best for women to take a stand and take control of their own safety, instead of waiting for society to change.” It was this thought that gave birth to Vandana’s baby, Taxshe.

Nearly four years since Vandana founded Taxshe, the cab service operated exclusively by women, for women and children, has seen great success. Taxshe drives over 450 children to and from school, every day, aside of conducting similar trips for 50 working women in Bangalore. “Instead of looking at the number of trips we conduct, we take pride in the number of women and children we keep safe,” says Vandana, “Our measure of success is safety and not trips.” Expats have also made a significant percentage of

Taxshe's clientele, with several tourists booking flights based on the availability of cabs. "This means we will do well on the global safety map as far as women tourists are concerned," Vandana adds. The response to Vandana's enterprise is more than encouraging. "We currently run a client waiting list of 4500-plus in just Bangalore alone, and have recently set up shop in Gurgaon as well," she says, "Nearly 95 percent of our clientele are children, which also ensures fixed timing, fixed routes, fixed clientele and a whole lot of love for our women drivers."

A large number of the drivers that Taxshe ropes in, are women mobilized from underprivileged sections of society by NGOs like the Neeva Foundation. "We work with local leaders in the slums, and have devised a system, where our women drivers are now taking the roles of mobilizers," says Vandana. What this means is Taxshe's women drivers take on the role of ambassadors, going about inspiring other women to join the movement by speaking to them from experience. But by Vandana's own admission, it hasn't been easy. "Driving was never considered as a career for women at all," she observes, "It has been stamped as an unsafe and a male-dominated career. It takes a lot of time to reach out to women drivers." And even in the instance in which a woman is willing to join, Taxshe encounters situations wherein the woman's family shows resistance to the idea. "It takes a long time to convince their families, and to show them how we have made it safe as well as lucrative for our drivers," she adds.

Taxshe works on the basic premise that for better safety of women and children, only woman drivers must be roped in. "Women drivers are your best bet against child sexual abuse," Vandana affirms.

Elaborating on the organization's standard operating protocol, Vandana explains, "We operate fixed bookings for the year, wherein the same driver is assigned a set of children who travel every day. So, we drive the same kids, the same routes and same timings throughout the year."

The charges, however, are premium. But there's a good reason for

that as well. “Nearly 70 percent of the billed amount goes to the women drivers,” says Vandana, “But it still works out to be quite economical for clients owing to our HUDDLE model.” This means that the company’s vehicles are capable of carrying as many as six to eight children, which makes cost-sharing an effective solution in the pursuit of economy. “Then the women who go in the same route travel together, which in turn makes it cost-effective for them and their organisations,” says Vandana, “So, this is a win-win for both, the women driver and society at large.”

One issue that continues to plague the service though, is the availability of women drivers in comparison to demand. The solution to this problem, Taxshe says, is the strategy of working where demand is the highest. “During the day, women are safe with regular transport, so we focus on keeping children safe in the day time,” says Vandana, “In the evenings and at night, we drive women to and from their workplace. We also have specialised drives for feeding moms, as they are not able to breastfeed their babies with regular male-driven cabs. We also have sunshades on our cabs for privacy that these mothers require.”

Taxshe’s targets are ambitious. “We plan to keep about one lakh children, safe and sound, over the next four years,” says Vandana, “This can be done with just about 4,000 women drivers in four years. We are targeting two cities for this Bangalore, and NCR.” Taxshe hopes to close this fiscal with 100 women drivers on the road, 62 of whom are already in various stages of training, and 25 already employed. “We intend to understand the nuances of scale and be ready for the next big plunge, rather than looking at scale hastily,” says Vandana, “Every substantial growth trajectory needs to be carefully monitored for success.”

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## 12. Transgender Rights Association To Love and Live without Fear



Section 377....an archaic law that has been violating the fundamental rights of a large group of individuals was veiled quite a few months back bringing great pride and relief to a community that has been struggling to rise against oppression. An unjust law has been violating morality and rejecting the very existence to live a life that each human think they deserve. LGBT has been one of India's major concerns for many years. Though many activists in the social space have been struggling to bring about transformation for decades, the law itself stood as a hurdle as it criminalized a community for 'being themselves'.

R. Jeeva, Founder of Transgender Rights Association has been threading the journey to freedom from the moment she realized she was not like the rest she knew. As a child of 8, there isn't much you can understand about how you feel. But, as soon as puberty hit, Jeeva started growing uneasy to the way she felt about herself. She knew she was what she thought she was; but, to her family this was an unacceptable scenario. Being a transgender was not

acceptable to the kind of family Jeeva grew up in. Like most Indian families, she too had a very conservative family that tried to change her mind and told her what she thought was not right.

The road was not easy for Jeeva. With the help of the only transgender she knew, Jeeva decided to run away to Mumbai. Although she knew that she was able and employable, she had to beg for a living as nobody wanted to employ a transgender.

After a few months, she chose to leave Mumbai and get back to her homeland Chennai. Here, she worked for about two years in a tile company and had to leave as the company closed down. Although she did not complete her schooling when she left her home, she ensured that she completed her under graduation and succeeded at that in 2007. During this period, Jeeva was also involved in social service activities. Seeing her passion and determination, YRG Care, a Centre for AIDS Research and Education, decided to make her their Community Advisor. This brought forth new experiences and started making a difference in Jeeva's life.

“Dr. Sabina Francis, a CSIMA Alumnae and a transgender, encouraged me to enrol in CSIM's Post-graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management. My learnings at CSIM was immense and this led me to form the Transgenders Rights Association,” says Jeeva.

From then on, it has been an exciting journey for Jeeva. She was offered a fellowship by ActionAid. “The words of Dr. Esther Maria Selvam has been so motivating. She encouraged me to leverage the fellowship opportunity and scale out my organization. Today, we have 360 transgenders from Chennai who are part of TRA,” says a proud Jeeva.

Jeeva dreams and works to ensure that transgenders across Chennai get opportunities which she never had. Jeeva is now a State Level trainer who advocates for transgender rights. She believes that the youth of today can be the greatest strength if they are properly understood and if our society accepts transgenders as they are.

While Jeeva addresses college students on this issue, she sure

knows that it's going to create a ripple effect and the word will soon reach their parents as well. "Enlightening parents and influencing a change in their perception as they listen from their own children is the best way to sensitise them. A lot of problems could be avoided if only parents of transgenders are able to accept them and let them choose the life they want," says Jeeva.

Speaking across various platforms has helped Jeeva gain confidence and have faith in her own self and in what she and many others like her believe in. "People always sympathise transgenders for who and what they are. This is wrong. I want each of them to be recognized for their skills, educational qualifications, and ability to undertake the tasks they have been assigned in their workplace," says Jeeva.

Jeeva is currently working on a government project. She is striving hard to ensure that everyone receives the rights they deserve. Although her family did not accept for what she was earlier, her mother did realise her worth and lived with her for more than ten years. "It is unfortunate that I lost my mother last month. I feel that she is still with me in spirit and guiding me in all that I do," she says.

Jeeva has crossed the path and is now paving the way for many like her. "This is just a beginning to a long journey to break free and live and love without limits," she signs off.

***Angela Anish***

### **13. M Venkatrangaiya Foundation** **Mission Schooling**



For a country with a burgeoning population, it comes as no surprise that a large percentage of India’s children are engaged in child labour. Oftentimes, these children have no access to academics and quality education. Rehabilitating them from the throes of labour and providing them with access to education, has become a basic need. Since 1981, Telangana-based M Venkatrangaiya Foundation has taken it upon itself to achieve this goal.

“MVF has so far rescued over one million children from labour force in India and have followed up with them until completion of class 10,” says the organization’s national convenor R Venkat Reddy, “We have also stopped over 20,000 child marriages.” The organization’s main aim is to work towards a society free of child labour, or in Venkat’s words, “where every child is in school, enjoying his or her right to education.”

Venkat believes this can be achieved if and only if a social consensus surrounding deeply contentious issues like ending child

labour is arrived at. Needless to say, this must be accompanied by the societal need to ending gender violence and child marriage as well. “In order to achieve this, we follow an area-based approach to the work we do,” says Venkat.

This process often involves following up with every child in an area, whether the child is in school or out of school. “This in turn galvanizes community support and ownership of local institutions, not to forget local bodies to resolve conflicts, and builds consensus in favor of children’s right to education until completion of higher secondary school education,” says Venkat.

MVF has targeted a rights-based approach and believes that the state should ultimately be held accountable to children, their protection and their rights. “Therefore, MVF facilitates community-based institutions and local bodies to engage with government schools, Anganwadi centres, primary health centres and the departments of revenue, police and labour at every level,” says Venkat, “It utilizes, and critiques existing laws and policies, where necessary. MVF envisages that schools have a vital role in keeping children safe and therefore it sensitizes and involves school teachers and education system and students in transforming societal attitude towards children.”

The organization is currently focusing all its attention on adolescent children, with a clear focus on girl children and gender equality. This also includes rectifying social practices that exclude girl children, which in turn leads to empowerment and facilitation of girls learning the rights they are entitled to. “It helps these girls find their voice, discover their self and aspirations, and also sensitizes school teachers and functionaries, not to forget enhancing the implementation of laws and policies towards protection of girls, gender equality and education,” says Venkat. The process ensures that MVF ends up visualizing a long-term normative transformation in attitudes. “This includes attitudes towards girls in the school, family, community and society so there is zero tolerance of gender violence and where all girls until 18 years complete secondary schools,” says Venkat.

The organization says it cherishes almost every intervention since 1991. “We have taken courage from the enormous support it received from poor parents and the sacrifices they have made to enrol their children to school,” says Venkat, “We have learnt from our interventions in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and even in remote villages of Bihar that in spite of diversity in regions and cultural specificities and parents have similar aspirations and aspire to see their children going to school.”

What has no doubt been a source of encouragement and inspiration is the fact that in every area, village youth have shown dedication and commitment to MVF’s cause, even in the face of opposition. “There is the risk to life as well, but they have not lost faith in the cause for getting every child to school,” says Venkat, “They could reach out to the most stubborn employer and enlisted him as a partner to support the cause of protection of child rights. Schoolteachers too showed love and respect for poor and marginalised children. In all its project areas, MVF has witnessed the finest of human sentiments from all stakeholders.”

Today, MVF is looking back fondly on its process of social mobilization where conflicts have been resolved and a consensus has emerged in favour of children’s rights. “We are currently focusing on changing school cultures, to ensure that poor children are respected and welcomed, where there is no child left behind in his class and all children learn without fear and discrimination,” says Venkat, “It is also in ensuring that adolescent children, who have dropped out of school are able to catch up with their peers and pursue education until completion of higher secondary schools. In this effort, MVF’s emphasis is equally on girl’s education and gender equality.”

In the course of its journey, MVF has also charted out an ambitious expansion plan. “We hope to network with civil society organisations, corporate sector and the government to consolidate its efforts on creation of child labour-free zones in the country,” says Venkat. “We also want to scale up our work in building pressure

for improvement in quality of education in schools.” Another goal that MVF has set for itself is to expand its programme on girls’ education and gender equality throughout the state of Telangana.

One thing is for sure, with such sustained efforts to getting children in schools and ensuring they stay there, organizations like MVF have taken giant steps towards ensuring that the children of India are in the right place, at the right time when it comes to academics and education. The fact that this is a bottom-up approach — involving consensus-building, and rooting archaic social practices, only adds a great deal of credibility to a movement that is quickly gaining ground.

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## 14. Yakshagana

### Revive, Restore, Renew



Did you know that the modern day prevalence and continuity of a traditional art form is crucial to the development and human resource indices of a region? A World Bank study has indicated that performing art forms help advance development and human progress.

“Sadly, globalization has led to decline of many lesser known Indian performing art forms. These art forms help in strengthening communities by bringing people together, they boost economic activity, community development, cross-cultural understanding, they create common experiences and a sense of identity and belonging,” says Priyanka K Mohan who runs Yakshadegula, an organization focused on reviving performing art forms in Karnataka, specifically, Yakshagana. “Given the importance of preserving and appreciating local art forms, we chose Yakshagana as our focus area,” says Priyanka, “Through our journey we came to realize that several more local artistes need support. This let us kick-start a process of looking for support from various stakeholders to reach

out to artists in Karnataka to collect data, compile them onto a digital platform, connect artistes with each other, map the needs of artists and create various pathways to resolve issues.”

Yakshagana has found prevalence and patronage in coastal Karnataka. Yakshadegula, however, was instrumental in introducing Yakshagana to Bengaluru, as a means of reviving the art form. However, to sustain this revival, the organization has had to adopt various innovations. This ranges from free Yakshagana classes in the city as an incentive to learn the not-so-popular art form to using Yakshagana to narrate stories with social messages surrounding right to education, HIV and dowry among others. “We also began recognizing artistes,” says Priyanka, “Usually a lot of recognition is reserved for the lead actors and musicians, although there are several other artistes who have given their life to Yakshagana. We’ve made an effort to recognize these lesser-known artistes, every year.”

The organization has also helped release books on various aspects of Yakshagana, including contemporary stories. “We’ve also popularized other art forms native to coastal Karnataka, like Talamaddale and have documented lesser-known aspects of these art forms like percussion and costuming,” says Priyanka.

Given art’s unique status as a vehicle to bring communities together, storytelling is a strong ally. “As we evolve, we need to narrate stories that keep these art forms alive and relevant,” says Priyanka, “Innovation in any sector helps keep pace with the changing times.”

However, in Priyanka’s words, “Being mindful about what aspects of art forms needs to be kept traditional and what can be evolved plays a crucial role in preservation.” She adds: “We need to leverage technology to build awareness on Indian art forms and increase our reach, and then continue to find innovative methods to document and preserve our traditional art forms.”

Yakshagana is an ancient form of folk theatre or a dance drama

typical to coastal Karnataka, usually performed in the open. It is also called Bayalata, which translates to: field play. “It’s a nifty amalgamation of song, dance and drama with flamboyantly dressed characters, often war-like, with valour and passion,” explains Priyanka, “It’s all about revelling in the finery.” Interestingly enough, Yakshagana is called Gandu-Kale (which literally translates to “male art form”) as it is predominantly performed by men. “Even female roles are played by men,” Priyanka says. Oftentimes, performances are staged through the night and on paddy fields. “These days, with time being the biggest constraint, the plays are shortened to just a couple of hours,” says Priyanka. There are three styles in Yakshagana – Tenkutittu (Southern Style), Badagutittu (Northern Style) and Badabadagutittu.

Priyanka explains how the art form is interwoven with stories. “Tales from epics like the Mahabharata, Ramayana and Puranas are taken to narrate in the unique style of Yakshagana,” she explains, “The Bhagavatar, who is the singer, accompanied by percussionists sing a verse, to which actors dance after which the actor explains the meaning of the verse through dialogues. Each character has a different costume and make up.”

In Yakshagana lies multiple art forms, like dance, drama and music, all interwoven in one. The mere volume of work, Priyanka explains, is a testament to the many decades that have gone into perfecting the entire art form. However, she feels limited funding and support makes it difficult to enhance the revival of the art form itself.

“We have been able to work extensively on one form of Yakshagana,” says Priyanka, “Talamaddala and Hoovina Kolu are some of the associated art forms of Yakshagana in which we have done work. Creating awareness through various channels, documenting our work and innovating in the traditional art space has helped us achieve this. Working with educational institutions, artistes, Government, and art lovers has helped us achieving our goals.”

After having worked with several artistes, Yakshadegula now realizes the importance of reviving other art forms as well. The plan is to replicate the work done with Yakshagana, to other art forms of Karnataka. “There are several local art forms we have lost and many others are under threat today,” says Priyanka, “At Yakshadegula, we aim to revive and popularize all art forms of Karnataka. In 2019 alone, we are looking at working with at least two or three art forms.” The focus, as she explains, is to revive art forms and thereby help artistes to derive their livelihood from art. “State and central government support alone has helped us so far in our journey,” Priyanka says, “However, now there is a need for more organizations and individuals to join hands to make a larger impact.”

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I am happy to know that Centre for Social Initiative and Management is bringing out the 10th Volume of "Unsung Beacons" which is a fine compilation of articles featured in their monthly tabloid "Conversations Today" in 2019. The fact that CSIM is taking efforts to bring to light the social changemakers and inspiring personalities besides being a leading institution in the field of Social Entrepreneurship is highly appreciable.

**Gagandeep Singh Bedi, I.A.S.,**  
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