

UNSUNG BEACONS  
*VOLUME III*

*Stories of people for  
whom humanity matters*

*A compilation of inspiring stories featured in  
'Conversations' - a tabloid on social issues*

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## Foreword

Unsung Beacons is an excellent publication that has effectively combined the art of story-telling and the prospect of social entrepreneurship. By featuring stories about doctors, engineers, farmers, tribals and rural citizens involved in bringing about social change, these stories are throwing light on some of today's most important issues.

The book is rightly subtitled, 'Stories of people for whom humanity matters'. Hailing from humble backgrounds, the changemakers featured here are extraordinarily impressive and their selfless dedication to the cause they strive for is unparalleled.

A special mention needs to be made of each CSIM alumnae's work. Their yeomen service reveals the brilliant mentoring done by the CSIM team as they have proved to convert their social ideas into action systematically.

From Dr. Regi George at Sittlingi to Radhika at Tindivanam—the passion that each of them exhibit in fulfilling their mission makes one ponder as to how we can emulate them.

The chapter on lives of backward communities is very informative. I must mention here that I found the style of writing very impressive as it led me to where the story belonged.

The section on celebrity interviews is truly inspiring. It has brought into limelight the social consciousness of many personalities, whom we have recognized only for their public life so far.

Being involved directly with education and schools, I sincerely feel that this publication should be shared with young children, as the living legends featured here are true role models for our next generation, who will be inspired to be responsible citizens like our unsung heroes. By doing this, we will not need an army of social workers or social entrepreneurs to bring about social change.

I appreciate the effort taken by Marie Banu, her team of writers, and CSIM for publishing Conversations. The attempt taken to identify the champions of social change and socially responsible celebrities is commendable.

I wish Conversations team the very best to continue their journey of inspiring our society.

*T.N. Venkatesh*  
10.4.13

**T.N.Venkatesh, IAS**  
**Joint Commissioner - Education**  
**Chennai Corporation**

## Editor's Note

My Conversations journey, which started in 2013, has been most edifying. It has given me the opportunity to meet people from many different walks of life.

I get nostalgic when I recollect the story-gathering trips I made last year, especially that of backward communities. From the Irulas to Dhobis, their way of life has taught me several lessons—from leading a simple life to deriving happiness from one's work life.

Interviewing celebrities engaged in social work was a great source of motivation for me. As a researcher and interviewer, I found the humility of these busy, illustrious personalities amazing. "Thanks for an excellent coverage. The article looks so good that I find it difficult to believe it is my interview! This is how a good editor (and layout designer) adds value. Thanks for all this," said Shri S.K. Dogra, IPS, when I shared the printed publication.

Editing articles by our writers did not require much effort. I owe my thanks to each one of them.

I must thank Ms. Latha Suresh, Trustee, MSDS, for her sensitive inputs; and Mr. Amit Kumar, communications professional, for being my mentor.



I would like to place on record my thanks and gratitude to Mr. P.N. Devarajan, Founder, CSIM for giving me the opportunity to work with CSIM and engage in Conversations.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents and my children for allowing me to do what I love—writing!

Hope you enjoy reading this publication.

**Marie Banu J**

**Chief Editor – Conversations/**

**Director – CSIM**

***ALUMNI TALK***

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



### **Exclusively For These Couples...!**

The best thing about democracy is: 'there is room for every shade of opinion'. Here, we are to learn about a man who is living his thought despite all odds. If most mavericks have a record of discontinuing studies, he too has stood by the test.

Balamurugan, Founder, Inter-caste Marriages Foundation, Dindivanam, has been through various troughs in integrating couples of inter-caste marriages in the districts of Tamil Nadu. Like they say, practicing is one, while preaching is another. Murugan has broken this cliché.

As a student, he had to discontinue his graduation because he got a job with the Tamil Nadu State Transport Department. "My family circumstances were so," he shrugs. One would expect such a person to marry a little later in life after achieving a sustainable financial freedom. But, Murugan was different. He got married to a Muslim girl in 1991 when he was 21 years old.

“It was not an easy show. There are a lot of issues to be dealt with than what one would see in films,” smiles Murugan.

The hardships faced during his marriage have moulded him into a person of introspection and action. In his desire to show the way forward for couples like him, he identified 13 groups which worked for these couples and brought them together under a single banner in 1994.

“It was in this process that I came across a group functioning in Salem district since 1984. Like many others, this issue has also percolated and persisted,” he adds.

Why are inter caste marriages looked down at? Religion, caste, and socio-economic status emerge as determinants; and thereby companionship—which is what marriage is all about—takes a back seat.

Murugan remarks that people are used to looking forward to society’s approval for all their actions. Hence, even if someone attempts to set a new trend, the equation is often lopsided. Fortunately, the state government has been extending support to such couples through numerous initiatives.

During the regime of Arignar C N Annadurai, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, registration of Inter-caste marriages was introduced through an Act in 1969 and in 1972 couples were offered free land for construction of houses. Further, for the children of these couples 12 seats in Government Engineering and Medical colleges have been allocated besides two seats for teacher training.

During Kalaignar Karunanidhi’s Government, preference was given to those who had registered with the employment exchange.

The Inter-caste Marriages Foundation has kept track of all the government programmes and worked for creating awareness amongst the couples in all districts of Tamil Nadu. Additionally, it also took up the task of ensuring that the benefits reached them. “Implementation is the part where you struggle the most,” he quips.

With employment being a major concern the resolve to protest was not long lived. The couples, who find their ways in the process, do not continue to protest. “While the uneducated go after money, the educated go behind jobs. At the end, they are all gone,” laments Murugan, who spends a great part of his salary in this work.

Are these marriages successful? “One cannot have doubts at all. I am successful and my marriage is. My wife is very supportive and together we are paving way for a change. So, lack of money and assets are never complained about, though its absence is felt,” he says proudly.

Murugan explains that love marriage is the result of an emotional outcome and a gap can be easily created by ‘energizing the individual’s ego’.

So, do the couples who benefit from the movement come back to support its work? “Not at all,” he says adding, “Until they get their benefits, I’m treated like almighty. Once it is all done, everything is forgotten.”

Surprisingly, this attitude of the couples does not hurt or disappoint Murugan. “It does not bother me because I’m neither a politician nor do I vouch for any caste or religion,” he clarifies.

Murugan has coordinated through the movement fasts and protests demanding implementation of government orders

for the couples of inter-marriages. Although he corresponds regularly to all MLAs, till date this issue has not been raised in the assembly. “This only goes on to communicate that our leaders do not endorse the idea. Until all our leaders can be identified apart from their caste, this situation will continue to be helpless,” he laments.

“Government policies are not a right for an Individual. Continued implementation entails a great struggle questioning the very survival of the movement where the members leave once their needs are met with. I don’t even own a bicycle, how will they respect me?” says Murugan in the context of the paltry resources that have kept the movement on for years now.

Murugan came to know about the Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) through a friend at a training programme in 2007. “The four-month programme made a huge difference to me and my movement. Administrative discipline is the best learning I have gained besides documentation and networking with like-minded organizations,” says he.

Having worked consistently for over two decades, we are sure that his movement would pave way for a better society. Let us wish him the best in his efforts!

Murugan has plans to launch a website and is mobilizing support to expand his reach.

— *Shanmuga Priya. R*

*If you wish to support Bala Murugan’s cause, call 9791076073*



## One Step at a Time

Jayapathi hails from Cheri Iyampettai, a village in Kaveripaakkam at Vellore District in Tamil Nadu. He heads the Kaveri Jayabharathamatha Magalir Koottamaippu Arakkattalai (KJMKA)—a women’s cooperative welfare society—and reaches out to scores of women’s self-help groups and others in need, living in and around Wallajah Block, Vellore. This society is one of the five branches of the Kaveri Comprehensive Rural Development Society (KCRDS), an NGO working for the communities living in and around Kaveripakkam. The parent organization was founded in 1989 by R.S. Mani. It later branched out into five wings and KJMKA was formally registered in 2008. Jayapathi’s association with this organization goes way back to his early youth, when in 1999 he gave up his job as a power-loom weaver and dedicated himself to voluntary service.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step; what started off as voluntary work soon became a

passion that consumed Jayapathi so totally. “In those early years when I joined KCRDS to help create employment opportunities for the youth and to run a discussion forum, it was still in its project-stage. As a camp-officer for KCRDS, I volunteered in tuition centers, and organized blood donation camps and health camps. We collaborated with Shankara Nethralaya, Chennai for monthly eye-check-ups,” says Jayapathi.

“During one of our initial eye camps I came across an elderly gentleman who had lost his vision due to matured cataract and was totally dependent on his wife for support. When it was suggested to undergo a surgery, he dismissed the idea as being unnecessary. ‘After all I’m old,’ said he, ‘now all I want is to die.’ We coaxed him into giving in to our suggestion and the surgery was done on one eye. When he regained partial vision, it was like re-birth for him. He had just regained his independence! Shortly, he agreed to have his other eye operated upon, and to his amazement regained vision in his second eye too. He told us that he felt 30-40 years younger. From then on, he started advising others in our area to welcome any eye camp or health check-ups. Watching this old man’s zeal got me hooked to this work”, adds Jayapathi.

“Back in the day I couldn’t continue to live on my monthly earnings of Rs. 300. Since there was a money crunch anyway, I decided to plunge into social work full time and my father, wife, and children have been really supportive,” he says nostalgically.

Today, KJMKA has expanded its operations to include several different activities and Singhvi Charitable Trust at Triplicane in Chennai offers health camps in this area every

quarter. These camps mainly target women and around 1000 patients are attended at a time here. Eye and dental surgeries are undertaken at Sri Ramachandra Hospital and Government Hospital at Egmore, respectively. Besides, dental camps are also organized at schools.

Today, 286 self-help groups are currently functioning in Kaveripaakkam. Through these groups, health and hygiene awareness, awareness on economic independence, and education related programs are conducted. “For women’s education we tie-up with open universities and arrange for free course application forms to be distributed amongst women. We also organize career guidance and counselling sessions for women. Till date, we have assisted 22 girls seek admission in Nursing assisting/ Diploma in Nursing programs. Further, we have referred students and liaised with colleges like Barthya Sarvavidya Kaingarya and the Sivakumar School of Nursing to offer subsidized fees. Through the women’s development corporation, a three-month course on – nursing and first aid, motivation, awareness, bringing together, skill-training, leadership-training, financial management training, and other such programs continue to be organized.

In 2006-2007, Jayapathi took up the PGDSIM course at CSIM, about which he says, “CSIM has touched the lives of several individuals I know. Earlier, with CSIM, we had installed solar power panels and satellite torches to illuminate an entire village at Edayanthangal in Vellore district. Abu Bakker, the Secretary of KCRDS who was a CSIM alumnus, advised me to take up this course. Since then, I have come under the CSIM-spell and upon my advice several of my friends have also undergone training at CSIM. Through this course I learnt how to tackle the difficulties in managing

finances. I am now confident that if quality of services is good then there is ample opportunity for funds to flow in.”

Today, with strong bank linkages, KJMKA helps people obtain scholarships, death claims, disability certification and allied benefits, accident-claims etc. “We notice that other organizations want to work with us. We offer consultation services at a nominal fee to those who seek us. We work with both the government as well as private organizations. If only we had a greater staff strength, we would be able to do much more,” says Jayapathi thinking out aloud.

So, where is Jayapathi headed next? “I have always wanted to promote a meditative environment in our area. I have a craving to create a peaceful space, where people can forget their worries and start leading healthy, fulfilling lives. We stand at a point in time wherein we can afford to dream of such new thrust areas to work on.”

“Our self-help groups have become independent and no longer need our constant supervision and handholding. Our commitment remains towards women’s development and we are looking at organizing personal counseling to curb any suicidal or self-destructive tendencies. We are gathering motivational videos, and stress-busting activities which can be incorporated in our schools so that children can grow up in a fun-filled, tension-free environment. Thus my work is going to be more focused on creating a total quality environment for the people of Kaverippaakkam,” quips he.

Winners don’t do different things; they do things differently. May this winner inspire many more by his example!

—*Archanaa R.*

*If you wish to contact Jayapathi, please call 9952222621.*



## So What If We Are Different?

“Centuries of human existence, but still men and women are not treated as equals in many places. The plight of transgender (TG) is not any better,” comments Jeeva, an alumnus of Centre for Social Initiative and Management.

At the age of eight Jeeva realised that she was different. “Everybody including my parents ostracised me when I was looking forward to someone who can tell me the ‘what and why’ of what I was going through,” she sighs.

After leaving her family at the age of 13, Jeeva came to live in the slums of Pulianthope at Chennai. “It was here that I learnt the perception of common people on transgender,” she laments.

Battling against the Association of Transgender with beggary

and sex work was her first step towards educating the community about transgender. “Every morning when I left my house with a hand bag, people around would comment that I was going for sex work. With continued efforts I began to conduct sessions in schools and colleges to educate the students on the history and present day situation of a transgender. Gradually, one student after another recognised me in the locality and their parents started dissociating me from sex work,” explains Jeeva, who is now the President of 84 community based organisations working for MSM, FSW and TG.

Jeeva’s sessions have had a phenomenal impact in creating space to talk about transgender and their specific problems. “This credibility opened roads for me to approach the police department officials and engage in fact finding on TG. All along I was clear about one thing – sympathy must change to empathy, otherwise the purpose of education is lost,” she says.

Jeeva mentioned about a PhD scholar who once stood up and apologised for her attitude towards transgenders during a journey. In order to avoid seeing the ‘*aravani*’ she had slept all day. The next morning, that very *aravani* woke her up to ask if she was fine as she had not got up for breakfast. “No matter who you are, the basic needs such as hunger, thirst, shelter, love are the same everywhere,” Jeeva points out.

Sessions with the IAS and IPS officers helped her further in expanding her circle of friends. At the end of every such session, the response obtained were the same – ‘we did not know about this’. A counsellor and a social worker in the TG community, Jeeva decided to apply for the PGDSIM course at CSIM. The fact that she had completed only 7th grade did not affect her prospects. “It was with their motivation that I

applied for a Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology and completed it,” she says with pride.

“Talking of CSIM, I must talk of three people – Dr Sunil who removed my stage fear, Mr. Louis whose games motivated me to decide my future course of action and Mrs. Latha Suresh who imbibed the confidence to learn English. CSIM is the place where I knew what I wanted to become,” exults Jeeva, who has recommended two members from her community to undertake a similar programme at CSIM.

In 2007, Jeeva established the Transgender Rights Association (TRA) to advocate for the fundamental rights and livelihood of the transgender community. Simultaneously, her sessions in schools grew more popular to the extent that NSS students vowed to respect the TG community. Jeeva is also a member of the Transgender Welfare Board in Tamil Nadu (under the Department of Social Welfare) that had recommended measures to allow transgender to study in colleges. In 2011, the Board had also recommended that the transgender be enumerated in the census.

“Success here was in terms of Government Orders which are not permanent. Having worked in the field for the last 15 years, I can say that there is a need for a comprehensive legislation to address the needs and problems of this community,” says Jeeva who is also a member of the Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society (TANSACS).

Attitude seems to affect every strand of life. In case of TG, the attitude of the rest of the community towards them is remarkably different in the northern and southern parts of the country. Human rights and freedom are still a distant dream for them. “The media inclines to project us as allies of political parties, which is hardly the case. We are here to

place our demands to the government for the betterment of our community,” says Jeeva.

Jeeva has authored two books in Tamil – “*Thirunangaigalin samuga valarchi – Thamizhaga arasin pangu*” (Social Development of TG and the Role of TN state government) and “*Aravanigalum samuga urimaigalum*” (Transgender and their rights).

Social worker, counsellor, teacher—what is next?

“As an individual my growth has been satisfactory and I am very happy about it. But, my community has a long way to go. What more I can do for our community’s welfare is the thought that helps me choose my way. I want to become the first TG lawyer in the country,” smiles Jeeva.

Let’s wish her success in her endeavours!

—*Shanmuga Priya. R*

*Jeeva can be reached at 9884813666.*



## Bridging the divide

Maria Suthan Dallas, known as Suthan by his friends and colleagues hails from Nagercoil, a town in Tamil Nadu. His father being a Block Development Officer, he grew up in Pollachi and Udumalpet during his childhood. While studying at Presentation convent in Udumalpet, a village near Coimbatore, he got involved in social service activities. Getting into social work was not new for Suthan. Even as a child, he used to collect old clothes along with his friends and donate them to old age homes and orphanages.

Keen to pursue social work even after school, Suthan enrolled for BA Sociology in Loyola College, Chennai. “I did not know that there was a bachelor’s degree in Social Work, hence took up sociology,” he says.

While pursuing his graduation, he enrolled in the Outreach Programme at Loyola where he needs to spend 120 hours in social work every year. Although he was happy to do this, he felt this not satisfying as wanted to spend more time for social work.

Along with 12 of his friends, who also shared similar passion, Suthan formed an informal community and named it 'Amity Ministry'.

"I named it 'Amity Ministry', which means 'ministry of love'. We encouraged college students across the city to join us in volunteering at orphanages and old age homes during weekends. Initially, people thought we were a church based group. We therefore started projecting ourselves as 'Amity' as we wanted people to believe that we were secular in our thoughts and works," he says.

Amity has now grown to 600 members. On an average, 80 to 90 members are active every month and the core committee members schedule their volunteering time. "We were finding it difficult to issue receipts to our donors and collect funds from abroad, hence wanted to formalize our work. In 2010, we registered Amity as a Trust," he explains.

Amity's campaign for volunteers was through social networking sites. "Although most of the students are from Loyola College, we also have students from Stella Maris, New College, Women's Christian College, and RMK Engineering College. Every two months, I spend considerable time with the fresh set of volunteers to motivate them further," says Suthan.

Speaking about Amity, Suthan nostalgically shares an incident which made his belief in volunteering stronger. "I used to volunteer during weekends at an orphanage

that provided care and shelter to children living with HIV/Aids. Senthil (*name changed to protect identity*) was a young boy who lived here. He was very friendly and I looked forward to spending time with him. One day, I did not find him in the home. When enquired, I learnt that he suffered from chicken pox and expired a few days ago. I was deeply shaken. It was then I decided to spend more time with children who were living with HIV/Aids."

"Volunteering in orphanages does not necessarily involve only helping the inmates with their day-to-day chores. Our volunteers spend time with the children in orphanages and make them happy by playing games and telling stories. We want them to be happy as long as they live," says Suthan wiping a tear.

In 2008, Suthan learnt that there was a drop in the number of children who were infected by HIV/Aids. It was then he decided to shift his focus on something more important.

Suthan says: "From 13 out of 1000 children, the number of HIV/Aids affected children had dropped to 3 out of 1000 in 2008. I read about Scott Harrison, the founder of 'Charity: water', a non-profit organization based in New York that works towards providing clean and safe drinking water to people in developing nations. I was inspired by Scott's initiative and decided to move beyond volunteering."

"58 percent of Indian people use open space for defecation, while it is only 4.8 percent in Indonesia. I launched a Trust 'The Bridge' to focus on providing clean water and sanitation for people living in rural areas. There is a government scheme which provides a grant of Rs. 5000 to construct a toilet in a rural household, but not many are aware of it. We organised campaigns in rural villages and advocated with the government to extend this programme

to all rural households. Now, the grant has been enhanced to Rs. 9000 per household,” he says with pride.

Water is essential to maintain these toilets. As the government provided financial support only for toilet construction, The Bridge mobilises local donations and provided tap connections to each of the toilets. Besides, the Trust also organises awareness campaigns on hygiene practices.

Suthan wanted to adapt a social entrepreneurship model in his social work like Scott Harrison did. It was then, he googled and located CSIM. He joined the one-year course Post-Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management in Chennai. “I learnt the technicalities of running an organization with business acumen. I understood that not the turnover of the organization, but it is the number of beneficiaries that matters. The sessions of fundraising were also really helpful,” he says.

Suthan has now launched a for-profit enterprise named ‘Oinkk’, which provides NGOs technical support to launch websites at a nominal fee. “I wish to train students on web designing and sustain my initiative. The money I earn from this would be used for my charity,” he concludes.

Suthan’s ministry of love has bridged the gaps for many. Let us join him in his mission to reach out to more people who are in need.

—*Marie Banu*

*Maria Suthan Dallas can be reached at 8056229191.*



## Empowerment By All Means

The self-help group movement in India has opened doors for women to experience economic independence through financial intermediation. Today, the groups have grown to walk that extra mile in developing their communities. Radhika, Founder, Sivagami Rural Women Federation in Villupuram, is one such empowered woman, who has designed her own journey in this road.

Even as a school student she was drawn towards social concerns, and she always intended to bring about a change in her own style. Though she had to discontinue studies after twelfth standard, her attention to social issues only grew manifold. She grew to be a keen social observer. The fact that her husband was disabled did not deter her from beating her own drums. “I wanted to prove that life is what you see and make of it,” asserts Radhika.

Although being the mother of two daughters, she attends SHG meetings regularly and guides her members. She is also the District Secretary for the political party Samuga Samathuva Padai and has actively campaigned for the cause of returning the *panchami* lands. "I intend to convincingly show that women can work like men, multitask in the social work field," she says.

As a trainer for the last ten years, she has equipped the women in her network with skills such as jam, sauce, and pickle making. The groups have together organized periodic medical camps, awareness on the use of sanitary napkins, and the importance of using toilets. They have been able to efficiently use the funds to construct toilets in the neighbouring villages. Of late, they have also propagated kitchen gardens for farmers and the cultivation of herbal crops.

Motivation to engage in multiple activities comes from Radhika's sense of curiosity. "I always want to learn and explore," she quips. She explains that there are women who are well read but yet remain housewives on the one hand, and those who want to study, but are not motivated to do so on the other hand. "Today, these women have come forward to complete their degree through correspondence, which is a great achievement considering the prevalence of social taboos in the rural landscape."

Radhika believes that this entire social activity helps women in parenting, more so striking a chord with their children. The self-help groups have adopted ten villages in the district where they distribute books and note books to school students, toys to children at *balwadis* and also run evening tuition centres. Further, they have launched a tailoring institute in Dindivanam and Semmangalam districts.

According to her, change and development are both relative terms. The very fact that women have begun to approach the groups for help is in itself an indication of success. "A woman, who once used to lock herself inside the house after the child leaves for school, is now working for the federation's administration and. They now participate in meetings like men. They are equal now!" says a proud Radhika.

Commenting on the acknowledgement given to women self-help groups, she justifies, "If not for the results shown, the Andhra Pradesh government would not have proposed a dedicated bank for women SHGs and the Central Government would not have reduced the rate of interest for these groups from 12 to 7 percent." Above all, what is to be appreciated is the fact that women have realized the need for money and have come forward to generate resources.

"This is not all! We have also been able to enable elders get their pension, enumeration in the voting list, and provide awareness on registering with the employment exchange. At a micro level, we have been able to prevent suicides in the regions we work," adds Radhika.

Although the Federation has been operating for about ten years now, it was registered only three years ago. "All thanks to CSIM," smiles Radhika. She came to know about CSIM while volunteering with an organization in the same district. "Through registration, I realized the need to acknowledge our work. The course at CSIM helped me organize my activities towards caring for the people. It gave me the confidence to talk to different stake holders appropriately. CSIM has played a crucial role in moulding me as a social worker."

Being in the forefront of a women's federation and a political

party is not an easy task. But, Radhika seems to have gotten the grasp of it. The two roles complement each other well.

Ms. Sivagami IAS, whom Radhika met about ten years ago is her source of inspiration. Ms. Sivagami's resignation to concentrate at the grass root level has impacted her strongly. "I realized from her that there was much to be done for the people and education certainly is not a barrier," explains Radhika, who acquired a degree in Sociology at the age of 34.

She adds that family cannot be a hurdle to our social interests. "This is how social work is. Not all can have the same attitude towards society. As a social worker, I must and I have been able to manage personal and professional life at a reasonably well," she signs off.

—*Shanmuga Priya.R.*

*If you wish to contact Radhika, please call 9952622652.*



## Need A Light? Take A Liter

Entrepreneurship, innovation, and networking are three words whose definitions have seen a sea-change in the last decade. Thanks to a simple but significant prefix—social! There's no denying that social entrepreneurship, social innovation and social networking has, in the recent past, changed the way people live, even as these processes have done their bit in breathing a whole new life to the seemingly mundane. However, in a world that has snuggled up to social revolution (be it networking, entrepreneurship, or innovation), it takes an entrepreneur par excellence to add a spin to the usual, drawing that extra bit of mileage from the world around us.

Earlier this year, when CSIM (Centre for Social Initiative in Management) alumnus Ram Mohan Katla, observed a young lad trying his very best to explain what he (the boy) believed

was a game-changing idea, he couldn't quite manage to get the boy's drift. "His English wasn't great. But he was trying his best to tell me something with a bottle," says Ram, "Only when he took me to one of the houses in the village, I realized what he was trying to explain to me. The lad had stumbled upon a way of generating light through a plastic bottle." In many ways, that was how Ram, Vice President, Ikya Global Group and Founding Trustee, Ikya Global Foundation, began what would later be known as his pet project — Liter of Light.

However, to understand how his path led to that one incident, it is perhaps imperative to know a bit about the man himself. Ram, soon after graduating from CSIM in 2010, knew that social entrepreneurship was his calling. "After my course, I was associated with CSIM for a considerable period, taking up various assignments that were more or less connected with social entrepreneurship," he says, "I identified that my passion lay in enabling the younger generation discover opportunities. In the process, I began discovering myself."

It was fairly easy for Ram to decide that the surest way of testing social entrepreneurship skills lay in empowering the rural population. It was around the same time that his enterprise, Ikya Global Foundation came to be. "We stuck to our primary objective— bringing about grass-root innovations and introducing surrounding villages to the same," he says, "We at Ikya decided that we were in a good position to connect with these rural communities, discover the problems they faced, and unearth solutions to counter these issues." Ikya started by adopting a cluster of villages near Hyderabad: "We based our activities out of the local Mandal headquarters, an area we termed the Rural

Impact Hub." Part of Ikya's work in these villages lay in the formation of common interest groups among women and farmers. "Through these measures, we helped these people build micro-enterprises," says Ram, "These small enterprises had a great deal to do with areas like energy and agriculture, to other non-farming activities."

Ikya had announced its arrival. Within a short span of time, the organization began collaborating with reputed institutes like IIT Madras and the Rotary Club. "But the urge to do our bit for the urban slums kept tugging at me," says Ram, "That was when Liter of Light came to be."

Good or evil, every organization or person has that one feat that it is generally remembered by. Sachin Tendulkar for instance, will always be remembered for his 48<sup>th</sup> ODI hundred, simply because it was the first time in One-Day-Cricket history that a batsman scored a double-century. Likewise, even as it was going big guns, Ikya's —and Ram's— defining moment came its way during its novel 'Liter of Light' initiative. "The moment when that youngster, Pradeep, showed me what he had done with that humble bottle, proved that there were greater things ahead," says Ram. He knew for certain, that Pradeep's idea held great potential. Through a drive termed VInAct (Volunteers in Action), Ikya mobilized several hundreds of youngsters, in spreading the word about generating energy from a plastic bottle. "The idea virtually held good itself. We could power homes that didn't quite enjoy a basic necessity like electricity," says Ram.

Not surprisingly, innovation then began taking Liter of Light to the next level. "These bottles could power a home during the day-time," says Ram, "Merely fitting a solar panel atop the apparatus ensured that you had light even

during the night.” However, by Ram’s own admission, one of the greater fallouts of the Liter of Light initiative was the inspiration that it provided to youngsters. “Many of the volunteers who worked on the project began believing that they could indeed do a great deal to further their cause,” he says. With the right kind of social-media marketing — “Youtube videos that went viral got us a great deal of mileage,” says Ram — Liter of Light was all set to enter the big stage. “Around 140 liters of light have been installed from polythene, plastic, asbestos and tin,” says Ram.

The initiative began gaining rapid ground, spreading to countries like Columbia, Spain, and Mexico. However, Ram feels that the initiative is far from complete. “We now plan on drawing awareness towards the use of eco-friendly bricks, from plastic. We started building awareness by recreating monuments like the Char Minar in Hyderabad, using these bricks. Chennai is on our mind, next. Hopefully, we’ll be there soon.”

— *Daniel Almeida*

*Ram Mohan Katla can be reached at 09848303499.*



## Creating Opportunities In The Village

“Life throws in opportunities around you at any time. The ones that you pick up and the circumstances that lead you there ultimately shape your destiny,” says Mr Ramesh, Founder, Annai Kanniyammal Educational Trust based in Endiyur village at Villupuram.

His is the story of an unanchored individual, whose life situations showed him the path ahead. Today, he is beating his own drums for the betterment of his village.

The son of a road mender and a home maker, he discontinued schooling after completing tenth standard. Later, he finished his Diploma in Computer Office Management. That was not it. He did his Diploma in Film Technologies and then in multimedia. “How connected or relevant were all these was not at all a concern then,” smiles Ramesh.

At the age of 32, Ramesh founded a Trust in 2010 and named it after his mother as 'Annai Kanniyammal Educational Trust'. "After my mother's demise, I wanted to do something that will keep her name alive in my village. And thus, my Trust was born," he says.

Ramesh is very categorical about family's influence in the management of the Trust. Therefore, he decided to include only his brother in the Board of Trustees, so that he would carry forward the activities after his lifetime. "The other Board Members are my friends. They are the backbone of this Trust," exclaims Ramesh.

In just two years, the Trust has grown to support 25 self-help groups, provide organic certificate to 200 farmers, and also coordinate 6 farmer clubs. The activities of the Trust are multifaceted. "Our objective is to show inclusion as a practicable principle. Education is being taken up as a primary concern, as it can equalize opportunities for the next generation. From a Free Computer Education Centre in the village, we now run a film institute named 'Annai Kanniyammal Film Academy ' that was started in March 2012. The Academy provides courses on direction, screenplay and camera, absolutely free of cost," says Ramesh.

With 40 students being guided by Ramesh in this institute, he has already chalked out a strategy to hone their skills. Within a short span, the Film Academy has garnered a lot of attention and popularity.

My students can direct a short film if given the screenplay. They work out details like camera angles very well. In every student here, I see a young Ramesh. We are all eagerly looking forward to the documentary festival to be organized

on 9th September, 2012, which will be judged by popular film directors," he says proudly.

Ask him about his inspiration, and you will be surprised with the reply. "Myself!" he says assertively.

Ramesh's early days were marked by discouragement and skepticism about his capabilities. This was perhaps the reason for his staunch belief in self. "My intentions were ridiculed. People openly asked if I was capable of doing these tasks. Today, I can say that I am a role model to at least one of my students," he adds.

Annai Kanniyammal Educational Trust also runs an Education Awareness Centre through which focused group discussions are organized regularly for the children in the village. These programmes aim at creating awareness about the need to educate the next generation. "If not for education, people can never be brought on a common platform. Like a mother is to birth, education is to personality," says Ramesh concernedly.

When asked about his education at CSIM, he begins to mention the names that he would remember forever. "CSIM brought the biggest change in my career. I was introduced to myself as a better organized person. Today, I can confidently approach any stake holder, handle their queries and responses. Fundraising, that remained a dark matter to me, has become comprehensible and organizing programmes has become an enriching experience," explains Ramesh while thanking his good friend Balamurugan, who introduced him to CSIM.

He honestly admits his apprehensions about interviews such as these. "Exposure through CSIM has given me the

confidence to face everything.” Soon, he delves in to share about his future plans: “I want to build a CBSE school in Endiyur and also a hospital. I want to show that CBSE schools can function efficiently in villages as well.”

Given Ramesh’s intentions to create a better tomorrow for his village, one would expect him to be received in a grandeur. But, it is not so. “Irrespective of what you do, jealousy and cynicism are bound to be there. I have learnt to live with them,” he informs.

What is more contending to him is the fact that his ventures have opened numerous roads to interact with the students in the village. The volley ball and cricket matches, and the training programmes have had an immense impact on students’ performance.

“I knew I was making a difference when a teacher spoke to me about her student’s progress,” he signs off.

—*Shanmuga Priya. R*

*If you wish to contact Ramesh, please call 9344822000.*



## The Path To Awakening

Sahila is a busy woman. Donning several hats, she is, among other things, the Managing Trustee of Prince of Peace Charitable Trust, an NGO that works towards the upliftment of backward communities in four districts in the state of Tamil Nadu. Starting off as a tuition teacher in Nerkundram, Sahila strongly felt the need to reach out to as many children as possible, to encourage them to study well.

“Having lived in Chennai city for long, I found a vast difference in the upbringing of children in villages. The kind of exposure that urban children have is simply lacking in rural areas. I observed that there was a stark difference in the way the learning process was adopted in rural schools and the teaching standards were very low. I also found that children’s basic understanding of concepts to be very poor,” says Sahila.

Sahila started taking tuition classes for children at her home in Nerkundram so that they can internalize the lessons that were taught at school. This set off in her, a deep-rooted passion to bring about social change.

She joined the Prince of Peace Charitable Trust, a church-based organization that was launched by Pastor Mohan Raj in 2002. The Trust initially focused on improving educational facilities for school children in five villages in and around Thandavankulam village at Sirkali Taluk in Chidambaram District. The aim of the programme was to root out backwardness in education in rural areas.

While speaking of her experience working with communities Sahila says: "In those days, our only focus was upon children, as we could mould them without much difficulty. As days passed, our interactions with these children went past the classrooms and took us right into their homes. We spoke to their parents and immediate families. As months went by, our interactions became more widened and we discovered that there were some issues that needs to be tackled at the societal level."

"For instance, in backward communities, girls are discouraged from going to school after they complete eighth standard. Caste problems were rampant, and often led to social conflicts. We were working with both the farming and the fishing communities. Each of them had issues of their own, which we decided to work upon. Our activities steadily diversified as did our geographic reach," adds Sahila.

Today, the Prince of Peace Charitable Trust with its headquarters in Chidambaram works in Chennai, Nagapattinam and Cuddalore districts. The Trust runs a tuition centre in Nerkundram, an orphanage at

Nagapattinam that houses 25 tsunami affected children; a tailoring centre; and a computer centre.

Besides this, Sahila and her team of 50 members also focus on spreading awareness on legal issues such as widow pension, domestic abuse, as governmental policies.

"Working closely in the service field, I was able to note how many complications can arise while rendering social service. Working with people with different needs was a revelation. With career growth in this organization, I also faced challenges in handling staff, raising funds, and communicating to donors. It was difficult to deal with these issues without affecting the overall developmental work that my Trust was engaging in," says Sahila.

Speaking about her education at CSIM, Sahila says with excitement: "Latha Suresh, Director, CSIM is a friend of one of our sponsors. When the sponsor saw me struggle with issues at work, he gave me a timely introduction to her. I enrolled myself for the Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management at CSIM in 2010. My education here turned my world around. I learnt how to create and present a good funding proposal, how to effectively deal with issues at work, counseling, staff management, and also gained some knowledge of law."

Armed with her newly gained knowledge, Sahila has set out to fulfill her passion at full throttle. "I believe in equality. People should be able to flourish wherever they are, irrespective of how remote their home may be. Although we do have an orphanage, I am working towards a future where no child is found abandoned. I wish every child to experience life in a family setting with loving parents and relatives," she says.

Prince of Peace Charitable Trust plans to serve as an adoption agency so that they can place the orphaned children in secure families.

“My next target is women. Till date, over 150 women have undergone training in our tailoring centre and I take great pride in saying that each one of them are putting their training to use. Some have set up their own tailoring business, while some work from their homes; either way they have become financially independent. Women need self-motivation to come out of oppression,” she says.

The computer centre run by the Trust offers digital literacy programme, practically providing technology at people’s doorstep. “We are trying to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas in terms of access to latest technology in education,” says an unstoppable Sahila.

“There is a strong yearning to do some more every single day. There is so much left to be done. We are presently managing on funds that are allocated to us by our Church. We need to become more self-reliant in our finances and this needs the support of people, not just in terms of funding, but volunteers, advisors, and moral support,” concluded Sahila with a sigh.

—*Archanaa R.*

*Sahila can be reached at 9380459654 or 9840465127*



## Never Say Die!

Ujala Begum lost her parents during her childhood and was raised by her grandmother. Coming from a conservative family in Vandavasi (Wandiwash), she may have continued to live within the confines of her home, following the rigidities put in place by her immediate surroundings, had it not been for a major illness that drastically changed her way of life and in the process, her world view.

“A few years ago I was diagnosed with a mild form of polio that rendered me temporarily immobile. I was hospitalized for almost three months,” she says, recollecting the days that signaled the ending of a rather uncomfortable arrangement of living with her grandmother. “This illness triggered some unexpected conflicts with my grandmother, who was no longer willing to keep me at home. In time though, I did recover from being completely immobile to being fairly

independent, and then I moved out to live on my own," says Ujala.

Once Ujala decided to live on her own, she could see that her home town of Vandavasi was not in the least welcoming of her decision. "I was subjected to enormous ridicule as I was living on my own without a family. This town is still very conservative. Women here have to abide by rules put in by a hardcore chauvinistic society. Until a few years ago, it was rather difficult to see a working woman here. It used to be considered as a shame to a man if his wife was sent to work. In such a rigid society, I wanted to see some changes in the attitudes of the people. And unless women realized their own freedom, there was no other way out for them from this oppression," says a defiant Ujala.

In 2004 she started the *Paropakar Amaippu*, a welfare establishment that helps women become self-reliant through engaging them in various vocational training and educational activities. It presently has a tailoring centre, four night-school centres and one self-help group. Over 450 women have become certified tailors through this centre, four girls have been sent for nursing training through collaboration with the Ramakrishna Mission at Mylapore, several needy patients have been granted free and successful surgeries through a collaboration with the Maruvathoor Welfare Hospital, and several more have started attending the night schools to complete their basic schooling.

Right before she started *Paropakar Amaippu*, she used to work with the Kaveripakkam Comprehensive Rural Development Society (KCRDS), an NGO in Wallajah Block. The secretary of KCRDS, Mr. Abu Bakker, is Ujala Begum's mentor of sorts. "He was the first person who listened patiently to my worries. He gave me courage and had immense confidence

in me," says Ujala, adding that "the founder of KCRDS, Mr. R.S. Mani who has worked with Mahatma Gandhi in the olden days, reassured me by saying: "You were born to live". I have taken these words as my talisman and have ever since remained positive and hopeful at all times".

At KCRDS Ujala earned Rs. 100, then her income grew upto Rs. 300 as she undertook vocational training and self-help group training. Immediately after her training, she helped start 7 self-help groups. From there on, she started her tailoring centre. Growing step-by-step through her efforts, she helped mobilize funds for the heart operation of two needy individuals, totaling to an amount of Rs. 75,000. Today, 100 to 150 students are gifted with uniforms, dictionaries, and books every year. "I want underprivileged children to have the education that I could never have in my time," says Ujala who has helped a disabled student successfully complete B.Com.

The *Paropakar Amaippu* has come as a breath of fresh air to Vandavasi, encouraging women to get out of the four walls of their homes and training them to be independent. Ujala Begum is on a relentless hunt to infuse positivity into girls who come to her centers. "Earlier I used to sink in self-pity, but today I realize that we are all born to help each other. Women should help other women. In my tailoring centre or night schools, I sometimes find girls crying silently. I walk up to them and hear them out. Whenever the girls show a sign of hopelessness, I reassure them with real stories, such as mine, and ask them to move on. It works!" says a passionate Ujala.

Ujala's association with CSIM goes back to the early days of *Paropakar Amaippu*. She enrolled in the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme in 2007. "CSIM gave

me ample exposure to funding agencies and modalities. I found the course really useful in bettering the activities at *Paropakar Amaippu*,” says Ujala. Funds for *Paropakar Amaippu* mainly come from corporate donors. She has ever since referred several people to also enlist for training at CSIM.

In these last eight years of running the *Paropakar Amaippu*, Ujala has added several feathers to her cap. She has been awarded a fellowship by former President of India Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, and her efforts have been featured in leading Tamil media. Thanks to *Paropakar Amaippu*, Vandavasi today offers better exposure to women who would like to work outside their homes. The rigidity and the taboos have been gradually reducing and the proof of it is in the increasing numbers of women enrolling in college. As Ujala Begum continues her quest to transform people’s lives for the better, her family has started recognizing her for her exemplary qualities. “Those relatives who shunned me and shut their doors on me once, are now praising me,” says Ujala with a giggle.

It is often said, that perseverance moves mountains. Ujala’s perseverance has indeed proven the saying to be true.

—*Archanaa R.*

*If you wish to speak to Ujala Begum, please call 9841730877*



## Rewriting Destinies

This is the story of a boy who has lived in the streets, faced the hardships of poverty, survived bullying, battled disability, and is now redeeming the self-esteem of children who go through similar experiences in their lives. Vidyapathi is a life-skills trainer at the Ma Foi Foundation. A former Kabaddi champion, he hurt his knees during a match that left permanent damage rendering him bedridden for almost six months. He did recover from that and was able to walk again, but his knees have since lost the ability to withstand the strain of long walks and running.

Of his early days, says Vidyapathi, “I was initially raised in Aruppukkottai at Virudhunagar District by my Uncle, while my parents worked in Andhra, paying off debts using the

little money that they earned. I studied in a government school until my parents came to Chennai to set up a roadside idly-shop. I moved in with them and joined a private school here. My parents and I survived each day by eating the leftovers from the day's business. Between helping my father by selling *idly* and *poori* on the road side, and by doing other odd jobs, I managed to maintain a decent score at school. When I finished my schooling, a donor agreed to sponsor my college education. I joined a Nadar community college at Thirunelveli. Although I did belong to the same community, I was not aware of the fragmentations and hierarchy that was hidden within the community. I was bullied by teachers and students alike, mostly for being caste-ignorant and a city-bred boy. I quit college in 2006, losing all my certificates in the bargain, and started working in an aluminium fabrication company in Chennai."

Vidyapathi's interest in sports was nurtured even as a kid. From the time he moved to Chennai, he was a part of the local Police Boys' Club, where he regularly played Kabaddi at the local matches. It was during one of those matches that he severely injured his knee.

"For the first time, I was able to empathise with a disabled person. I didn't just comprehend their difficulties, but understood all the complexities it brought along with it. I now knew what it was to be unable to do one's own daily chores; to be unable to work. It was around this time, I was introduced to CSIM. I thought: 'if I cannot go for work, I might as well get into social service.' This thought, I realize in reflection, was more due to a state of hopelessness. However, as I learned more about social work, I got more attracted towards it, making me take it up like my life's calling," recalls Vidyapathi.

When talking about his association with CSIM, he gets passionate and emotional even. He considers Mrs. Eva Rosalin as his guide and mentor. "When I thought I could never get back to studying a graduate degree, it was Mrs. Eva Rosalin who helped me in retrieving some xerox copies of my certificates. I have now enrolled in a Bachelor degree in Sociology through correspondence."

"At CSIM, my class contained a mixed group of students. Among them, were widows, single women, women living with HIV/Aids, tribals, and even transgenders. I would have ridiculed some of these very people due to my ignorance earlier, but at CSIM, I learnt about them and I felt proud to be associated with them. We all have faced troubles and sadness in one form or another and had come together to overcome this. We were a very charged group," says he.

At CSIM, Vidyapathi learnt to come up with long-term sustainable solutions to every problem. "Mrs. Eva Roselin and Mrs. Latha Suresh motivated me to explore opportunities. I learned budgeting from Ms. Marie Banu, who like the other two mentors, helped me to find myself. These three ladies were so different from my own mother, who was a typical servile housewife. Meeting them has changed my perspective on how I view women. Needless to say, nowadays I give a lot of respect to the strong influence a wife and mother can have in her family as well as in the society," he says.

"At CSIM I learnt most of the skills that help me in my profession today. I may not have a degree yet, but I can comfortably operate a computer, speak English, work on Tally software and much more. Even in my friends-circle, I am considered to be more knowledgeable. Prior to CSIM, if I saw a stone on the path, I would merely remove it and move

on. Now, I would ensure that the stone never comes in the way” adds he.

After visiting several NGO’s who were working on varied issues, and after briefly exploring maternal-child health issues, Vidyapathi zeroed in on being a career guidance counsellor and life-skills trainer at Ma Foi Foundation in Chennai.

The Ma Foi Foundation offers anywhere between 1500 to 2500 scholarships a year to deserving candidates who are children of single parents, and those who are orphaned but live with their guardian. Vidyapathi, in the capacity of a field officer, has taken under his wing 16 Boys’ Clubs out of a total of 95 that have been reached out to. He ensures that he maintains a brotherly relationship with the kids so that they may not hesitate to talk to him about their problems. Not just kids, but parents too have taken a liking for him.

“Last evening a mother called me up and requested me to talk to her son. Her husband was creating trouble at home and the boy was suffering from abuse and was getting withdrawn. I am happy to be of help in their time of need,” says Vidyapathi.

He accords the credit to his being outgoing and bold to Mr. Jayaseelan and Mr. Vasantabala of Ma Foi Foundation. “They gave me the opportunity to speak to an audience of hundreds of people at a time when I was very uncomfortable doing so. In my very first class, I blabbered. However, their constant encouragement and grooming helped me go a long way.” he says.

Vidyapathi says with great humility, “I always remember my roots, and my roots are the streets. The people that changed my life along the way always tell me that they and

I are equal. I can never forget them. When organizations like CSIM are at your arms reach, the least you can do is to turn and take a good look at them and be aware of their existence. If many more did this, we would be a much better society.”

About his training experiences and future plans, Vidyapathi says, “I am going to dedicate myself to the children who need a push. These children, in their years of growing up require just a handy tip or two along the way. Their education should be scientific, not moralistic. However, some simple values, such as treating your parents and wife well, should be inculcated by way of example and not as mere words of advice. After all, children are like diamonds. It is up to people like us to polish them well so that they may shine brightest.”

Indeed!

—*Archanaa R.*

*Vidyapathi can be reached at +91 9840837694*

*A series on the lives of  
backwards communities that were  
featured as Cover Stories*

**COMMUNITIES**



## A day with the Irulas

A scenic drive winding through lush green paddy fields and *casuarina* plantations led us to Pinnal Nagar, a Irula hamlet at Kalvoy village in Kancheepuram District where 28 Irula families live.

Sourana and Balaji, our contacts, seated us at the front of a concrete house. The entire community gathered curiously, and the children were the first to converse. They began with a rapid-fire round: "What is your name? Where do you come from? Can you speak Tamil?"

After introducing ourselves and explaining the purpose of our visit, Maragatham, an octogenarian, told us wistfully, "I don't know my age as I never attended school. I married

Singaram when I was young. We had two sons. My elder son Kanniappan died due to illness when he was 40 years' old, and my younger son Dorai lives with his family here."

Maragatham tried to hold back her tears while remembering Kanniappan. She paused for a moment and introduced us to Dorai. Adjusting her spectacle strap fashioned out of a thin rope, she said, "My husband used to catch snakes and sell its skin while I grazed cattle. In those days, men went hunting and women worked as agricultural coolies. We received paddy grain instead of money and led a simple life eating fruits from the forest, rabbits, and rats. After the Indian Government banned the sale of snake skins in 1972, my husband also worked as a farmhand."

While I was engrossed conversing with Maragatham, four-year-old Punitha came up behind me and touched my hand. When I shuddered – I imagined snakes everywhere – she giggled.

Sourana drew herself closer and said, "Irula children join their parents in the hunt for rats and rabbits and can hold a snake with ease. Although educated, they follow our traditional customs and food habits."

Sourana, 35, is the Director of Adhivasi Social Service Educational Trust (ASSET) and has completed the Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management at CSIM. When I asked how the Irulas made a living after the government imposed a ban on selling snake skins, she said, "As they had no other skill, they earned their living by doing coolie work. They either worked as farmhands during the sowing and harvesting seasons or worked in rice mills. They collected firewood from the forest to sell, and also engaged in fishing."

Post-tsunami, Sourana and Balaji were employed at Irula Tribal Women Welfare Society (ITWWS), a non-governmental organisation at Thandarai in Chengelpet for over three years. In 2009, they together launched ASSET with the objective of educating and empowering the Irula community.

Speaking about their advocacy efforts, Sourana said: “Out of the 37 tribes listed under the Scheduled Tribe category, Irula ranks fourth. It was a challenge for us to obtain ration cards and community certificates for our members, which is a necessary proof to avail government benefits like free school uniforms, fee scholarship, subsidy, and bank loans. We found it difficult to prove to the government that we belonged to the Irula community as they were of the impression that we would wear dirty clothes and appear shabby. At times, our community members had to even sing the traditional Irula song to prove their genuineness.”

The Irula population in Tamil Nadu is estimated at six lakh. They are also found in various parts of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Karnataka. At Kalvoy village in Tamil Nadu there are about 91 families with a population of 320 who live in several settlements, and Pinnal Nagar is one of them. The government had allotted five acres of land to Pinnal, an Irula, in 1968 to establish his settlement, and today 28 families belonging to his lineage live here.

Most of the houses are thatched or semi-thatched and each has access to electricity and tap water. In 2009, the government of Tamil Nadu offered four families a grant of Rs. 75,000 each to construct concrete houses under the ‘Kalaingar Veettu Vasathi Thittam’ that was launched in 2010. This six-year programme aims to convert eligible huts in rural areas into concrete-roofed permanent houses

by 2016. Of the 131,241 houses that were identified in Kancheepuram District for construction, scheduled tribes were allocated a quota of 2.8 percent.

“I was the first Irula at Kalvoy to complete my tenth standard. I used to go hunting along with my father for snakes and rats when I was young. After I got married in 1995, I engaged in social work. I now work as an insurance agent and spend my free time to serve my community,” said Balaji, Treasurer, ASSET.

As part of the Trust activities, Sourana and Balaji also run a free tuition centre in one of the thatched houses at Pinnal Nagar. “All the 20 children from this settlement study in government schools at Kilkalvoy and Melkalvoy and attend our tuition centre during evenings and weekends. We are planning to construct a bigger centre so that the children from the neighbouring hamlets can also attend. Besides studies, the children are taught music and dance and we have a cultural team that performs during school events and festivals,” said Sourana.

Whilst Sourana was leading us to the temple, we heard a loud shriek. We saw Balaji hold a five-foot snake that squirmed restlessly. “This is ‘garandiya’ (rat-snake) and is harmless. They come to feed on rats,” he said, proudly holding the snake by the neck. Ramesh, 15, wanted to hold it and pose for a picture and the rest of the children surrounded Balaji to have a close look.

Hiding my fear, I slowly slid away into one of the concrete houses and waited until Balaji released the snake in the nearby hillock. The stench of the snake was unbearable even from a distance of about 100 meters.

When he returned, we asked him to show us the rat burrows

and demonstrate a capture. He promptly led us to the wasteland nearby, punched the fresh mud patches with a pole, and in one of the burrows caught two rats. “Do you know that these rats are healthier than chicken as they feed on herbs?” he asked rhetorically.

He carried them quietly to the hamlet and gave it to one of the community members. “Our ancestors used to depend on these rats for their food. When they found grains in the burrows, they spared the rat as a token of gratitude. But, today these will be served for dinner,” he added.

As dusk neared, we noticed some children settling with their books to study. Sasi, 15, a first generation school-goer, was preparing for her tenth standard board examination. “I want to become a doctor. I would like to serve my community by offering free medicine and treatment. Although I scored only 200 marks in the model examination, I am working very hard to excel in the board examination,” she said with hope.

Govindammal, 13, was helping her disabled grandmother Anjalakshmi grind mint leaves into a chutney on the grinding stone, and the aroma filled the air. Deenadayal led us to the nearby tree where the children were playing on the swing made of an old saree tied to a tree.

As we headed towards our vehicle, the children followed us and asked eagerly when we would come again.

—*Marie Banu*

*Irulas are a scheduled tribe who are present in various parts of India, but mainly located in the district of Tamil Nadu. They are known as snake and rat catchers. They are reported to be in possession of excellent medico-botanical knowledge of herbal wealth and related vegetation in their immediate vicinities. Prior to the Indian Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, the Irulas were one of the leading suppliers of snake skins to the global exotic skin industry. The hunting of snakes for their skins was eventually banned in 1972 to prevent the local extinction of several species and this deprived them of their main source of livelihood.*

*All Irulas worship the virgin goddess Kanniamman. There are two important festivals in their calendar. One is for their goddess Kanniamman; the other is the spectacular Maasi festival that is celebrated on a full moon day by the sea.*





## Big Fish, Small Fish

It was a quiet, lazy Sunday morning when we set out to Thailamkuppam, a fishing hamlet near Ennore, 24 kilometers north of *Chennai Port*. The roads were free, and we cruised. No one looked hurried, worried. Men sipped tea by the roadside, women ambled about in their night gowns. At one place we stopped for directions, a woman stood chatting, a parrot perched on her shoulder.

And then, almost suddenly, the scene changed. We had reached the fish market.

It was around 8:30 am. The fisherwomen were going past us with a great sense of purpose, the baskets on their heads spilling with fish, shrimp, and crabs. They looked straight ahead as they walked, and it was obvious that they all had

very little time to cash their catch.

We stood there pondering over whom to start conversing with. It was then that Anjala caught our eye. She stood tall amidst a group of fisher women, and beside her were about 15 baskets of fish, prawns, and crabs spread out. We were told that she was the auctioneer, some kid of local boss woman. She was about to begin the auction, and we wormed our way through the crowd to get a closer look.

While Anjala waited for more baskets to arrive, a few women grew restless. She raised her shrill voice and controlled all of them instantly. She exuded authority, it came to her naturally. She had presence.

She asked us if we had also come to buy fish. When we explained the purpose of our visit, she gladly offered her support. She was happy to talk – all fisherwomen do, it is a professional skill – but Anjala was camera shy. Each time she saw the camera point at her, she would freeze. We let her be, deciding to catch her unawares later.

She started the auction by pointing towards Kadal Azhagi's basket that had mackerel in it. Her first bid for 100 rupees triggered higher bids from vendors. In less than two minutes the first basket was sold for 300 rupees. She reminded me of a shark. An uncharitable comparison perhaps, but she was certainly the big fish in this market.

Anjala handed over the sale money to Kadal Azhagi and got 10 rupees in return. She was a consummate negotiator, this unlettered woman with fire in her eyes.

"Is that all?" I inquired.

"Well, I have 14 more baskets to sell," she replied politely.

She quickly went on to bid the second basket that had prawns. In the rapidfire auction that lasted less than half hour, Anjala had sold all the 15 baskets.

Each of those who had offered their basket for the auction paid Anjala ten rupees and gifted her with four or five fishes. She now had her basket with an assortment of fishes which I presumed was for her consumption.

I was wrong.

She sold her fish for 30 rupees to a vendor and sat calmly with her empty basket under the shade. She smiled at me and signaled me to come closer to her.

“Why did you give away the fish? What will you cook today?” I asked.

“I need money to buy rice. What could I do with fish alone?” she said truthfully. She added that her family did not like the ration rice provided by the government, and therefore she needed to purchase rice at 30 rupees per kg.

Anjala, 58, lives at Thailamkuppam with her husband and two sons. She has been engaging in auction for over 30 years now. “To engage in this trade, I don’t need an investment. All I need is a loud assertive voice,” she said with a smile.

Like Anjala, there were four more women who were engaged in auctioning at the market place, but had not finished their task for the day as yet.

The hustle and bustle in the market was intoxicating. There were women crushing ice, vendors selling tea and juice, and small shops selling snacks, *puris* and *idlis*.

The fisherwomen were being themselves, least dissuaded by our presence. Desa Thiyagi approached us along with her

friend Malliga and requested us to take their picture. Seating herself on her steel basket, she said: “My husband and my son leave for fishing early in the morning along with three other fishermen. I auction the catch in this market regularly. I could sell the prawns for only 500 rupees today. This money would not be enough to meet the fuel expense as well as to pay for the three other fishermen,” she lamented.

“Our day starts as soon as the boats arrive from the sea. At times it is very early in the morning. On such occasions, I have my breakfast in one of the tiffin shops here,” added Thiyagi.

The fisherwomen who had bought the fish at the auction put them in their baskets and immediately bought one or two measures of crushed ice to cover the fish with. They then settled for some tea before they set off to sell the catch.

Latha, our contact and a NGO worker at SEWA, gave us a brief background of the fishing community living here.

“There are over 3000 families living across the Ennore coast, and in this market alone there are about 70 fish vendors. The present generation does not venture into fishing as most of them are educated and prefer to work as labour in the neighbouring industries that pay a wage of 200 rupees a day,” she quipped.

“Post tsunami, 350 women self-help groups, each consisting of 15 members, was provided financial assistance by the government as well as NGOs. The fisher women used their micro-credit loans to invest in fish vending or small enterprise. Due to depletion in the fish population, the fisherfolk could not repay their loans. This led them to borrow money from private moneylenders at an interest rate of 3 to 5 percent. With the recent Thane cyclone, the catch

has further reduced. They continue to struggle to meet their daily needs," she sighed.

After taking a walk around the market place, we entered a building which had stalls for vendors. There were two rows, twelve stalls on either side. Each of the stalls had granite slabs and was neatly laid out. "We need to pay ten rupees to the stall owner every day, no matter whether we have sales or not. The shelf life of the fish is only four to five hours without ice. During summer the crushed ice costs more, and so I give away the unsold fish to a dry fish vendor," said Backiam.

Most of the women in the market were well turned out in colourful saris. Samyuktha was seated outside the market with an *aruwamanai* (a traditional Indian cutter) cheerfully attending to her customers who were waiting to have their fish cleaned and cut. She wore torn gloves smeared with blood.

"I do not have enough money to invest in fish. I earn ten rupees for every kilo of fish that I cut and clean. On an average I am able to make 50 to 70 rupees a day. Being single, this is more than enough for me," she concluded.

A few fish vendors were seen transporting the fish that they had bought at the auction to the nearby market. "We can sell these at a higher price in the city market. Today being a Sunday, our regular customers would visit us," said Kala.

We expressed to Latha our desire to interact with the boatmen, and she led us to the seashore at Nethaji Nagar, a neighbouring hamlet. Steering our way through the boats and catamarans, we noticed Amar and Dharmaraj removing mackerel and sardine from the fishing net. "We just returned from the sea. These fishes would fetch us only 200 rupees.

My wife will take them to the market for sale and would give me 50 rupees in the evening," said a disappointed Amar.

Narayanan, Ramesh, and Masilamani, who had also returned from the sea, joined us in the conversation and complained about their catch as well.

Few children from the neighbourhood were swimming in the sea, and the men were watching over them. "Our community children learn to swim at a very early age and all of them attend school," said Narayanan with pride.

Ten-year-old Katabomman was found walking a crab at the shore. He had tied it to a thin string and played with it as if it was a toy. We were awe struck by his creativity.

Not wanting to interrupt his play, we quietly moved away from the shore.

—Marie Banu





## Always in Salt Mines

“I don’t remember since when but I have always worked here”, said Chinnathambi, 60-year-old salt pan labourer at Lurdhammalpuram, near Therespuram, a fishing hamlet in Tuticorin. This hamlet was affected by the tsunami in December 2004.

He looked uninterested in conversing with a group of journalism students since he was busy getting the salt pan ready for the next cycle of cultivation. He has never gone to a school and is entirely dependent on the salt pan for his livelihood.

The salt pan is owned by a Naadar, a dominant caste in Tuticorin while Chinnathambi belongs to Paravar community which is classified as Most Backward Class. This caste equation prevails not only in the salt industry, but also in fisheries where the boat owners are Naadars and the labourers are of most backward or scheduled caste. It holds good even in field of agriculture. Chinnathambi earns Rs.190 a day while his wife who also works at a salt pan earns

Rs.180 a day—these are the standard wages for salt pan labourers across the district.

Chinnathambi has three sons and one daughter. One of his sons is married and runs his own family. The other children are studying in private schools. So, five people in Chinnathambi’s house manage on Rs.370 a day.

Standing under the scorching sun, Chinnathambi’s bare foot kept pounding the mud. He has not received the gumboots that he is entitled to, nor has he received the gloves, cap, and goggles that all the salt pan labourers are entitled to under the labour welfare schemes formulated by Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

Some salt pan owners had given their employees money to buy footwear and goggles, but Chinnathambi’s owner did not give him any. “I can only see a silhouette of the people standing there,” says Chinnathambi pointing at two girls who were standing some 200 metres away. He has become partially blind due to the glare of the sun reflected off the salt. It’s not just Chinnathambi, who has been working in the salt pan for many decades that encounters this problem. Mani, 42, who works at the same salt pan for over 10 years, also complains of poor eye sight. “Although the government does not organize medical camps, Aravind Eye Hospital conducts eye camps twice a year which is beneficial,” says Chinnathambi.

Chinnathambi works every day from 8 am to 1 pm, except on Sundays, in the salt pans. The salt pan he works is filled with spilled-over garbage that is dumped by the corporation and the poultry. Therefore, he along with other labourers has to clean the pans regularly apart from monitoring the manufacturing process.

Salt pan labourers are left without employment for four months in a year due to the rains. During these days, Chinnathambi and his wife meet their expenses by borrowing from the moneylenders at an interest rate of 10 percent. Generally, 160 grams of gold is demanded as dowry among the salt pan labourers of his locality. Although his daughter receives the government scholarship of Rs.1000 for her education, his burden is still not reduced. He has to educate his other children who study in a private school and also save for his daughter's wedding. His debts keep accumulating and he says that he somehow has to manage them to lead on with his life.

There is regular supply of commodities in the nearby ration shop. However, the quality of rice given free by the government is extremely poor, and he offers it to those who need goat feed. Chinnathambi therefore ends up spending money to buy better quality rice from shops outside. The government hospital where he can avail free medical facilities is located seven kilometers away. So, in case of an emergency he will have to rush only to a private hospital that is closer to his locality.

To add to his agonies, the government has asked him and other residents of Lurdhammalpuram to vacate their houses. They are being offered houses far away from their workplace and Chinnathambi who walks to the salt pan every day would have to spend on transportation if he moves to the new residence.

Chinnathambi who toils to add taste to food served elsewhere does not seem to taste debt-free happiness.

— *Saradha.V*  
*Asian College of Journalism*



## Before the Curtain Rises

An hour's drive from Chennai, far from the hustle and bustle of a metro, lies Punjarasantankal. A village difficult to pronounce, Punjarasantankal sits eight kilometers from the town of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu.

Winding through the narrow roads, we reached Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam. Kattaikkuttu is a form of rural theatre in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu.

The Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam or Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School was established in 2002 by Rajagopal and Dr. Hanne M. de Bruin with the objective of training a new generation of Kattaikkuttu performers. The Gurukulam is the first residential theatre school where young people can learn the art without having to give up their formal education. The school enables students to combine comprehensive

education with training as professional Kattaikkuttu actors or musicians.

Sivaranjini, 8, and Eesvari Devi, 10, welcomed us at the entrance with sandalwood paste, flowers, and sugar candy and led us to the hall which doubles as stage. The special visitor today, Mr. Bob Hiensch, Netherlands Ambassador, was already seated. Dr. Hanne, a Dutch lady who settled in India in 1990, greeted and introduced us to her spouse Rajagopal, a Kattaikkuttu actor, teacher, playwright and director. Dr. Hanne was strikingly tall and attired an olive green saree. She was at ease conversing in Tamil with the children and the audience.

Dr. Hanne has a Ph.D. in *Kattaikkuttu* and is the author of numerous books and articles on (marginalized) Indian art forms, such as Kattaikkuttu. She settled in Kanchipuram in 1990 and supports Rajagopal in managing the theatre school. The school is run under the auspices of the Kattaikkuttu Sangam, an association run for and by professional Kattaikkuttu performers.

I felt at home instantly and seated myself near the stage while my friend AK set off with his camera to capture interesting scenes both before and behind the curtain.

Over 20 children, aged between 5 and 18, sat on the floor in neat rows and about 12 children waited in the green room. The make-up artists (senior students and apprentices) spent over an hour on performers to transform them into a demon, monkey, *sanyasi*, joker, or alien. The musicians tuned their instruments while the performers arrived backstage with their props.

Dr. Hanne gave a pithy introduction about Kattaikkuttu to the audience: "Most traditional Kattaikkuttu performances

are based on selected episodes from the epic *Mahabharata* adapted to the local situation. Plays feature universal emotions and dilemmas of valor, jealousy, hatred, love, grief and despair, loyalty to one's family and friends, and folly. The play you are about to see, however, is written for children. On the request of his youngest students, Rajagopal (the author) incorporated special characters—a monkey and a doctor—in this contemporary children's play."

After a moment of silence, the show began.

Rajagopal sang at high pitch and set the tone for the show. Musicians Rangasamy, Velusamy, and Loganathan took their turn to beat the drums, play the *mukavinai* and harmonium.

Selvarasu, 11, made a dramatic entry from behind a veil and captured the audience with his shrill voice and stomping feet. He was playing the role of Maha Bhoodham, demon, the centre piece of this act. The rest of the characters — monkey, alien, and children — joined him. After making a swift circle, a traditional custom while making an entry on stage, they enacted a story about two children and a monkey who approach the demon to save the aliens who have landed on earth by accident. The children request the demon to use his magical powers and send the aliens back to the planet where they have come from.

When the demon (Selvarasu) banged his sword on the bench, I startled. At first, it was difficult for me to decipher the dialogues, but as time passed by I comprehended the story.

The audience broke into a loud applause when Selvarasu said: "Why do we need aliens on earth when we have enough people here already?"

After the first play ended, Doraisamy, 19, and Murthy, 18, entertained the audience with their slapstick comedy. Their clown make-up and spontaneous reactions made the audience double up with laughter.

Dr. Hanne then stepped onto the stage and narrated a synopsis of the next play that was to be staged—‘Subhadra’s wedding’—which was enacted by Jothi (Balaraman), Mahalakshmi (Krishna) and Tamilarasi (Arjuna).

Awe-struck by their performance, we wondered how much time these children would have spent to learn this art. Dr. Hanne led us to the library and classrooms on the seven-acre campus. Apart from books, the library had simple lab equipment. “Most of the children hail from the villages in the four northern districts of Tamil Nadu. The parents of some of these children are also Kattaikkuttu performers. Children are taught Kattaikkuttu for only three hours in a day. The rest of the time they learn academics and can opt to learn a musical instrument. After eight years, and going through a junior and a senior phase and performing in the school’s professional repertory company, the children graduate. Selected graduates can work in the Gurukulam as apprentices and become assistant trainers in the school, in addition to learning financial and management skills. We have seven apprentices in our campus now,” said Dr. Hanne.

Apprentices Doraisamy and Murthy were walking towards the green room to remove their make-up when I stopped them for a chat. Murthy was spontaneous, Doraisamy was shy. “My father is a Kattaikuttu performer. I was interested to learn this art, so I joined Kattaikkuttu Sangam when I was 9. I now work as an apprentice and earn Rs. 3500 per month,” said Murthy. I am also a member of the

Kattaikkuttu Young Professionals Company. For each all-night show of the company we get paid an additional Rs. 300. Last year the Company did 40 all-night shows in villages. I am also pursuing my graduation in commerce through correspondence. I love this art and will continue to perform even after I complete my one-year tenure here.”

Doraisamy too said he’d like to continue performing Kattaikkuttu even after his apprenticeship. His dream is to head the ‘comedy department’, which he envisages the school will need to have ten years from now.

Rajagopal, who was quietly observing our conversation remarked, “Till date, over 18 children have been trained in this art and are professional performers. We have bookings from neighbouring villages to perform during festivals and special occasions. The money earned from these performances is shared with the children and is remitted into their savings account. I want my children to perform in cities and towns as well. This art has a lot of value and needs appreciation and visibility.”

It was interesting to watch the children remove their make-up. They first dampened their faces with coconut oil, and then used a cloth to remove the make-up. While every child was capable of doing this task, younger children were assisted by their older mates. This was one extended family.

A delectable south Indian meal was served, and we feasted.

We meandered around the sparkling clean premises, no one stopped us. The rooms where the boys and girls resided had shelves that were neatly arranged with clothes and beddings. There were also guest houses that can accommodate 25 people.

“With 51 children in the campus, how is it possible to maintain it so clean?” I asked Sundaralakshmi, the head of education, who also oversees the kitchen. She smiled and replied: “All our children are disciplined. Our volunteers educate them on health and hygiene practices at the start itself.”

We met Puck, Rebecca, and Alex who were at the Kattaikkuttu Sangam on three to six-months internships. While Puck and Rebecca are students of nursing from Holland, Alex is a voice trainer from Greece. Kattaikkuttu encourages volunteers to serve as interns. The school would love to have volunteer English teacher from India, too, but so far no candidates have come forth.

We heard sounds of musical instruments, and while we wondered if there was yet another performance, we were told that the children were practicing.

Dr. Hanne and I went to the room where the girls were rehearsing. Thilagavathy, 22, an apprentice, was training the younger children in dance. It was a treat to one’s eye to see little children emote mythological characters. Sivaranjani, the youngest of all, was shy to perform in my presence. We slowly exited, allowing them to practice at ease.

“Kattaikkuttu Sangam is a university in itself. Children feel this to be their second home,” said Dr. Hanne. “They are away from their family tensions and more importantly free from poverty and malnutrition. They are provided food, clothing, and shelter, besides education and training in Kattaikkuttu. We have these children because of their talents—each of them is special—and not because they are from disadvantaged backgrounds. We treat all of them equal; boys and girls learn exactly and do the same chorus: in this once all-male theatre tradition, girls perform male roles, while boys learn here to sweep and cook. All of them are like

our children. They address me as *Paati* meaning grandmother and Rajagopal as *Thaatha* or grandfather. Parents and guardians of the children visit during weekends. They are happy to see their children grow in a healthy environment.”

Children return to their family once they finish their school education after 12th standard. A few children who have completed eight years of training in Kattaikkuttu opt to serve as apprentices here.

It was time for us to leave, and while approaching our car we noticed children playing in a clay ditch. With muddy hands, they showed us a crab and a few shrimps they had found. And at one little request, they gave us an exclusive impromptu performance of a monkey dance.

If all the world’s a stage, as Shakespeare said, this was going to be our favourite one. Encore!

—Marie Banu





## The God Makers of Kosapet

Winding through the narrow lanes at Kosapet, a shantytown in central Chennai, we reach the cluster of 20 families which are engaged in making gods and other figurines out of clay. These families belong to the Kuyavar community and had been engaged in pottery for over three generations.

As the city expanded, these families found it difficult to continue their occupation due to lack of space. They shifted their occupation from pottery to making of clay dolls.

Jagadeesh, our NGO contact, led us to Jayanthi's home. A 100-square feet space, which is supposed to have been the drawing room, doubles as a cottage industry. The room was piled with hundreds of clay gods of different sizes and colours. The strong odor of paint did not seem to bother the

women. Jayanthi, 33, was seated in the middle of the room, painting one of the idols of Krishna, while Koushalya and Indira were applying the base paint for the rest.

"I am an ordinary person. What is it that you want me to say?" Jayanthi replied when I asked her to tell me her story.

Jayanthi paused for a while, delegated work to her employees, and started the conversation. I stood gingerly in a corner of the room, careful not to step on any of the gods while my friend AK got busy with his camera.

"I am engaged in doll-making since the age of five. My father Perumal was managing this unit and I used to mould about 300 dolls a day for which I was paid five rupees. I spent two to three hours a day and worked even on Sunday," she said.

"As I was allowed to spend the money that I earned on chocolates and ice cream, I was more than willing to work here. In those days, five rupees a day was quite a substantial amount to spend on snacks though."

Speaking of her education, she said, "I studied up to the eighth standard in a corporation school. As my father could not afford to educate me further, I started to work full-time. Now, I manage this doll-making unit as my father has grown old. He is 62."

For a moment I got distracted when I saw a coconut shell half-filled with gold paint. I looked around the room and noticed that there were many such shells filled with different colors. Sensing my curiosity to know how these dolls were made, Jayanthi explained: "Making these idols is a cumbersome process. The last two days I was working at another site where we store the clay. My feet ache now. A lorry load of clay costs Rs 2000. We do not have any

machines to soften the clay, so we need to keep stamping on it until it turns soft. The neighbours object to the fumes emitted while firing the clay, so we choose a different site to work on this."

"The dolls are then brought home. We apply patti to adjust any defects in the figurine, and then paint layer after layer. While my employees work on the base coat, I draw the features and add glitter for each of the idols," she said.

Jayanthi has two children Latha, 14, and Kumar, 12, who study in a private school. "I want to educate them as much as I can. My daughter wants to become a computer engineer. I should get her a computer when she goes to the tenth standard," she sighed.

Hundreds of Krishna and Ganesha idols were lined up to get dried. Jayanthi began giving finishing touches to a baby Krishna. "A mould costs between Rs 500 to Rs 10,000. The Krishna mould costs Rs 500 and I can make only 1,000 dolls from one mould. The wholesale dealers procure about 15,000 to 20,000 idols from us every year at a price of Rs 20 per piece and sell it for Rs 30. These idols have a lot of demand during the navarathiri season. It is only during the month of September and October that we have sales happening. Until then, we stock these idols in our own homes."

I asked how she managed her monthly family expenses until then.

"I borrow around 25,000 rupees a month from private moneylenders on a five percent interest. I need this money to manage my family as well as to meet the doll-making unit expenses. When I need to pay my children's school fees or when I need to meet a medical expense, I borrow an extra 10,000 rupees," Jayanthi explained.

I asked her how she earned from this doll-making.

"I earn an annual income of around five lakh rupees, most of which is used to repay the loan. The moneylender offers me a fresh loan only after I have cleared my dues. Therefore, I have hardly any money left to invest for my next season. This cycle continues."

Perumal, her father, joined our conversation and said, "The cost of paint has increased three times in the last four years due to the rise in diesel price. Likewise, the cost of other products has also increased."

Jayanthi is a leader of a self-help group (SHG) that offers a micro credit of Rs 3,750 to each member. "The micro credit offered by the SHG would hardly fetch me 15 tins of paint, which is a drop in the ocean of expenses that I have," she said. "Banks do not offer loans either, so I have to depend on private moneylenders. I had borrowed 6 lakh rupees three years ago to construct this home, and am yet to repay it," she complained.

"Then, why do you want to work in this trade if you can't earn enough?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know any other trade. If I work in an export company, I would earn only around Rs 2,000 to Rs 3,000. This would not suffice to maintain my family. The solace I have is that I can work from home, my children are studying, and we have enough food to eat," she concluded.

As the evening neared, we went around the neighbourhood to interact with the other doll-makers, dodging the many kittens and stray dogs that lay scattered in the narrow byways.

I was led to the home of Kumar and Lakshmi. The couple

spoke casually about their lives as doll-makers and when I asked if working together and staying under one roof all the time led to any misunderstanding, Kumar remarked: "Misunderstanding happens only when the husband is away from the wife and a third person barges into our lives. We don't allow this to happen and so we are very happy."

I continued visiting more houses in the vicinity. While most of them were winding up their day's work, I found a senior couple still working. Govindasamy, 66, was moulding dolls along with his wife Meena, 55.

"We are paid three rupees for each doll that is moulded. The mould and clay is provided by our owner. On an average we are able to earn Rs 150 a day and this is enough to meet our living expenses," said Meena. "I used to sell vegetables, but after getting all my three daughters married, I joined my husband in moulding dolls. We live with one of our daughters and we don't want to be a burden on her,"

We bid adieu to the couple and walked towards our car. On the way, we saw an old house where women were busy making bigger gods in bright purple and yellow. Outside their home, a man and his wife were stamping on clay on the roadside. Life was just about beginning for the next set of dolls which some day would sit pretty in homes across the city.

—*Marie Banu*



## Blistering Bricks

The sun was blazing and summer was its peak at 42 degrees when we drove along Poonamalee high road to document the lives of the brick kiln workers at Aranavoyal, a village located 32 kilometers from Chennai.

Our NGO contact Logammal led us to the brick kiln that was situated near the main road at Aranavoyal. An iron pole served as a check post at the entrance of the brick kiln that was spread over 10 acres of land. After Logammal explained the purpose of our visit, the gate was opened for us.

It was around 3 in the afternoon. We stepped out of the car and walked towards a cluster of women and children. After introducing ourselves, AK set off to take pictures while I walked around seeking shade for the interview.

I saw a large thatched structure and doubled my speed to reach this place. Just then, I noticed Murugan, 38, stepping out of this shed. I stopped him and enquired if he would be interested to talk to *Conversations*. "How long will you take? I can give you three minutes. Ask quickly what you want," he said instantly.

"I will try to finish in less than two minutes," I replied. I was confident to convince him to converse for a longer time.

We stepped into the thatched shed that was lined up with bricks waiting for their turn to get burnt. In less than a minute, Murugan stacked some bricks and offered it to me as a seat. I was overwhelmed with his hospitality and asked him to also seat himself and said that he was going to be the hero for my story.

Murugan was thrilled to hear this and this set the beginning for our conversation.

"I hail from Thirunavallur at Villupuram district and belong to the Parayar (scheduled caste) community. I have been engaged in brick-making for over 15 years. During monsoon, I work as an agricultural labourer. Agriculture work is less cumbersome, but I get paid only Rs. 120 a day. My wife Jaya and I earn around 1,000 to 1,200 rupees a day in the brick kiln," he said.

"During Pongal, the harvest festival, our owner offers an interest-free loan of Rs. 70,000 to each of the 20 families who live here. We repay the loan amount in installments at the time of receiving our weekly payment," he added. Looking around the land where the sand was piled up, I enquired about the work at the brick kiln.

"Our owner procures sand from a dealer which is heaped

here. We then transfer small portions of the sand using a manual trolley and prepare the clay by adding water to it. We use a spade to turn the sand every two hours to make it soft, and leave it overnight to set."

"A length of 25 footsteps is measured on a clean patch of land and the softened clay is placed in three rows. Clay is taken by hand and moulded into bricks one by one. These moulded bricks are then stacked twelve per column and allowed to dry in the sun. They are left to dry for two days and turned over to facilitate uniform drying."

I looked around the thatched shed with awe at about 30,000 bricks in it. While I wondered how much of labour had gone into making these bricks, Murugan's son Surya, 8, stepped into the shed and in a moment started climbing the bricks that were lined up beside me.

"We start our day's work around 2 am and finish laying the bricks before the heat sets in. We rest at 10 am and commence work again at 3 pm. We use a tool to straighten the bricks and obtain a smooth surface. Once it is dried, they are then stacked in this shed. My wife and I can set 3,000 bricks in a day easily," said a proud Murugan.

About ten children from the colony surrounded us and drew our attention by playing pranks and laughing at each other. Murugan's daughter Jothika was shy and so was his son Dorai .

I requested Murugan to demonstrate the making of bricks and he readily obliged. Jaya helped Murugan and within a minute the bricks were moulded.

Not wanting to bother Murugan further, we took leave of him and thanked his family for their time.

The children joined us as we walked through the colony where the Goundar community lived. Here, we met Sushila who was leaning against a wall. When we enquired about the work at the brick chamber, she immediately rose and led us to the chamber.

“The chimney passes through a tunnel burning the bricks on rotation. About 15,000 bricks are laid in this chamber and it takes two days for the entire set of bricks to get burnt. Coal is used as fuel,” she explained.

“We are paid Rs. 1,350 a week which is much lesser than those who earn by making the raw bricks. In fact, it is because of our labour these bricks can be put to use,” she added.

The heat did not deter these families from work and it seemed as if they were all charged with solar energy. While I complained about the weather being unbearable, Sushila concluded saying, “It is this heat that gives us food.”

As the evening drew to a close we bid adieu to these families and headed towards our vehicle. We waved goodbye until we lost sight of each other.

—*Marie Banu*



## The Fine Strands

Kattunayakan means ‘the king of the jungle’ in Tamil. They are one of the earliest known inhabitants of the Western Ghats engaged collection and gathering of forest produce, mainly wild honey and wax.

The Kattunayakans believe in Hinduism and speak in a language which is a concoction of all Dravidian languages. The main deity of the tribe is Lord Shiva under the name of Bhairava. They also worship animals, birds, trees, rock hillocks, and snakes.

Displaced from their natural habitat, many of them have

taken to a different livelihood in cities, often living in urban squalor. The Conversations team spent an evening with 44 families of the Kattunayakan community live in Ennore, a suburb in Chennai. These families make wigs.

As we wound our way through the narrow lanes, we saw a group of women approaching us. One of them, a middle-aged woman, urged us to walk towards the first lane to our left. My NGO contact Latha introduced her as Mariamma, a wig-maker.

We followed Mariamma's instructions and just before we took the bend to our left, we noticed men and women waiting in front of their homes and children seated on the compound walls. The lane, which seemed to be less than five meters in width, was lined with open drainage. They were all curious to know who we were, where we came from, and why we were visiting them.

Latha introduced us to the community and explained the purpose of our visit. Mariamma instantly went inside her home and brought a plastic bag which had human hair and bamboo frames in it.

While I looked for space to do my interview, I saw AK craning with his camera in whatever little space was available.

The women cleared the path in front of Mariamma's house and sat on the ground to demonstrate the making of wigs. They seemed to be least disturbed by the drainage stench and the dust on the road. They spread out the raw material on the bare road, picked up the hair in parts, and started working on the wigs. I noticed that the raw material had human hair of varied sizes and wondered how this could be made into a wig of at least 12 inches length.

Just then, Masi, 58, the head of the Kattunayaka community at Ennore, emerged from the crowd and seated himself beside the women. He commanded authority and initiated the conversation.

"I am the guru for all these wig-makers here. I have been engaged in wig-making since I was 16-years' old," he said, holding out a bamboo frame.

I was glad to have the guru of wig makers as my first interviewee and asked him about the wig making process.

"We first weave the hair in this bamboo frame. We then attach small parts of hair to get the desired length. I can make a wig (hair extension) of about 12 inches length in about an hour's time and in a day I can make up to 10 wigs. I sell each wig for between 30 and 150 rupees depending on the quality and size, "Masi told me. "On an average I earn around Rs. 2,000 a month."

"For how long have you been living here?" I asked.

"We are a nomadic community that settled in Ennore 40 years ago. We lived here in thatched huts for over eight years while this land was owned by Mr. Ramamurthy Iyer, a Village Muncif (leader). It was then given to us free of cost by Mr. Ramamurthy Iyer. Each of the 44 families who lived here was offered one and a half cent of land to construct a house. Most of us stayed to live here, while a few sold their land to others," he replied.

Mariamma signaled me to come closer to her. I slowly slid away from Masi and asked Mariamma to tell us about her family and the income she earned from wig-making.

"I am a widow with four children. My oldest daughter is married and one of my sons has completed his tenth standard. The other two sons are studying in the

neighbouring government school. I can make up to 12 to 15 wigs a day and travel to Parrys corner and T Nagar to sell these wigs," she said, heaving a sigh.

"We purchase human hair from the local barbers and beauty parlours in the city. We cannot afford to buy good quality human hair that is sold in Tirupati as these are meant for the export market and are sold in tonnes. We therefore buy nylon hair that is sold by a retailer near the temple at a much lower price. This costs Rs. 750 per kilogram, and we can make 15 wigs in this. Each wig is sold for Rs. 60, which means that we earn a profit of Rs. 10 per nylon wig," she added.

"Does your income suffice to meet your family needs?" I enquired.

"No. I cannot afford to cook twice a day, therefore I cook only dinner. I save a portion of this meal to serve as lunch for us the next day. We eat all kinds of meat, except humans and dogs. We cannot afford to buy lamb or beef, hence hunt for cats, pigs, turtle, squirrel, myna, or sparrow. Cat meat is a delicacy," she said with a smile adding, "I leave home around 9 am to sell the wigs to local customers in the city and return by 6 pm. There are days when I do not make even a single sale. My children and I also engage in rag-picking to earn some money, but that too does not suffice," she said.

The wig-makers who live in this colony were mostly poorly clad. The average family size was seven and there were around 200 children in this colony. All the families held ration cards and all the children studied in the neighbouring government schools.

I asked if the government provided the community with any

benefits.

"The government has not bothered about us at all. We only have a ration card. That's all!" Mariamma complained.

When I asked her if she was seeking support from the government or NGOs, her response was immediate: "An institute in Erukencherry is engaged in wig-making on a larger scale and has a good export market. They have specialized machines and offer training to women. If only they can train us, we can earn much more."

Latha intervened and mentioned that she was working on this request already.

As the evening drew closer, we bid adieu to the community. We saw a huge crowd following us until we reached our car. The crowd that had first appeared curious now seemed hopeful of obtaining support .

—*Marie Banu*





## Divine Duo

Dr. Regi and Dr. Lalitha, fondly addressed by the tribals as 'G' and 'Tha' are the founders of the Tribal Health Initiative (THI) at Sittilingi, a village situated on the hillocks, about 100 kilometers from Salem. Regi is a surgeon and an anesthetist and Lalitha is a gynecologist. Both pursued their medical degree at Allepey Medical College and together decided to work towards providing health care for the tribal communities.

Here is an interesting story on how they started their work at Sittilingi and about the tribes who live here.

"After completing our Medical degree in 1987, we worked in Gandhigram hospital at Dindugal for a while. We wanted to not just work in a hospital, but instead move one step ahead. After we had our first child, I left Lalitha behind, and visited

tribal areas across India. This is because we learnt that the tribals were neglected due to inaccessibility and lacked health care facilities," said Regi.

Trekking with just a backpack, Regi George visited several tribal hamlets to locate an ideal place to launch their mission—providing health care for the tribal communities. During his journey, he visited Sittilingi valley and the surrounding Kalvarayan and Sitteri Hills which were inhabited primarily by tribal people. These tribes were known as 'Malavasis' meaning hill people and their occupation was rain fed agriculture.

After studying several tribal hamlets, Regi learnt that Sittilingi had a high rate of infant mortality (147/1000) and maternal mortality. The nearest hospital was at Harur town, the taluk headquarters, situated 48 kilometers away from Sittilingi, and to find one with surgical facilities meant a journey to Dharmapuri which is located 100 kilometers away. The area was remote and badly served by public transport.

"Both of us being nature lovers decided to serve the tribal communities who lived here as we believed that there should be more meaning for our work. Also, Tamil Nadu was then one among the five backward states in India," said Regi.

In 1993, Regi and Lalitha set up a hut in a small piece of forest land. They had two cots that were made out of wood and ropes which they used to treat out-patients. In the mornings, they would take the cots and set up a clinic under a tamarind tree. The room in the hut doubled up as an operation theatre and a labor room. This is how Tribal Health Initiative got operational here.

"Action Aid, an international non-governmental

organization, provided us funds to construct a 10-bedded hospital and a place for us to stay. We also got support from our friends and well-wishers. By 1997, we had established a full-fledged hospital with an operation theatre. But still, not all the tribals were convinced that we were doctors," he said.

"What did you do to gain their confidence?" I asked.

"We visited villages by motorbike and the tribals used bullock carts to attend our meetings. We spoke to the communities about the need for health auxiliaries and health workers in each of the 21 villages. We organized awareness campaigns and used flash cards to communicate to them. Once they got convinced, we requested them to send educated girls to our hospital to get trained as health workers. Today, THI has a lot of tribal girls trained as health workers, health auxiliaries, and hospital staff," replied Regi.

The Health Auxiliaries are women who have been chosen by the tribal communities. Once in a month, these health auxiliaries visit the hospital at Sittilingi for reporting and training. They are offered advice on nutrition, hygiene, birth practices and simple ailments.

Public transport in the hilly areas being a major issue, THI also operates ambulances around the clock. These ambulances are of immense help especially during deliveries as the villages are located far away from the hospital. The ambulance service is offered to the tribals free of cost. In-patient care including surgery or delivery is also offered free for the tribals as it is supported by Tamil Nadu Government scheme, while a nominal amount is charged for the non-tribals.

"How did the tribals attend to child births earlier?" I asked curiously.

"Earlier, it was the mother or the elder sister who attended to the delivery. The pregnant mother would be taken to the backyard and laid on a sack. The placenta would not be cut until it fully came out and both the mother and child would remain outside the house for seven days in a temporary thatched structure. Being a hilly region, the weather was not conducive for both the mother and the child. This was the reason for high level of infant mortality and maternal mortality amongst the tribals," replied Regi heaving a sigh.

"Today, the health workers form the backbone of the Tribal Health Initiative. They are able to diagnose and treat common problems, assist in the operating theatre, conduct deliveries, care for inpatients and go out to the villages for antenatal and child health checkups," he added.

While conversing, Regi was informed about an emergency in the hospital. While he left to attend to a scan, I took a walk around the campus. I had the least feeling that I was visiting a hospital. The entire place was filled with greenery and the ambience was soothing. The staff were cheerful and even the patients, who were waiting for their treatment, were pleasant to interact with.

The hospital staff, guests, trainees, and tribal in-patients were being served food near the kitchen. I spontaneously took my serving and sat in the tiffin shed quietly observing the others who were enjoying their meal.

Around 2 pm Regi and Lalitha arrived to have their lunch.

"You seem to be having late lunch?" I remarked.

"We try to attend to our out-patients before the bus arrives at 1:30 pm as the next bus is scheduled only around 4 pm or so," said Lalitha smilingly.

It was obvious that she hid her tiredness behind the smile and I was not surprised at her commitment.

Tribal Health Initiative runs a full-fledged 24-bed primary care hospital and has extended its services to conduct education programmes and outreach clinics in all of the 21 villages situated in the area. Further, newer initiatives such as Organic Farming and Tribal Craft have also been launched.

“It is 20 years since you came here. What are the major changes that you observe among the tribals now?” I asked Regi.

“They are very simple people. They used to consume a lot of millets earlier, now they have chilli chicken,” answered Regi jokingly.

“What about the future plans of Tribal health Initiative?” I asked.

“We came here with no plans, and still do not have any. We respond to people and hope to give power to the people. That’s all and nothing else!” replied Regi spontaneously.

I bid adieu to the divine duo and enroute visited a few villages where the health auxiliaries lived. “The community recognizes me as a nurse and come to me for medication. I have a better social image now and feel proud to be part of the Tribal Health Initiative,” said Vijaya.

Winding through the twisty roads and crossing the forest area I wondered when I would get to visit this place again and spend a day with the divine duo.

A great inspiration for social work!

—*Marie Banu*



## Reinventing Bamboo

You can call it blind love Or the sheer love of bamboo. I am talking about the passion that consumes those men and women whose deft hands fashion bamboo baskets and window blinds day in and day out on the sidewalks of Chennai which double as their work spaces. Working on their frames with a stone to which a thread is attached, their hands go back and forth, weaving the bamboo strips in quick succession, to create a blind. Finishing touches are added as they dress up the borders and add a touch of paint to some of the pieces. Finally, pulleys and strings are fixed so that the blinds can be rolled up or down and they are ready to be despatched to the customer. All in a matter of days.

In a world where plastic and synthetics rule, it is wonderful to reconnect to our roots with these lovely blinds, baskets (bouquet holders, laundry baskets and pooja baskets), and chair swings born out of the creativity of these skilled crafts persons.

What is life like for them?

Says Lakshmi who operates out of Chetput: “The blinds are customised, made strictly on order, and are charged for at square feet rates. The prices may vary depending on the intricacies of the design. The smaller baskets are bought for bouquets and have a fairly stable market; but with the chairs, swings, and laundry baskets—there is no telling. There are good days and bad days. The bamboo for the chairs is from Assam (available in Chennai) whereas the bamboo for the baskets is from forests in Pulicat, which we sometimes collect ourselves”.

She and her husband hire other workers to complete orders, and if volumes are good make what is a reasonable sum. But, given today’s inflation and soaring prices doesn’t add up to much. Hailing from Andhra, Lakshmi and her family originally used to live in Mandaveli near Mylapore in Chennai. The house was broken down and they soon found themselves by the banks of the Cooum.

“We now have a ration card and the government has promised us a dwelling. Let’s see,” she says full of hope and optimism. As she speaks, her little daughter Swathi runs out tucking into a banana and grasping her mother’s shoulder for support. Lakshmi’s other children are at school.

Quiz her on the customer profile and she says: “Our customers are a motley crowd. They come in cars and two wheelers.” But, beyond that she does not know much about

the demographics.

This skill that they possess is all that they know having learnt the ropes at the hands of family members. So, a life minus this vocation is probably difficult to imagine!

Her counterpart who sells her wares from another part of the city is very guarded in her responses.

“Give me a fictitious name,” she says “Any name. I don’t want any trouble from the undue attention.”

So I decided to call her Parvathi.

For Parvathi too weaving runs in the family and it was natural that she took to it. “Twenty or thirty years ago there were more of us almost one family on every other street of the city. But, things have changed. Right now, if customers come we are happy; otherwise we just take it in our stride. If there is work there is work, else no,” states Parvathi in an attitude of resignation.

But the sensible strategy that they have all adopted is to work only on order basis as far as the blinds go. She and her husband head operations at this site, but as one person cannot do all the work a team is put together when orders are good.

“In summer business is slightly better because the blinds offer protection against the heat and help to ward off dust. Our clients are anyone who needs blinds, not just this or that person,” she points out in typical business speak.

In what is one of the greatest ironies of life, the take home pay is nothing to write home about for all that labour.

“The profit is not great after making payouts to the coolies and deducting costs of materials, etc. It is barely enough for

paying house rent, meeting the cost of school education for the children, and our food bills,” observes Parvathi.

A mild drizzle begins. This is something they dread, because the bamboo can’t be bundled and taken home quickly nor can it be left exposed to the elements.

Clear about one thing and what signals the death knell of crafts such as these she says that she doesn’t want her children to take to this line of work. Mechanisation of course has taken a toll, but customers are also fewer these days.

“Sometimes people think we are a hindrance or an inconvenience since we work out of the platform,” she confides giving voice to her deepest fears.

In sum, a little patronage, some marketing and design support, a permanent work space are few of the things that will go a long way in keeping this craft alive and help to provide a livelihood for families and women engaged in this occupation. Perhaps it will also impart a sense of security and safety and remind people that there is such a concept as dignity of labour even in the twenty first century.

— *Sudha Umashanker*



## The Parrot Fortune teller

One Saturday, while strolling at Elliots beach in Chennai, I spotted a parrot fortune teller seated on the sand. He was anxiously eyeing the crowd, probably waiting for his customer.

I observed him for some time and hesitantly asked if he would give an interview for *Conversations*.

*He* instantly agreed.

I sat beside him and we conversed as if we had known each other for a long time.

62-year-old Jayaraman, belonging to the Vedan community, has been involved in fortune telling since the age of 17. People belonging to the Vedan community were originally bird hunters.

“My father was also a fortune teller. Earlier, I used to walk around the city, and have even travelled to Mumbai, Delhi, and Agra. Now, after getting diabetes, I only come to the beach as I cannot travel much,” he said.

“Where did you get this parrot from? I asked.

“About four years ago, I bought this parrot from a boy near Gandhi Statue at Marina beach in Chennai. In fact, the boy did not charge me anything as he had just captured three parrots from a nest, and was more than happy to spare one for me when he learnt that I was a fortune teller,” replied Jayaraman.

I politely enquired about fortune telling and Jayaraman was more than willing to share information.

“It is very simple and anyone can become a fortune teller. All that you need is a parrot; a pack of 27 tarot cards; and a book which outlines the message for each of the cards,” he said with confidence.

The 27 tarot cards represent the Indian cosmic system and 8 of these cards predict bad news. Each card contains the image of a Hindu deity and some contain images of a mosque or Mother Mary.

As we spoke, Esther, 40, walked towards Jayarman and enquired the cost to check her fortune.

“It is just twenty rupees,” he said.

Esther was convinced to spend her money here, and sat beside Jayarman clutching her hands.

I stepped away to click pictures, and witnessed the fortune telling process from a distance.

Jayaraman stacked the 27 randomly assorted tarot cards in

front of him. He opened the cage, let the parrot out, and instructed it to select a card for Esther.

The parrot walked towards the stack of cards, rejected a few cards with her beak, and handed over her selection to Jayaraman.

“Is this the card meant for Esther,” he asked.

The parrot chirped signaling her approval.

“Are you sure that this is what you would want me to predict for her?” he questioned.

The parrot chirped again.

“Okay. Pray to Lord Muruga and then give me the card,” he instructed.

The parrot obediently walked towards the deity’s picture which was placed near her cage, and after prayer handed it over to Jayaraman.

Jayaraman fed the parrot with a few grains and locked her again in the cage.

Esther was tense until Jayaraman opened the card that was chosen for her.

“You have got a very nice prediction. Your card has a picture of Goddess Mahalakshmi. You will have good times ahead and need not worry about anything,” he said adding even more positive messages.

Esther face radiated with happiness. She thanked Jayaraman and left after paying him his fee.

Jayaraman was also happy that he could convey a positive message to his first customer.

The parrot kept chirping as if to draw my attention.

The chirping sound reminded me of a popular comedy clip in which Vadivelu enacts like a parrot when he is captured by a fortune teller.

Hiding my laughter, I continued the conversation.

“How long does it take for a parrot to be trained,” I enquired.

“It could take between three days or three months for a parrot to get trained. A trained parrot provides training to the new comer,” he explained adding that the white rat in the cage was a new comer.

Jayaraman earns around 100 to 500 rupees a day during weekends, and is not certain about his monthly income as earnings during the week days are not predictive.

“My wife is a palm reader. We earn enough to meet our daily needs. All my four children are married, and so we need to earn only for ourselves and for our grandchildren. We leave home around 4 PM and spend four to five hours at the beach every day,” he said.

“Have you ever checked your own fortune?” I curiously asked.

“No. I visit an astrologer instead,” he said instantly.

Speaking about his patrons, Jayaraman said with pride: “They are young and old; rich and poor. 10 percent of my predictions come true, and I have regular patrons as well.”

Like Jayaraman, there were two more fortune tellers who were seated at a distance away. While Vittal posed for a picture, the other fortune teller was shy.

Although most of us believe in destiny, the lives of these

fortune tellers depend on the few who trust in parrot fortune telling. Heaving a sigh, I bid adieu to Jayaraman and his Salethu Selvarani wishing them luck in getting more patrons.

—*Marie Banu*





## Bead makers

On a lazy Sunday morning, I set out to document the lives of Narikuravas who live in Chennai. The traffic was smooth, and in less than 30 minutes I reached my destination—Kottur. I parked the car at a distance and walked towards the market where my contact Vijaya lives. Half-way through, I called asking for directions to reach her place.

“Where are you? I shall send my son Jayakumar to lead you home. He is wearing a blue t-shirt and beige bermuda,” said Vijaya.

I waited around the corner until Jayakumar arrived and we

walked through the noisy market that was slushy due to the recent rains. The smell of fish was strong, and I was careful not to slip. Jayakumar stopped abruptly and pointed to a two-storied house and said with pride: “We live here.”

I thanked him for leading my way and entered the premise. In the verandah, there were three men making bead chains and amidst them was a portable dvd player screening a recent Tamil movie. While they were engrossed in the movie as well as in their work, I slid slowly inside Vijaya’s home.

Vijaya was seated at the floor busy making a bead chain. She welcomed me with her warm smile and offered me a chair. But, I seated beside her and thanked her for inviting me.

To put her at ease, I said, “I don’t want to disturb your work. You can speak to me and continue making the chain.”

“No. I can do it later,” she replied.

“Well, you need a lot of concentration for this as it involves a lot of beads and knots,” I said.

“No. I can watch television and make the bead chain at the same time,” she replied with confidence.

“So, what is your favourite television channel? I probed.

“I like only action movies. I watch mostly ‘Movies Now’ and my favourite hero is Arnold Schwarzenegger.”

I tried my best to hide my surprise, and did succeed on that.

Vijaya’s husband was on travel to Trichy. She has two sons—Jayakumar and Nanda. Jayakumar has studied up to the 10th standard and is married while Nanda is studying in 8th standard at a matriculation school at Kotturpuram.

“It is nice to know that you son is going to a matriculation

school," I appreciated.

"We have been through a lot of struggle. I don't want my children to experience that. That is why I have educated them," she said nostalgically.

"You must have really put in a lot of effort to reach this position. Can you share with us your life journey," I politely asked.

"My husband and I moved into Chennai after we got married in 1989. There have been days when we did not have even a single meal. We depended on the leftover food that was given away by the sailors when the ship landed," she said holding back her tears.

"One of our friends suggested that we travel abroad to sell beads. We got deceived by several passport agents. It was then I decided to start my own passport agency and help my community people to travel abroad to earn a better living," she added.

"Was it easy for you to get passports for your community members? Did they all have ration cards?" I enquired.

"Yes, they all had ration cards. Now, they also have Election ID cards and PAN cards too," she said smilingly.

"My husband got his passport in the year 2000 and traveled to Singapore. He kept sending me money every month and on seeing how my life has changed, my community members requested me to send them abroad as well. I charged Rs. 1000 per application and also lent funds, about 3000 Malaysian dollars as each person who travels abroad will have to declare 'sure money' at the time of immigration," she explained.

Vijaya has traveled to Singapore and Malaysia several times. Besides bead making, many of her community members are also engaged in fortune telling. "The moment my community members land in Malaysia, they start making money by selling bead chains that they carry from here or through fortune telling. One-third of the population in Malaysia being Tamilians, we have good business here. Most of my community members' travel on a three month visa, while some are lucky and get a multiple entry visa for one-year period," she added.

We paused for a moment as her younger son Nanda arrived. He demanded our attention and holding my camera asked me to click his picture. I asked Vijaya if I could take her pictures as well.

She hesitantly asked, "Can you give me some time so that I can wear a saree?"

I stepped out allowing her to get ready for the photo shoot, and chatted with the men who were seated at the verandah

In less than ten minutes, Vijaya appeared in a bright blue saree and I was awe-struck.

"You look very pretty," I said instantly.

She blushed and was conscious of herself. I took more than two dozen pictures of her alone, as I did not want to disappoint her.

The men and children insisted that I click their pictures as well, and I obliged.

"I have ten houses in this lane which I have let out for rent. I have more than enough money now," concluded Vijaya with contentment.

Bidding adieu to bead makers, I traced my path back home reminiscing each moment I spent with this colorful community.

—*Marie Banu*

*The Narikuravar are a community of people from Tamil Nadu, India. They originally belong to the indigenous tribes, and their main occupation is hunting. But, as they were prohibited entry into the forests to pursue this livelihood, they were forced to take up other alternatives such as selling beaded ornaments to survive. They started migrating from place to place to find a market for their beads.*

*The word 'Narikurava' is a combination of the Tamil words 'Nari' and 'Kurava' meaning 'jackal or fox people'. This name has been bestowed upon them due to their adeptness in hunting and trapping jackals. The Narikuravas speak an Indo-Aryan language called Vagriboli, which is a western Indian language of the Indo-Aryan family. Due to this, they are also known as Vagris or Vagrivalas. Almost all Narikuravas are well-versed in Tamil.*



## Wash

Amidst the hustle and bustle of Chennai city, I wind through one of the narrow side lanes at Chetpet to meet Ramachandran, the President of Chennai Rajaka Yuvajana (Sakavaiyalar) Sangam.

The soapy waters flowing around the ironing shed and washing area, the line of clothes waiting to get dried, and the sound of clothes slapping on the stones welcomed me to the century-old *Dhobhi Khana* that is spread across 20 grounds of land in the heart of the city. The smell of soap and starch was pleasant, and as I looked around, Ramachandran greeted me with a warm smile.

A third-generation Dhobhi, Ramachandran has been working at the *Dhobhi Khana* since the age of 10. I entered his 80-foot room that was overflowing with clothes; an iron stand, a washing machine and a chair placed within. He offered me a plastic chair, but I preferred to use the stool-like structure covered with a towel. The seat wobbled, and I rose instantly. I realized that it was a cardboard piece placed over a bucket that deceived me. I hid my embarrassment and stabilized the bucket before I seated myself again.

Ramachandran initiated the conversation by saying, "I am the President of *Dhobhi Khana* for over 15 years. When Moore, a British, inspected this site in 1902, he offered to construct restrooms and washing platforms for 120 Dhobhis' who worked here. There were huge bungalows in the neighbourhood, unlike hotels and beauty parlours that are present today. These residents recommended to the British to also provide us with metro water. The *Dhobhi Khana* was thus launched on 8th December, 1902."

*Dhobhis'* were allowed to use the *Dhobhi Khana* only when there was supply of metro water in the mornings and evenings. The rest of the time, the premise was locked. The 120 restrooms increased to 128. As years passed, the number of *Dhobhis'* increased to 2000 and they started relocating elsewhere as there were not enough restrooms to accommodate them. But, they continued to work at *Dhobi Khana*, as additional washing platforms and water tanks were constructed and offered to them at a nominal rent.

"What are the rental charges," I enquire.

"From 1950s to 1970s, we were charged a monthly rent of 3 rupees for the restrooms and 50 paise for the washing platforms. In 1984, the restrooms were re-constructed and

the rent was waived by the government. But, the washing platforms were continued to be rented at 50 paise a month. During the Chief Ministership of Dr. M.G. Ramachandran, the rent was hiked to 7 rupees, and later to 50 rupees. Recently, the corporation has enhanced it to 75 rupees," laments Ramachandran.

"Isn't the rent too low?" I ask directly.

"It is ten years since we have remitted the rent to the Chennai Corporation. Our association has submitted an appeal to reduce the rent to 50 rupees a month, but we haven't sought any response as yet. When we approached the Corporation Bill Collector with a consolidated payment of Rs. 46,000 recently, he refused to accept it by stating that our ledger was missing. I am worried if the rent arrears would increase to an amount that we cannot afford," he sighs.

Ramachandran lives with his wife and four sons in the neighbourhood. While two of his sons have studied up to BSc and DME, and work as salesmen in shopping malls in the city; the other two assist him at the *Dhobhi Khana*.

"Are the earnings from laundry enough to meet your family needs?" I probe subtly.

"No. There aren't any sufficient benefits from the government either. We belong to the Most Backward Community. Since early 1980s, we have been requesting the government to categorize our community as Scheduled Caste. Apparently, it was a week after we had submitted our petition to Smt. Indira Gandhi in 1984, that she was assassinated. Scheduled Castes have more privileges offered by the Government than MBCs. The education scholarship is Rs. 2,000 for SC while it is only Rs. 150 for MBC," he says.

“Have washing machines affected your trade? Has the charges for your services increased?” I question.

“Not much! We have our regular customers. Our quality of service has been lauded by many of them. In fact, one of my customers, Mr. Venkatesa Narayana Reddy, recently sent across a donation cheque for Rs. 10,000 to our association.”

“During the 1960s, the charge for wash, starch, and iron was around 50 paise per garment. Now, it is 15 to 20 rupees, depending on the material. For bulk orders that is sourced from hospitals, hotels, and beauty parlours, we charge only 2 rupees,” he answers.

Ramachandran took me around the *Dhobhi Khana* introducing me to his fellow men who were at work. They were happy to get their pictures clicked and were curious to learn which newspaper I represented. The washing stones were queued neatly and each of them had a small water tank that had metro water flowing into it. Women were also present, and some had their children assisting them.

“Today is a school holiday. She is therefore helping me rinse the clothes,” says Padma.

The day for the *Dhobhis*’ start at 4 AM and they work until 7 AM. After lunch, they return in the afternoon to iron the washed clothes and deliver it to their customers. While few of them own auto rickshaws, most use two-wheelers to commute. During monsoon, they need an extra day to dry the clothes and for urgent orders they use a washing machine.

“I am finding it difficult to meet the transportation costs and the electricity charges. It is hard to cope with the rising prices. On an average I earn around 15,000 rupees a month,

and I don’t have any savings. Some customers who provide bulk orders don’t make timely payments. Despite all these challenges, I strive towards providing quality service to retain my customers,” concludes Ramachandran.

Almost four generations down now, the *Dhobhis*’ don’t have any other choice than continuing the same trade. Even though their profession is slowly fading away, they still manage to make their living out of it.

—*Marie Banu*

*Dhobhi is the name of the washerman community. The name, Dhobhi, has been derived from the Hindi word ‘dhona’ and the Sanskrit word ‘dhav’, which literally means to wash.*

*In Tamil, Dhobhis’ are called ‘Vannar’. Other names include Vannan, Panicker, and Salavai thozhilale. Tamil Vannar’s population is around 3.5 million and majority of them belong to the middle class.*



*This section features interviews  
with celebrities who are into  
social work*

**INSPIRING CONVERSATIONS**



**“If you can, I can. If Ramanathan can, you can.”**

Kalaimamani Abirami Ramanathan is a double graduate in engineering and holds a Masters in Homeopathy Medical Science. He is the **Managing Director** of Abirami Mega Mall—a family entertainment Center in Chennai. He is also the President of Chennai City Film Exhibitor’s Association and Tamil Nadu Cinema Theatre Owner’s Federation.

He has served as the President of The South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce and as the General Secretary of Film Federation of India. He is also the Past District Governor of Rotary Club of Madras District 3230, a producer and film distributor.

Abirami Ramanathan is a recipient of several awards. To name a few, ‘Kalaimamani Award’ presented by the Government of Tamil Nadu, ‘Honourable Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi Award’ presented by All India Congress Committee; ‘Raja Sando Award’ presented by Government of Tamil Nadu in 2001; ‘Dr. M.S. Ashraf Award for Non-Medical person by the Indian Medical Association’ in 2002; and ‘Seva Ratna Award’ for the year 2002 - 2003 presented by the Centenarian Trust.

*In an exclusive interview Abirami Ramanathan shares with Marie Banu his journey as an entrepreneur.*

**You are an icon for innovations. The Abirami Mega Mall broke the monotony of a theatre being a place only to watch movies. Where did you draw this idea from?**

I was having business in Malaysia also. In 1983, while I was staying in a hotel at Kuala Lumpur I heard that there was a big celebration in the neighbourhood as the Prime Minister was inaugurating a mall. Mall was not common in those days and I was told that there were two old theatres which have been renovated to include a mall named ‘Chingaivanam Plaza’. I was curious, and spent two days to learn how the theatres have been renovated to include a shopping place. It then struck to me, ‘why not try this in India?’

Any consumer model that works out successful in another country would definitely be a success in India too. For almost 17 years, my wife I traveled all over the world visiting malls in each country. We would spend two hours in each mall to learn about the benefit and difficulties here. We went into details of how the food court has been designed; how the theatres were positioned; the parking space, the size of the kitchen in every food court, whether they used

pre-cooked food or cooked the food at the venue itself, and other minute details.

We selected an architect who designed Mayajaal in Chennai and took him along with us on a second trip around the world and showed him what we wanted. This mall is a result of all our combined ideas.

**What is special about Abirami Mega Mall?**

This is the only family entertainment center in India. Most of the malls across the globe target the upper income group, but we wanted to target the middle-income group. We focused on getting two-wheeler customers rather than those who arrived in a car.

We decided to control the prices of the food while maintaining the quality. Even though we have leased the food stall to somebody else, we would still inspect their kitchen; ensure that the stale food is removed at the end of the day.

The reason we wanted to have control on the prices is because we did not want a coffee to cost Rs. 200 here. It could cost Rs.10 to15 maximum. People starting visiting the mall as Rs. 300 was enough to entertain their entire family. Even if the kids would want to visit another place, the father would insist on visiting this mall as it is easy on his purse. That is why on a Sunday, we have not less than 20,000 people visiting the mall.

**What is your advice for entrepreneurs who have innovative ideas but are not willing to take a risk to venture into business?**

When we took this risk of converting a theatre into a mall, we did not have finances to the extent we required. We

approached bankers and had to prove it to them that this initiative would work. Many bankers refused, and few banks who agreed offered us finance at a high rate of interest.

Initially there will be difficulties and you will have to face them. My advice for entrepreneurs would be: Be straight forward, don't try to cheat anybody, and plan properly.

**You are identified as Abirami Mall owner; Producer; Distributor; Rotarian; Philanthropist— which of these roles would you like yourself to be identified with and why?**

I would like to be identified as 'myself'. When others are happy, I am happy. That applies to philanthropy, business, and everything else.

**Can you share a memorable incident while rendering social service?**

My wife is my biggest strength. In fact, it was because of her I started rendering social service. One day in 1987, while she was driving down east coast road along with her friends to Mahabalipuram, she found children near Neelankarai studying under a tree. She found that their school had no classrooms. She instantly called and asked me to build a classroom for them.

Since then, I have been endlessly doing social work and have been asking many people to do it. In fact, I have adopted my own village— Pulankurichi of Sivagangai District, and spend around 25 to 30 lakh rupees a year for its development. This year we have plan to provide 100 solar street lights, which has become a necessity today.

**What are the innovative programmes that you have planned in the future?**

We are planning to provide a free *kalayana mandap* which has a capacity of 1000 in Pulankurichi village of Sivagangai District. At the moment, the mandaps in our village charge people Rs. 20,000 a day. This price could not be afforded by villagers, who are mostly farmers.

Our mandap will charge people only for the electricity on consumption basis and there would be no discrimination amongst the rich and poor. Bookings would be taken on first-come first-serve basis. This initiative would benefit 20,000 families in this village who can use the mandap for their domestic functions.

Another project that is in the pipeline is another mall in Chennai. The concept for this is to re-create Venice.

**Your message for our readers?**

I have two policies. The first is: If you can, I can. If Ramanathan can, you can. The next is: Whatever happens is for our good. Any entrepreneur can be successful if he adopts these policies.

Whatever we earn, we should divide it into four parts. One part is for the use of the company itself, so that it develops further. The second part is for your children—for their education. The third part is for the society. God has given you enough. So, give it to others and make them happy. The last part is for you. When a day comes when you cannot work, you must have a reserve. You should not depend on your children.



**"If you help an old lady cross the street, that is social work."**

Capt. Prof. Dr. Baram Biswakumar, served the Indian Army as an Emergency Commissioned Officer in the Army Medical Corps from 1963 to 1967 and was honourably discharged with the rank of Captain. He saw active service in Jammu and Kashmir and the Indo - Pakistan War, in recognition of which he was awarded the J & K Service Medal as well as the 1965 War Medal.

In 2010, he was awarded the Degree of D.Sc. (Doctor of Science Honoris Causa) at the 20th annual convocation of the Tamil Nadu Dr. M. G. R. Medical University in 2010. D.Sc. (Honoris Causa) is awarded in recognition of the scientific, academic, and social contributions of an eminent person and is the highest Degree conferred by the University.

Dr. Biswakumar is an active member in many professional

bodies like the Indian Medical Association and Neurological Society of India. He is the Grand Master of the Freemasons of India and has been the first doctor to get this post. He also served as President for Rotary Club of Madras in 1995-1996.

Dr. Biswakumar has received many awards for his service and has been organizing many free health care camps for children and senior citizens in and around Chennai.

*In an interview, Dr. Balaram Biswakumar shares with Marie Banu and Latha Suresh his experience in the army and his passion for social causes.*

**Can you share your experience serving in the Indian Army?**

My career in the army started after I passed my MBBS in December 1962. It was the time when Chinese invaded the Indian Territory and we were totally overpowered in all sectors. One of the Generals came to our college and addressed us. He said that the army needed a lot of people, especially doctors. I had just passed my MBBS and had not even finished my internship. I felt that I had to do something, and so I joined the Indian Army in May 1963.

I was one of the early people who joined the emergency commission and was inducted as an Emergency Commissioned Officer. For one year, I served as a Peacetime Medical Officer in Military Hospital, Pathankot, which was the last railway station before Jammu and Kashmir. It was here I completed my internship. After that, I was sent to one of the artillery regiments to serve as a Regimental Medical Officer. My regiment was an artillery unit where they worked with 25 pounder guns that can shoot at a long range into the enemy territory. I had to look after the health of the jawans and the officers here.

It was a very rewarding experience in the sense that it makes you a disciplined person. One gets to learn manpower management, leadership qualities, and many things about administration. You are the confidante of the Commanding Officer and treated at the level of a 'couple of steps below God' by the jawans! That situation taught a lot of things to me, more importantly humbling me and to develop endearing qualities despite a fierce-looking moustache!

I had the opportunity to serve in the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war in which my regiment took place. Those of us who were in the fore-front were given the Army Medal, and that is how I got that.

**When you were honorably discharged from the army, were you willing to come back?**

Yes, even though it is a very satisfying life for a young unmarried man to be exploring, climbing mountains, and doing only preventive doctoring. There was very little doctoring to do except treating the Kashmiri civilians which was not satisfying for me.

As a student I had never failed in any subject, hence I wanted to come back and do my post-graduation. The army did not relieve me after three and a half years, and so I remained for one more year.

**How did the passion to engage in social service set in? Was it because you were in the army?**

The idea of becoming a doctor set in when I was 6. My family doctor was my role model. I would compare him to the doctor in Cronin's novel 'The Citadel', who was compassion personified. He was always for service to the people and cared little for money. I wanted to be someone

like him and this naturally kindled in me to do something for the people.

Going up in the social ladder, life gave me plenty of opportunities to join organizations. It is very difficult to do charity by yourself. You need likeminded people to carry your ideas forward and execute them, and an organization can do a lot more. That is how I was moulded into doing things and my innate desire got fructified when I got associated with the Rotary and Freemasons.

**Other than health, which other issues are you passionate about?**

In the more recent times, in the last one year particularly, I have come to witness the abject poverty of people in our country and the miserable state of living they are in. I had the opportunity to visit the tribal areas all over the country. A dream came to me that I must do something for the people living in these areas, and I named that dream 'Jyotirgamaya'—meaning leading from darkness to light. We planned to electrify these villages using solar lights. To our horror, we found in certain hamlets that people have not seen an electric bulb. They were managing the entire family with just one kerosene chimney. We, the Freemasons of this country have provided lights in their homes through solar power and have literally led them from darkness to light.

The satisfaction it gave me to light up their homes is something that cannot be measured.

**You have been the personal doctor for Kanchi Paramacharya. Can you share your learning?**

Looking at him bless people and listening to the advice that he gave to those who came to him with various problems

naturally gave me a lot of wisdom. Wisdom you absorb; when you don't even talk to him. Just looking at him was enough and that was an experience in my life which has moulded me in a very big way. I learnt what compassion and wisdom was. When people were longing to get a glimpse of him I had the unique privilege to touch and feel the God-who-walked-the-earth.

**Can you tell us the charities you are associated with?**

*I am Chairman for five Trusts. I have instituted one Trust in memory of my late wife called Dr (Mrs.) Indira Biswakumar Memorial Charitable Trust through which we support the needy people—oppressed women, destitute women and children, and visually impaired persons.*

*I am also the Chairman of Sri Kanchi Paramaguru Medical Trust. Paramacharya ordered me to look after the health of the old people who were residing at the old age homes in Kalavai and Srikalahasti. For the past 25 years, I am regularly taking a team of doctors and volunteers and attending to the health needs of those living in the old age homes here. This project was initially started by my good friend Late Dr. N. Mathrubootham.*

**Who do you think is a social worker?**

For me, someone who doesn't want to be called a social worker, but instead thinks that he is repaying to the society what he has drawn from them in a big way—is a Social Worker! When you grow higher in status—whether they are titles or monetary position or influence in the society—the more you have to give back to the society, because that is where it all came from. In fact, everyone should be a social worker. If you help an old lady cross the street, that is social work; If you lend your shoulder to a person who is in distress to cry, that is charity.



**“I am sure The Netherlands can assist India in the realization of its CSR ambition.”**

Bob Hiensch, is the Ambassador of The Netherlands to India and also accredited to Nepal and Bhutan. He served in many diplomatic positions around the world: Hong Kong, Paris, at the UN in New York and as ambassador to Israel before he arrived in India in November 2007. Ambassador Hiensch is married and has five children (four daughters and a son) who live in different parts of the world: Monaco, The Netherlands, Brussels and New York.

The Dutch – all 16 and a half million of them – live in 41,526 square kilometers, just a little larger than Kerala. This makes The Netherlands one of the world’s most densely populated countries. Less well known is that The Netherlands or Holland as it is often called, has the twelfth largest economy in the world, and ranks sixteenth in GDP.

Since 1947, Indo-Dutch relations have been excellent, marked by strong economic and commercial ties, based on foundation of shared democratic ideals, pluralism, multiculturalism and rule of law. Indo-Dutch relations have been multi-faceted and encompass close cooperation in various areas including political, economy, academics and culture. Since the early 1980s, the Dutch Government has identified India as an important economic partner. The relations underwent further intensification after India’s economic liberalization in the 1990s with growing recognition of India as an attractive trade and investment partner.

*In an exclusive interview, Bob Hiensch shares with Marie Banu the development programs supported by the Netherlands Government.*

**What is the drive that involves you in social work activities?**

As you know, embassies are not social work institutions. So, for an ambassador to get involved in social work has to be a personal inspiration. For me it follows from my conviction that civilization is ‘concern for others’: that is friendship, compassion, and responsibility. This has been the major driving force in my life.

Regretfully, The Netherlands and India do not have a development cooperation program anymore. For many years

India was the largest recipient of Dutch development funds worldwide, but this was stopped in 2003 at the request of the Indian government. But, on a personal and very small scale the embassy still is active.

One of the fields that is very important for me is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The Dutch government gives a very high priority on corporate social responsibility, both domestically as well as globally. The Embassy is very focused on CSR and we work closely together with the Indian government and other Indian partners in this field.

**What are the programmes supported by the Netherlands Government in other developing countries?**

That is quite extensive. We have 15 partner countries in the world and our main focus are on food security; water; sexual and reproductive health; safety and security; as well as the rule of law in the partner countries. We work in countries where we feel that our approach can really make a difference.

**Through international NGOs, your government does support programmes in India. Can you tell us more about this?**

We have around 33 Dutch NGOs that are active in India in one way or the other. Some are very big like ICCO and HIVOS while some are as small, more private organizations. They work on different programmes, mainly in the field of humanitarian issues, education and women rights. The total funding of these NGOs for India is estimated at around 48 million euros per year.

**What has been your experience working with the Indian NGOs?**

Generally speaking, they are very professional. We have hardly had any bad experience. Of course, we do have

small points where we disagree, but generally I find them to be devoted to the task and focused on what they want to achieve. They work mainly on women rights, minorities' issues, and children education.

**How could an Indian NGO seek funds from the Netherlands Embassy?**

They should contact the embassy. I don't want to promote that too much as we have very limited funds. It is not possible to support large programmes here in India, but we can consider support for small requests.

**Of the social issues in India, which do you think should be addressed with priority?**

One of the most worrying issues is the degradation of the environment, especially the pollution of rivers and waterways. Water will be a crucial issue in the future development of India.

**You mentioned CSR: what are India and The Netherlands doing together in this field?**

The embassy has worked closely together with the ministry of Corporate Affairs in realizing a Memorandum of Understanding on CSR between the Indian and Netherlands governments that was signed in Delhi last year. It's the only MOU on CSR that the Indian government has with a foreign government. It's a very important achievement for us, because it gives us a good platform to discuss CSR issues with India and to exchange expertise on CSR and corporate governance. We now have a working group which met in Delhi early this year, and we will meet again in The Netherlands in November 2012.

In the last five years I have seen a clear change for the better, especially since the new minister of Corporate Affairs took

office after the elections of 2009. The attitude changed from being rather reluctant to actively promoting corporate social responsibility.

**What are the CSR programmes that the Embassy is supporting?**

Our embassy has interacted with important Indian influential think tanks, employers' associations, community organizations and government officials in this field. We have organized several round tables, seminars and trainings on CSR to enhance the dialog on the different CSR principles and to showcase the system that The Netherlands already has in place. We also used the opportunities that Ministerial trade missions gave us to discuss CSR more in depth with Indian and Dutch officials and companies.

We do expect the Dutch companies to act responsible when they operate internationally and the embassy helps them in this. We have very good examples of Philips and Unilever in India, whose CSR-policies are exemplary. I am sure The Netherlands can assist India in the realization of its CSR ambition.



**"For us, merit is not based only on marks, but on social criteria."**

Loyola College is an autonomous Jesuit institution of academic excellence under University of Madras in Chennai. The institution is among the handful of India's most prestigious institutions for degree programmes in Commerce, Arts, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences and has been consistently ranked amongst the top five institutions in India for all of the said streams. The college admits undergraduates and post-graduates and offers degrees in the liberal arts, sciences and commerce.

*In an exclusive interview, Rev. Dr. Boniface Jeyaraj S.J, Principal of Loyola College shares with Marie Banu what makes his college unique amongst others.*

**Loyola College has continued to remain in the list of Top 10 Colleges in India ranked by India Today. What is the secret of your success in achieving this position?**

Our success is mainly because of our unique curriculum—which has a choice based credit system. We have covered two aspects—high quality output syllabus, and a re-structured pattern.

Besides English, Languages, Core and allied subjects, we feel that our students should also have knowledge on various other aspects like personality development, understanding different religions, analysing Indian society (*critically*), and being environmentally conscious. We give them the tools and these form part of the foundation course which is covered during the first year of the graduation.

Many people think that ‘foundation course’ means an ‘English course’. But, for us ‘foundation’ means ‘Human Development’. We need in our Indian society a person who is morally upright and of good character. We give emphasis and focus towards overall, total, integral formation of each student. In fact the NCERT wanted to adopt our curriculum model for all educational institutions.

In the second year, we give them community orientation in the form of outreach programmes. We help our students form the right attitude so that they can be happy; know how to understand themselves and the society; understand the needs of the poor people and have compassion for them.

We give a lot of facilities and offer around 40 percent

admission to poor students, first generation learners, orphans, slum students, rural students, children of single parent and students belonging to the scheduled castes. In addition to the students’ academic merit (marks obtained in the qualifying examination), the above factors would be taken into account for assessing *inter se* merit for admission. If they had been given equal opportunities they would have been much better. According to us they are meritorious students under the socio-economic category.

**What are the challenges that your professors face while handling the affluent students and those who hail from the weaker section of our society? How do you address them?**

You have really brought out a very interesting issue! We have students from both extremes—affluent students from English medium schools; and students from rural areas, Tamil medium schools, private schools, and government schools. Because of this, there is always some difficulty in the classrooms.

During the initial months, the weaker students find it very difficult to cope. But, we do not give up. Depending on the level of support required, we try to help them out. We therefore offer them with peer support and help them after class hours through an enhancement programme that is managed by our faculty as well as PhD students. For the past two years we have been also offering a 10-day bridge course where English and one more subject are taught.

The strength of our institution is to cater to all sections, especially to give access to people who have been denied access.

Our tri-objectives are access, equity, and excellence. That is why we offer scholarships worth 30 to 40 lakh rupees

a year. Besides this, free noon meal is served to around 400 poor students and we spend 2.5 lakh rupees from the management funds every month.

We receive about 15,000 applications out of about 20,000 applications that are sold. We categorize them based on the above stated criteria. The entire admission process is computerized and selection is purely based on merit.

For us, as stated above, merit is not based only on marks, but on social criteria. We give priority for poor students, first generation learners, orphans, slum students, rural students, children of single parent and students belonging to the to Dalits, SC, ST, MBC, and BC . We also give preference to differently abled students and have a RCDA (Resource Centre of for Differently Abled Students) to give all support to the visually challenged and differently abled students. If we take care of them, God will take care of us. Because, they are all God's children!

**Your alumni include several eminent people. How effective was the World Alumni congress that was organised in 2010?**

The Alumni Congress was first of its kind and we had around 3000 alumni attending the event. About 140 alumni who contributed to the society in various fields were felicitated. We have very strong alumni, some of them being Mr. P. Chidambaram, Mr. N. Ram, Mr. Viswanathan Anand, Mr. Thamarai Kannan IPS and Mr. K. Narayanan, Governor of West Bengal.

Our students are enthused when they meet such great alumni. We get the support of the alumni, when we send our students for industry interactions. We also invite them to give endowment lectures to our students during the annual

alumni meet. Alumni provide support for constructing buildings and offering scholarships to the poor students. We all invite them to provide training for our non-teaching staff and students.

**As a principal, what is your advice for those who wish to pursue their education in Loyola College?**

My advice for students who aspire to study in Loyola College is—do well in your studies. If you do not get the course that you had applied for, be flexible. For instance, if we are offering you admission in BBA or Economics instead of B.Com that you had applied for, accept it. The subject of the course is not important to get jobs. What matters the most are good marks, excellent communication skills and Loyola backing.



**“I consider a posting to be a role assigned to me by God in his Big Scheme of Things.”**

Shri. S. K. Dogra IPS was born on 14th December, 1953 at Dhariwal, a small town in Punjab. He did his Master's degree in English Literature and Linguistics from Baring Union Christian College, Batala, and then taught English Literature and Linguistics for over 5 years in the English Department of Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar.

He joined Indian Police Service in 1982 and was allotted to Tamil Nadu cadre. He has served in different capacities in various parts of Tamil Nadu and is now the Additional Director General of Police in charge of the Prison Department. He takes interest in music and painting and is on the editorial board of *Crisis Response Journal* published from London. He also maintains a website [dogratamil.com](http://dogratamil.com)

*In an exclusive interview, Shri. S. K. Dogra IPS shares with Marie Banu his role as a police officer.*

**You had held several portfolios in Indian Police Service. Is there any role that you cherish most?**

My thinking is greatly influenced by the *karmayoga* philosophy of Srimad Bhagwad Geeta. I consider a posting to be a role assigned to me by God in his Big Scheme of Things. The *karmayoga* orientation prevents the ‘good-posting; bad-posting’ syndrome and helps me enjoy my work. Every posting offers new challenges and new opportunities to serve people. It gives you a glimpse of the society from an angle you had missed so far.

*Karmayoga* teaches you to focus on the task and enjoy the act of performing it rather than wait for results. It makes you one with the task. You tend to lose your personal identity and become the role you are performing. For a follower of the *karmayoga* philosophy, the task is more significant than who performs it or who gets the credit. Once you learn to put your trust in Him and His Design, you begin to accept that every role He assigns to you as well as its timing is a part of a well thought-out decision. Steve Jobs called it ‘connecting the dots’.

At present, as the officer in charge of the prisons in Tamil Nadu, I am working on some projects with tremendous

potential. During the past six months or so I have used meditation techniques in Puzhal prison to change the psychology of the prison-inmates. In the next couple of months, I hope to build up this entire edifice into a huge structure.

Srimad Bhagwad Geeta and Maharishi Patanjali's Yog Sutras are two of our ancient scriptures that have deeply influenced my life. One taught me *Karmayoga* and the other *Samadhi*. These have become the two pillars on which I have built up my thinking, my life and my career.

**Was this a reason you have emphasized on meditation, spirituality, and yoga in Puzhal prison?**

Strictly speaking, meditation is not a part of any religion. The processes described in Yog Sutras are more easily understood in terms of neural activity of the brain and the spinal cord rather than in terms of any specific religion.

To my knowledge the only reference in Yog Sutras that could be called 'religious' is in the Sutra where the Maharishi says '*tasya vaachakaah pranavah*', meaning 'His name is Om' and '*tajapas tadartha bhaavanam*', meaning during meditation the word Om should be pronounced and we should concentrate on its meaning. The word 'Om' simulates the pulsating transmission of energy. The repetition of the 'Om' sound, whether pronounced loudly or silently in the mind, puts the *chakras* into vibration and converts them into transmission systems in touch with the Universe, its energy, and God.

I am not sure whether this process should be called religious or scientific.

Incidentally, what I teach to the prison-inmates has nothing

to do with all of this. I use a simple psychological technique that I learnt from my friend Dr. Rishi Tewari who runs a stress management centre in Egmore, Chennai. In this technique I take the prison-inmates to a deep level of concentration and then make them replace their negative thought processes with positive ones. Along with this, I use a number of feedback techniques. I have named the entire system 'Reverse Socialisation' and plan to build it as a model of reformation for other jails. I keep noting down my observations with a view to bring it out as a book.

When I asked one of the prison-inmates how my meditation techniques were affecting him, he said, "I feel something I had never felt before. Whenever I do something, someone in my mind seems to watch and assess it as good or bad." I thought this was a great success for my effort. The prison-inmate had begun to develop a conscience, or what Freud would call the Super Ego.

**The Tamil Nadu government recently sanctioned 45 lakh rupees for a bakery unit in Puzhal prison. Can you please tell us more about this?**

The bakery is a part of a bigger concept called Prison Bazar. Honourable Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu wishes that reformation of prison-inmates should be combined with their rehabilitation as professionals. Prison Bazar will help us provide opportunities to the prison-inmates to learn trades and earn money while serving their sentence.

**What are the challenges that the prison-inmates face after being released from jail? What are the steps taken by the government to support them?**

At present a prison-inmate leaves a prison with the blot of being an ex-convict. I wish that our efforts turn the tide

and a released prison-inmate is seen as a person recently returned from a kind of academy after a period of training and self-improvement.

A large part of my effort is focused on filling the mind of the prison-inmates with the idea that they are living in an ashram. In our society, an ashram has certain connotations—spirituality, piety of heart and habits, non-smoking, non-drinking, cleanliness of mind and body, etc. So, when this word ‘ashram’ is planted deep in the mind of a prison-inmate, it begins to play its role and changes the thinking as well as the behaviour of the person.

Fortunately, the Prison Bazar is likely to come at a time when I would have prepared the prison-inmates mentally for devoting themselves to work. It will be my effort to build the Prison Bazar around the idea of ‘labour as a process of self-purification’ rather than ‘labour as a way of earning money’.

**Can you tell us about the marketing linkages for the products that are produced in the prison?**

So far, we have been producing only for the government departments. It is a system where the production is driven by the order rather than a product seeking a market. Prison Bazaar will reverse the process. Under the Prison Bazaar, we will be working in a competitive market situation where quality, efficiency and uniqueness of product will decide success.

Honourable Chief Minister’s concept of Prison Bazaar creates the unique opportunity of utilising the labour-potential of the prison-inmates in a manner that provides a win-win situation for everyone. Now, it is for us in the Prison Department to translate it into a buzzing reality. Essentially,

what I am doing these days through the meditation sessions in Puzhal, is to prepare the ground for a roaring success of the Prison Bazaar and to translate Honourable Chief Minister’s vision into reality.

**Given the recent Assam communal riots and numerous honor killing cases, what are your thoughts on the value systems of the people in our country today?**

We are living in a society that is changing each day. The value-system that sustained us through the centuries is crumbling under waves from the West. Traditional society had strong systems of control. Now, control is believed to hinder creativity. The media and films encourage the youth to rebel against anything and everything.

Everyone has his or her view on what the future culture should be like. I am the traditional type. I believe that a few fundamental features of our culture should not be allowed to fritter away. For me, the institution of family is very important. Similarly, we must teach our children to look at things from the point of view of others.

Much of today’s violence takes place because we don’t cultivate in our youngsters the quality of empathy. ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’. How many of us follow this? We believe what pains us doesn’t pain the others. A mob that can set someone on fire and watch without feeling the pain has moved as far away from humanity as the distance between heaven and hell. Every time such incidents occur one is constrained to wonder whether something has gone fundamentally wrong with our society.



**“Please spur your children to be the best in what they do.”**

Dr. L. S. Ganesh, Dean of Students, IIT Madras is a Professor in the Department of Management Studies, and is a widely sought speaker on the themes of Education, Technology, Entrepreneurship and Development. He coordinates the unique MS (Entrepreneurship) programme of the Institute and until recently was the Advisor of the Cell for Technology Innovation, Development and Entrepreneurship Support (C-TIDES). Many of his students consider him to be among their most inspiring teachers. He loves work, meditation, philosophy, music, and dreaming.

*In an exclusive interview, Dr. L. S. Ganesh tells Marie Banu how social entrepreneurship can be an effective way forward in changing the societal patterns in India.*

**IIT Madras has been instrumental in spreading the concept of social entrepreneurship through various lectures and introducing an elective on social entrepreneurship as well. About introducing the idea of for-profit social enterprise — how have the students responded to this? Do you observe any attitudinal changes?**

We offer a minor stream consisting of three courses from the theme of Innovation and Social Enterprises with the idea of promoting, if possible, technology-centric social enterprises, in which technology plays a significant role for a social cause. That was the objective. Of course, we are also okay with business model based social enterprises and that is why we started the minor stream. There are no prejudices or biases in whatever I have seen among the students who are participating.

We now have the fourth batch of students, and I find the students appreciating the “hybrid spectrum” ranging from pure profit play on the one end to the fully donation based enterprises at the other. They focus ultimately on the effective transfer of value to the intended beneficiary.

**Some of your students have pioneered social entrepreneurship projects. Can you share with us some successful projects?**

Definitely! Thirumalai, a first batch student of the minor stream, took the course out of great passion and continues to work for the cause of rural communities since then. Although being a student of our MBA programme, he did not sit for placement. As he had already worked for a few years with a multinational company, he could dedicate his post-MBA career for a social cause, particularly focusing on ideas of value addition for the agricultural products

produced by a rural community. They were simple folk, and at first could not relate to his idea. But, once they caught on, things have stabilized in the community. He has now moved on and is working with government agencies. He is formally associated with the social sector and is concerned with evaluation of the impact of social projects.

Shanmugam, who graduated with an MBA this year, has already set up a dairy centric social enterprise at the foothills of Yercaud near Salem.

We also have BTech+MTech dual degree students, who are working in the area of social entrepreneurship with a focus on the transportation sector. They have an interesting business model idea and have also invented some technologies for green energy transportation. They are in the very early stage of business and are trying to understand the business, technology and market by learning from people in the transportation industry.

**Do you think Social Entrepreneurship is the way forward in changing the societal patterns in India?**

It is definitely an effective way forward. The reason is that we are trying to provide value to a very large population and, most importantly, as we have been conversing, never take away the dignity from a challenged person. You may do a hundred things, but never take away dignity. This principle has been well entrenched in all our students and is a good way to go forward.

The minor stream is popular, and we do get a handful of students from other departments attending the class out of sheer passion and interest.

**How do you think technology can be used in social projects?**

There are many examples of the use of technology in social projects. One of the most recent is the 'Avaz' device invented by Ajith Narayanan, an alumnus of IIT Madras, which is to help certain physically challenged people to communicate. In fact, it was included among the Technology Review 35, an annual list of 35 top technologies, and was named "Innovator of the year 2011" by MIT. It is a remarkable recognition for a technology product that was conceived, developed, made, and sold in India.

There are many other such examples where technology plays a significant role in social projects.

**It has been said that management students should create value in markets, and build transformational organizations. Do you think this is true? How many of your students have been successful in this?**

When a student graduates with an MBA degree, we should talk about entry level management positions. Obviously, expecting a fresh MBA graduate to transform an organization is a tall call and I think it is unrealistic. But, if the question is whether they are recognized for their contributions to their organization, I would say, yes, to a very large extent. Many of our MBA graduates have won company awards — Best Employee Award and Team Awards — consistently year after year. This is hard evidence that there is something good that is happening in terms of their work.

If people are rooted in these four themes/questions:

- (a) Effectiveness – Am I accomplishing what I am supposed to?

- (b) Efficiency – Am I using minimum resources while being effective;
- (c) Excellence – Am I struggling and pushing my limits; and
- (d) Ethics – Am I doing all these without violating any of the known and understood codes of ethics;

I am sure we will all witness large scale desirable transformations around us. Very often, we are challenged on all the above four.

**There is a lot of pressure among students to perform well. How does IIT management help them to de-stress themselves?**

There are a lot of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities in which the students directly participate or are a part of the audience. In fact, yesterday we had an opera by a Norwegian troupe and our Central Lecture Theater was full. It was healthy entertainment and our students thoroughly enjoyed the programme, perhaps even without any idea of the language used in the lyrics.

We also have yoga and pranayama workshops. IIT campus has a fitness centre and offers one of the finest set of facilities in India for sports and games, both indoor and outdoor. We have a swimming pool, two squash courts and a number of basketball, volleyball, and tennis courts along with hockey and football fields and a stadium. Our campus also has the famous IIT-Chemplast cricket ground.

Students should make use of these facilities and grow healthy in body and mind. They should balance their time between academics and extra/co-curricular activities. We have many clubs — Astronomy club, Ham club, Auto sports

club, Music club, Electronics club, and so on. It is possible for a student to lose himself in the kind of facilities we provide here. However, it seems that there is also a sizeable population stuck in social networking and computer gaming.

**For aspiring IITians, what is your advice for their parents?**

Studying in IIT is a blessing, as it is one of the fine institutions in our country. Historically, IITians have done well and the government has done well in promoting these institutions. The challenge is that we have only sixteen IITs to accommodate the 10,000 plus young men and women out of the 600,000 plus applicants who take the entrance exam after plus two.

One need not get obsessed with gaining admission into an IIT. There are very good institutes in our country which are good in economics, medicine, law, and social sciences. The simple lesson that I would like to share with parents is this: “please spur your children to be the best in what they do.” I agree that they do need constant guidance and encouragement.

It is difficult for teenagers to understand life, economic stability and family stability. It is very difficult for 16-year-olds to understand these unless they are soaked in some of their family’s affairs. This is the truth.

Parents should infuse the spirit of excellence in their children. If you are painter, be the best painter; If you are a carpenter, be the best; if you are a farmer, be the best; if you are a mechanic, be the best; in short, “be the best”. The point is that the world must have enough space to absorb excellence and must not tolerate mediocrity. We need to be a nation that is excellent and is reputed for the highest quality of thought, word and action.



## "We are not Indrajit."

TSG, this is how this multidimensional man is known amongst his circle. T S Gopalan is one of the leading advocates in India; he never takes pride in saying that one of his juniors Mr. Ibrahim Kalifullah is presently the Judge of Supreme Court of India.

TSG is a role model and idol to many budding professionals across the country. An average student at college, he cheerfully mentions that Law College is a comedy spent and passed. After completing his Post Graduation in Madras Law College in 1960, he joined King & Patel where he met his God Father Mr. C. Duraisamy, an influential and renowned barrister. In 1976, TSG came out of King & Patel to start his own venture T. S. Gopalan & Co, which has created lot of giants out of ordinary men. In 1992, he started a primary school in his native village Thiruvvarur which has got smart classrooms but charges only thousand rupees per year.

*An excerpt of Mr. T.S. Gopalan with J. Amirtha Kannan*

**Although you argue for management, you are known for fairness. Many unions come to you for consultation. What is your view about today's trade union and the labour force?**

In today's environment, I feel there is no tolerance amongst the management and they are not sensitive to the problems of the labour force. I am personally against the contract labour system, which is not right. I strongly feel that a contractor is one who robs butter from the leper. My heart beats for the labourers.

**Nowadays, a lot of debate is going on regarding the Indian Educational System, what is your view on this?**

The Government control (rules & regulations) on schools does not talk about the quality of education. Government does not mind spoken English as a necessary skill. I see India's education system as a stumbling block towards its objectives of achieving inclusive growth. A common feature in all government schools is the poor quality of education, with weak infrastructure and inadequate pedagogic attention. We should focus on value based education system.

**The last couple of decades have seen renowned persons opening up Engineering or Medical colleges, what interested you to open up a primary school?**

To navigate a fast-changing world that presents new opportunities and challenges, we need to nurture each child to become a self-directed learner; to build character with sound values and good habits.

My father inspired me to start this school, which has now got 450 students, 20 teachers, and a correspondent. It was

purely my father's vision, who used to always say: 'it is very important to ensure primary education to children if we want a better future for humanity'.

**We have heard that your school is the only school in India and probably in the world, which attracted a Nobel laureate. Can you please elaborate the incident?**

On October 2nd, every year we organize a get-together. The highlight of this event is that we raise funds for school children to enable them continue their education.

Any child who needs financial assistance can approach us with a bonafide letter from their institution mentioning its fee.

Mr. Sidney Altman, a Nobel prize winner for chemistry in the year 1989, who is also my elder son's mentor, heard about our school and about our initiatives. When he visited India, he spent considerable time with our students and even donated for infrastructural developments.

**Many MNCs are investing in India and thereby a significant industrial growth, this has led to a greater mobility of people from rural areas to the urban areas. This in-turn affects our back bone i.e., agriculture. What is your view on this?**

Land is the society's property; no one is ready to share the burden of the society. I have been preaching about a concept in agriculture and I have also approached many people in the political circles. My proposal is that—just like SEZs and SIPCOT, let the government lease out some land for agriculture. The government can hold fifty one percentage of land and the remaining be with the individual.

**Many of us know that your name is being associated with social causes like public sanitation and surrogate motherhood. Can you please brief us on your views?**

Public Sanitation, as a health hazard is one of the most critical discrepancies faced by us in today's times. On one hand, we are technically developing each day, and on the other hand we are ignoring basic health issues. This is curbing our overall development. Why doesn't government emphasize each petrol pump to have a toilet, and why not have one in post offices, police stations, and ATM centres?

We debate a lot on surrogate motherhood; we argue on legal, ethical, religious, and psychological issues—I am not sensing any of these immoral or criminal. Surrogacy makes families and gives financial assistance to a poor person.

**Lot of youth or Gen Y are occupying key positions in the corporate ladder but they end up confining themselves into the four walls. They do not know the real India. What is your message for them?**

India's biggest cultural treasure is the emotional bond and warmth of relationship. They should understand our tradition and appreciate it. Family bond is far and high from all societal hurdles. They should look beyond their office cubicles. Our society needs system change. Although there is a change in the mindset of the people, the progress is very slow. Their awareness is also very low, especially amongst women. How many women know that there is an act called Domestic Violence Act?



**"The life of a Police Officer is difficult. But, at the same time, it is an excellent opportunity to help people."**

Shri. S. George, IPS is presently the Commissioner of Police, Chennai. A native of Thiruvananthapuram, he is a post graduate in Engineering. He did his M.Tech from IIT, Delhi, and his MBA and M.Phil in Management from University of New York, USA.

He has served in various positions, including ADGP, Law & Order; Inspector General of Police (North Zone) and Inspector General of Police (Central Zone). He has also worked as Joint Commissioner of Police, Deputy Commissioner of Police and Assistant Commissioner of Police in Chennai City. He is the recipient of the President's Police Medal in 2010 and Chief Minister's Medal for Excellence in Public Service for his work in the conduct of Mahamaham festival in Kumbakonam in 2004.

*In an exclusive interview Shri. S. George, IPS, shares with Marie Banu his views on conflict situations.*

**You have played a crucial role during conflict situations like the anti-nuclear plant stir at Koodankulam and Mullaiperiyar dam protest. What have been your learnings from these situations?**

These have been unusual situations. The issue at Mullaiperiyar evoked spontaneous support from the public, and the local police had to deal with crowds ranging from 10,000 to 15,000 people. These people were not against any establishment, but were passionate about the issue. We addressed the situation keeping in mind the sentiments of the crowd and the cause for which they were fighting. At the same time, we did not allow them to go out of control. Police acted with great restraint. Since we understood their emotional state and the issues involved, we handled the crowd differently when they marched towards the Kerala border.

As regards Koodankulam, the issue was about the sentiments of residents of one village, whose views were entirely different from that of the Government. We depended on

collection of information from the local community and the co-operation of the religious groups. Here again, we acted with great restraint. We did not want to convert the situation into a communal or religious issue and therefore did not do anything that would be of advantage to the protestors.

**In 2011, we saw a rapid increase in vehicle population with 2.22 lakh new two-wheelers and over 52,000 new cars hitting Chennai roads. What measures can be brought to restrict the vehicle population in our city? Can you share your thoughts about the traffic discipline in India and abroad?**

It is a policy decision to bring about measures to curb vehicle population.

I have lived in the United States for five years where it is rare to find any traffic violation. There are a limited number of police officers on the road to supervise the traffic. Generally, people do not deviate from the traffic signals and traffic signs. They wait for the signal even if there is no traffic ahead of them.

**Community Policing – Can this be introduced as part of the school curriculum? Can you please share your views on this?**

In some States, they have Students Police Cadets (SPC). It is always good to train school students to be responsible and socially committed individuals who are willing and able to selflessly serve their community. Such ideas have a positive impact.

We can educate children on hardships faced by the police; and tell them as to how to use information to assist the

police during crisis and law and order situations. Role modeling is a good concept that brings about attitudinal change. Role modeling by children with the police will make them aware of the consequences that they have to face, if they do not abide by the laws in our society.

**Your advice for IPS aspirants?**

The life of a Police Officer is difficult. But, at the same time, it is an excellent opportunity to help people, particularly the weaker sections. It involves a lot of hard work. One will have to work within a system and these systems are not static.



**“I ensured that the bureaucracy catered to the vulnerable groups which do not have a voice.”**

Rajendra Ratnoo IAS joined Civil Services in 2001. While serving as Sub-Collector of Cuddalore, he coordinated the flood relief programme in Tamil Nadu during October 2004. He initiated the Community Kitchen as a pilot project, and this concept has now been mainstreamed into the common flood management programme. Following this, he managed the tsunami response in December 2004; the Chennai floods

in November 2005 where he was given the special flood duty; Cuddalore floods in 2007; heavy rains causing loss to crops in 2008; floods in November 2008; phyan cyclone in 2009, flash floods in Kanyakumari in 2010, and the Thane Cyclone in December 2011.

*In an exclusive interview with Rajendra Ratnoo IAS shares with Marie Banu his passion towards social causes.*

**Why did you choose to join Civil Services? Who has been your inspiration?**

My father has been my source of inspiration. He was a very bright student, but could not complete his education to the level he wanted to. He worked in the District Collector’s office at Tonk in Rajasthan, and used to take me to the Collector’s chamber on Sundays.

This triggered my curiosity. At the time of my post-graduation, I internalized my goal and decided to dedicate myself for some socially meaningful and productive work either through civil services, or teaching, or working for an NGO.

My aptitude was towards social work. I again attribute this to my father. I was an above average student, but up to the 12th standard was not outstanding in sciences. Somewhere, at the back of my mind, I wanted to pursue Civil Services and therefore chose to study social sciences.

**Would that be your advice for those aspiring to join the IAS?**

For a student aspiring for IAS, he should choose a subject that he is comfortable with and should make note of the scoring trend. I believe that if we allow children, guide them and facilitate them to choose a subject where they have an

aptitude for and interest in, they can excel.

**As District Collector of Cuddalore District, how long do you think it would take for the farmers affected by the Thane Cyclone to restore their livelihood? What have been the government efforts to support them?**

There are many areas in which we have brought in normalcy. For instance, we have restored domestic power supply as well as power supply in agricultural areas where there were standing crops. In that way we have minimized the damage as much as possible. Nevertheless, certain crops like cashew, jackfruit, and coconut will take years to yield as there has been heavy damage.

The government has come out with a very good package for the farmers and we will be coordinating the rehabilitation programme for five years. More than 70,000 acres of cashew fields have been partly or fully damaged and over 40 percent of the trees have been uprooted. This requires a huge amount of manpower and resources for cutting, clearing, leveling the fields, pitting for new saplings, providing new high-yielding variety of saplings, planting, watering, protecting the saplings from cattle, and providing inter-crops until such time the cashew starts yielding. For inter-cropping, the government would be providing all the inputs free of cost for a period of five years.

**Have there been cases of migration or threat of farmer suicides due to the large scale of devastation caused by the Thane cyclone?**

No. We have been fully able to control the distress. I first came as a monitoring officer to Cuddalore and was later put in charge as District Collector on 21st January, 2012. We coordinated sector specific meetings with stakeholders

and affected farmers. We had two rounds of meetings with the cashew farmers, did their needs assessment, and noted their expectations. Similarly, we had meetings with the jackfruit and coconut farmers. We did not adopt a top-down approach, but instead captured their needs to tailor the rehabilitation package. In that way, their distress has been largely reduced and I could see the cheer after the package was announced.

I remember the first meeting with the coconut farmers, when Kothandaraman who had lost around 1000 trees broke into tears. Another progressive farmer was uncontrollable as he was shocked with his loss. But, when the same farmers learnt about the magnanimous package offered by the government, they were ready to take the challenge of growing the crops.

**You have been administering the relief and rehabilitation of tsunami as well as Thane Cyclone in Cuddalore District. Were the lessons learnt from the tsunami beneficial for the Thane programme? What has been the steps taken to ensure sustainable agriculture?**

I think that we have learnt a lot of lessons from the tsunami programme. Incidentally, this is my ninth disaster management experience.

Until now, the farmers were cultivating cashew using the rain-fed agricultural method. But, due to large-scale tree plantation, there was need for irrigation. As the small and marginal farmers were in majority, the government decided to provide them with a community borewell. In this, 20 to 25 acres of land form one cluster and the farmers would share one irrigation source. The government would further be providing them with micro irrigation and drip irrigation facilities.

To compensate with the restriction of water, the government has introduced water conservation methods as well as planned to provide large number of check dams to enable recharge of rainwater in this region.

**While you served as Collector at Kanyakumari District, you launched the ban of non-recyclable plastics. Can you tell us more about this campaign? What do you think would be the best method to curb usage of plastic in our everyday lives?**

I think that the ban alone would not suffice. The Kanyakumari campaign had many unique components and experiences. One method was to lead by example. The resource persons who led the campaign had to first ensure that their behavior and attitude changed before they took the message to the public.

The second strategy was to impart knowledge on why plastics affect the environment; the gases that are emitted while burning plastic; soil health; cattle health; and marine health. By imparting appropriate knowledge, we could bring about a change in the attitude of people. But we did not limit ourselves here. Literature on many of past campaigns showed that despite knowledge and attitude, people did not change their behaviour. We therefore targeted formal and informal key persons in the community and motivated them to serve as role models at grassroots level. We brought about change in their behavior and inculcated leadership qualities, thereby empowering and enabling them.

Our communication strategy was a mix of mass media and inter-personal communication. We formed sustainable forums along with the government. One of them is 'Friend For Nature', a citizen's forum. I now hear that over 90

percent of the people in Kanyakumari carry their own bags and have stopped using plastic bags.

This was because, the efforts that were made since the beginning of the enforcement phase was sustained even after the intensive campaign.

**Which social issues are you passionate about?**

There are a lot of issues which I am afraid we would not be able to capture in this interview. I have always had concern for the vulnerable groups. Wherever I have gone, I ensured that the bureaucracy catered to the vulnerable groups which do not have a voice.

For example, in Cuddalore, the Irula tribals, Narikuravar community the differently abled people, HIV affected people, folk artists, and schedule castes are all marginalized. Considering the unique historical, social, and cultural circumstances which have made an impact on their lives, I feel that the administration should address the needs of these groups.



**“The things that do not belong to you, you have no right to enjoy.”**

Shri U. Sagayam IAS is currently the Managing Director of Co-optex. He is the first IAS officer in the state to upload details of his assets on the district website, taking fellow officers by pleasant surprise. Due to his actions against corrupt activities, he was transferred 18 times in a span of 20 years.

**In an exclusive interview, U. Sagayam IAS discusses with Marie Banu social issues that are of concern today.**

**How are you able to maintain your character of being an honest person, given the social pressure one faces today? Would you like to share a memorable incident in your childhood?**

First of all, the credit goes to my mother Tmt. Sawariammal. I basically hail from an agrarian family. My father is a small farmer, and my mother is upright in character. When I was about 10 years old, I went along with some boys to an orchard that was owned by a Chettiar to pick mangoes. When I returned home, my mother did not accept these mangoes and she told me to throw it away. When I was hesitant, she advised me saying: ‘the things that belongs to you, you must enjoy. The things that do not belong to you, you have no right to enjoy.’ This is how she taught me to be honest and upright.

We owned a small piece of land extending to 2 to 3 acres where we cultivated minor millets like ground nuts. Adjoining our land was an acre of uncultivated *poromboke* land. As a small boy, I asked my mother, ‘why not cultivate this land as well?’ She gave me the same answer: ‘whatever belongs to you, you must enjoy.’

My mother has created a great impact in my life. Today, if I am honest and upright despite the several hurdles I have faced—the credit goes to her. I will continue to be so until the last day of my career.

**Your thoughts about elders being abandoned by their children? How effective is the Senior Citizen’s Act, 2007?**

As a Collector, I have received a lot of complaints from senior citizens that they have been neglected by their sons

and daughters. I could also observe that the condition of the senior citizens were extremely pathetic.

When I served as the Collector for Namakkal District, I once received a complaint from a 70-year-old man who hailed from a small village near Thiruchengode. He complained that his son had taken away the little property he owned. He mentioned that he was literally on the street as no one cared for him, especially his son. I immediately directed my officials to enquire into the issue. They reported that his son was adamant not to take care of his father. Thereafter, I ordered arrest of the son using the provisions under Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007. I can say that I was the first person in our country to use this provision to take action against a son who had neglected his father.

I personally feel that this is not an isolated case. There are a lot of such cases reported across the state and similar situations do prevail in other countries as well. This is not a good sign!

We administrators should be determined to enforce this Act against children who are neglecting their parents. There is a need to educate children about their duty to take care of their parents. Therefore, there should be a blend of both—enforcement and education.

**Do you think that our education system should include value education as part of the curriculum?**

Naturally! Our education system has many flaws. Today, children are made into mark making machines. When I visited schools at Namakkal, there were complaints from children that they were not allowed to play games.

Children have a right to play and this gives them great

happiness. Play is not just a physical activity. It involves many things—to be united; to care; and share for others. But, in most of the schools there is no scope for children to play as there are no extra-curricular activities, and the children are made to study all the time.

The moral education that we used to have earlier is now dispensed with. I feel that our schools and colleges should ensure that moral values are taught. The government should ensure that this is strictly adhered to.

**The weaving community in Tamil Nadu is on the decline. What are the measures that are being taken by the government to ensure their quality of life?**

The government is serious to take care of the welfare of our weavers. Obviously, we are concerned about their pathetic condition. Their earnings are meager and we have decided to enhance it at par with the minimum wages that are paid under the Minimum Wages Act. We have been also seriously planning to substantially increase the sale of Kanchipuram silk sarees and share a portion of the profit that would be generated additionally with the poor weavers. I am sure this will enable them to improve the quality of their life.

**Which of the social issues are of concern today?**

As an administrator, I have witnessed a large scale of migration of villagers towards urban areas. Today, I would describe the social mobility as a major crisis and problem. The urban areas are not in a position to accommodate the migrants, provide basic amenities, infrastructure, and employment.

Obviously, there is an increase in the rate of crime. Due to the exodus of migration from rural to urban India, I am sure that food security is at stake. It is obvious that the next

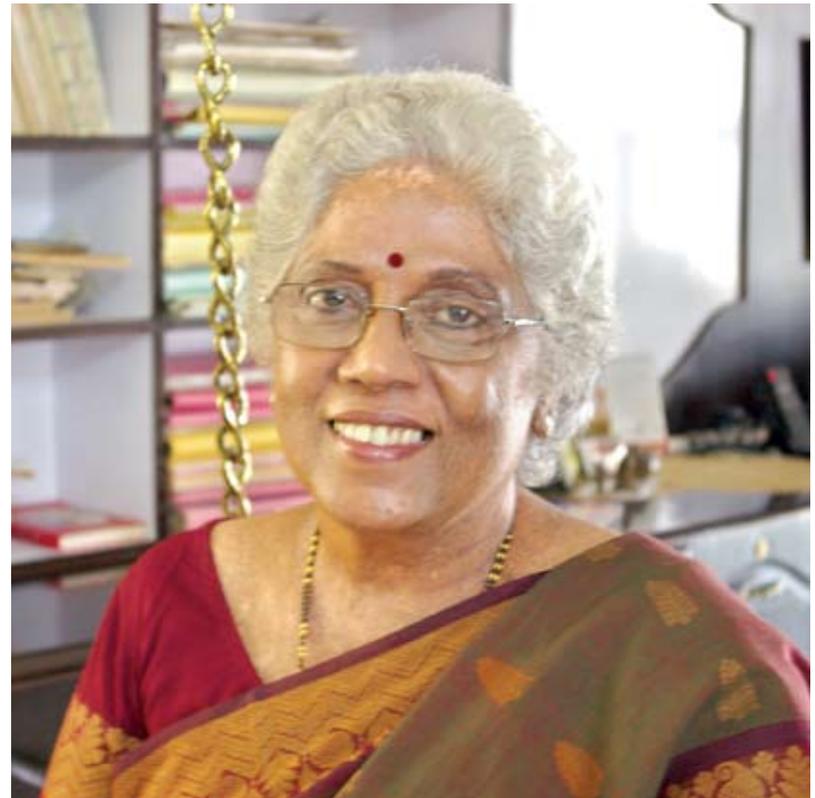
generation of farmers is not going to engage in agriculture as it is no longer a profitable proposition. The cost of agricultural inputs is expensive and the returns are meager.

I consider this as a major social issue of concern. The government should address this issue taking into consideration the serious implications.

**You are an inspiration for the youth. What is your advice for IAS aspirants?**

I am happy to be an inspiration for the youth. I want them to build a new society and a new nation that is uncorrupted. I want them to be honest and upright as this is what our country requires today.

For IAS aspirants, I would say that it is a very good opportunity to serve our country. One doesn't hope to make money by choosing a career in the civil service. But, if you are determined to be honest and upright, the scope is enormous to serve our country.



**“I am first a human being, and this controls the writer in me.”**

Sivasankari is a popular Tamil writer and activist. She is exceptionally sensitive to issues that confront contemporary society and has carved a niche for herself in the Tamil literary world over the last four decades. Her works include more than 36 novels, 48 short novels, 150 short stories, 15 travelogues, 7 collections of articles, one talking book, 4 volumes of literary research book, 2 volumes of anthologies, and biographies of Smt. Indira Gandhi and Sri. G.D. Naidu.

Her stories and articles have been published in prominent Tamil periodicals and many have been translated into English and other Indian languages. Her novels on Drug Abuse, Alcoholism and Old Age Problem, written after many years of research and authentic spadework, have won a lot of acclaim.

She is the first writer to have narrated her story through video and audiotapes. Her project 'Knit India through literature' aimed at substantiating the idea of unity in diversity through literature. This project attracted national attention and was acknowledged by Sahitya Akademi as a 'bench mark'.

She is a recipient of numerous awards such as Kasturi Srinivasan Award, Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiyar Award, Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award and Tamil Annai Award. The Library of Congress has seventy-two titles of her works.

*In an exclusive interview, Sivasankari tells Marie Banu what triggered her to write on social problems.*

**While most of the writers author fiction, what triggered you to write on social problems?**

I am first a human being, and this controls the writer in me. Being human, each one of us is indebted to the society.

I believe that one need not be from the government or a non-governmental organisation to engage in social work. A person in your family may not be a drug addict, but this issue affects you in some way or the other. If your friend's son is a drug addict or your next door neighbour is an alcoholic—you cannot be keeping quiet or gossiping about it. You need to do something from your individual level.

It was therefore very natural for me to think and write

about social problems, human relations, and inter-personal relationships.

**Your novels have brought into limelight issues like drug abuse; alcoholism; and old age. How did you feel when you learnt that your writing has made an impact on people's lives?**

Definitely, the awareness on this issue has tremendously spread and engulfed. Not everybody knows everything at the first instance. We all learn, and once we learn we internalize and practice it.

I myself did not know that alcoholism was a disease. Alcoholism is a problem in almost every alternate household, and people thought that it had something to do with willpower or religious beliefs. But, alcoholism is like diabetes which requires treatment. When this awareness set into me, it was a revelation. I wanted to pass it on and share it with my readers.

**At which age did you start writing and what was your first article on?**

I was 25 when I penned my first story '*avargal pesattum*'. It was about a childless woman.

It is customary to do the Kaappu function on the 7th or 9th day after a child is born. On this occasion, certain communities (not sure if this is still practiced) ask a childless woman to bathe and dress a grinding stone imagining it to be her child.

When I went through this incident, it hurt me very much. I believed that it emotionally affected the woman even more, and the insensitive attitude angered me. The older generation did have a reason for doing this, but I felt it was

barbaric and demeaning.

**Other than novels, you have also been writing travelogues. Which of the places did you cherish most?**

Every country has something very peculiar and very typical of that country. I don't think one can compare it with another. Each country has its own beauty, and its pluses and minuses. If you want see only the pluses, it is impossible.

I have done many international travels and I have enjoyed all of my travel – whether it is the Egyptian deserts or Alps in Switzerland or fjords in Norway. I am a person who would go with an open mind and accept whatever I see for its face value. I will never tend to compare it as five fingers are not the same in my own hand.

**Reading habit amongst the youngsters today has declined due to electronic media. What are your thoughts on this?**

I would say that the reading habits have not declined, but instead changed to a different medium. Previously it was physical books, but now people surf the internet. They may not choose fiction reading, but instead knowledge oriented articles.

Thirty years ago people had only books to read as they had no other diversion. But today, we have the television, cell phone, and internet. People are diverted from one to another and this is the price you have to pay for modernization and development.

A lot of youngsters spend hours on the internet, and of course many who waste their time on facebook and others. Anything used properly is good, but if you are going to indulge in it without any time limit, it is a waste!

**What has been your learning while interviewing stalwart writers across India while doing the project – Knit India through literature?**

First of all, I have traveled crisscross India. I am sure that I am one among the handful of people who have seen India the way I have seen. I have interacted with almost all the intellectual giants of various languages. Knowing about their perception, ideas on how they have succeeded, their values and their challenges, has been a great experience.

I learn from everything that I experience. Over a period of 16 years, I met about 100 senior writers from different language backgrounds and have had intense discussions and interviews with them. I looked into the region of their state through the eyes of the writer – their people; literature, women; youth; problems, etc. It would be difficult for me explain in a couple of sentences about what I have learnt.



**“I am a big consumer of advertisements.”**

Srinivasan K Swamy is the Chairman and Managing Director of R K SWAMY BBDO Pvt Ltd, a leading advertising firm in India. He is also the Chairman of HansaVision, Hansa Research, HANSA Customer Equity, iVista Digital Solutions in India and HANSA|GCR and HANSA Marketing Services in the USA.

R K SWAMY BBDO is present in Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore, Kolkata, and Hyderabad. It has over 75 large national and multinational clients across all important product categories and services. In addition to its Creative and Media Services, it provides communication solutions for Healthcare, Social and Rural sectors as well as specialized divisions for Interactive, CRM, and HR Communications.

Srinivasan K Swamy is the Past President of All India Management Association and is also the Past President of The Madras Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Madras Management Association, and the Advertising Club of Madras. He serves on the Board of Indian Institute of Management, Tiruchirapally and is also a Trustee in the Consumers Association of India and CONCERT.

*In an interview, Srinivasan K Swamy shares with Marie Banu his journey in the advertising sector and his passion for social causes.*

**Being the Chairman of Confederation of Asian Advertising Agency Association, can you tell us what inspired you to venture into the field of advertising?**

Advertising was a default option for me. My father started this Company— (R K Swamy Advertising Associates)— in 1973, and when I completed my MBA in 1978, my uncle literally forced me into it. I cannot say that this was a wrong decision, because I dare say that I made my own contribution to the progress of our company which has now grown into an institution covering 20 different business offerings both in India and the USA.

My involvement with various industry associations is not seen by us as a waste of time, since we believe that any amount of time spent for strengthening our industry is

well spent. It is after all the hand that feeds us. I was the President of Advertising Agencies Association of India for three years. When I was chosen to lead the Confederation of Asian Advertising Agency Associations, it was a natural corollary.

**You have involved in several social service activities, Valluvar Gurukulam School Society being one of them. How do you find time for social work?**

As a person I believe in the virtue of delegation. You are only as effective as your team is, and team members take more interest if they see the outcome of their efforts rather than as per direction of someone else.

At Valluvar Gurukulam, we have been able to make this into a wonderful institution in a matter of 15 years. From 200 students we have scaled up to 2700 students who are all housed in a modern building that has all top facilities for sports, extra-curricular activities, etc. The dedication of our Honorary Secretary, Education Advisor, Principal, Head Mistress, teachers, staff, and students made this possible. As Chairman, my role is limited to encouraging people to take positive and firm steps. Our only goal is to make the school a preferred destination for parents and students in the community. The joy is more, because most of the students are girls who are first generation school goers.

**You seem to be passionate about providing education to the underprivileged. Which other social causes are you concerned about?**

I am passionate about all things that I take up. I am the President of Hindu Mission Hospital, a 230-bed multi-speciality institution that caters to the health needs of the poor and needy. I am also the Trustee of AIM for Seva,

an organisation that runs homes for poor students in over 80 locations across India, and a Trustee in Consumers Association of India and CONCERT.

I play a serious role in the affairs of the Sri Ahobila Mutt. I continue to be involved in many of our industry's initiatives where I have served as Chairman or President earlier. I enjoy all of this because life gets monotonous looking at 'work' alone.

**Most youth prefer to venture into visual media today. What according to you could be the reason?**

I wish more youth take more interest in visual media (as you call it). Given the growth in IT industry, many have taken this vocation seriously. Media industry (print, television, radio, and internet) offers great prospects. Marketing Communication or advertising is undergoing some structural changes and young people are more adept to absorbing these changes and making a difference.

The challenges are arising out of the rise in digital media on the one hand and media proliferation on the other. The youth of today are big consumers of media yet unreachable for commercial messages. This problem could be best-solved if they enter the advertising profession with enthusiasm and some basic training that is provided by visual communication courses and further supplemented by MBA.

**Can you tell us an advertisement that impressed you and one that disturbed you?**

Being in the profession for over three decades, I am a big consumer of advertisements. To me the ads that serve the advertisers' best in terms of increased sale or change in behaviour impress me. I don't get taken-in by entertaining

ads. Yes, like for others, they do entertain me. I enjoy them, but most often these are wasted if they do not lead to positive action. Similarly, advertisements do not disturb me. Some may be in bad taste, however well they may sell the product.

**Advertising has positive as well as negative points. Can you share your thoughts on this?**

Advertising promotes choice and competition. It reduces the product price due to the competitive forces. It improves quality, promotes innovation, and makes the consumer choose with confidence the quality they can get. I can go on and on. But, the only down side of advertising is the small fellows with better products cannot always compete with big manufacturers with deep pockets. It is an unfair world, after all!



**“You can get whatever you have lost, but not your time.”**

Tamilaruvi Manian shares with Marie Banu about his youth movement that works on Gandhian principles

Shri. Tamilaruvi Manian began his political career as a congressman in 1966. After the split happened in the Indian National Congress party, he joined the Indian National Congress. For some years, he served in political parties like Janata Party, Janata Dal, and Lok Shakti. He then joined the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC). After the merger of

TMC with Congress, he continued his career in Congress and served in politics for over 40 years. He resigned from the post of General Secretary of Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (TNCC) on 23rd February 2009 because of the party's position on the Eelam Tamil issue. He has founded the Gandhiya Makkal Iyakkam on 2nd October 2009.[]

*In an exclusive interview, Shri.Tamilaruvi Manian shares with Marie Banu about his youth movement that works on Gandhian principles.*

**What motivated you to launch the Gandhiya Arasiyal Iyakkam in 2009?**

When I started Gandhian People Movement, most of my friends advised me not to indulge in this. They said that no one would join my movement and therefore not to unnecessarily waste my time on this. But, I had firm belief that my movement would be a success as today's youngsters lack proper guidance and proper leadership.

My intention was to uphold probity in public life. I tell the youth who want to join my movement that they must be, first of all, very clear in three things. They should not crave after money; power; or name and fame. Whatever they have within themselves, they should contribute it for the welfare of the society. They should not expect even a pie from the society for their own benefit. So, this is the first prime aim of my youth movement.

We have enrolled more than 48,000 youth for the movement so far. They are doing a wonderful job and are now pre-occupied with a signature campaign against Tasmac. We aim to collect one crore signatures and submit it to our Hon'ble Chief Minister of Tamil nadu on 2nd October, 2012.

**Your speeches have been inspiring and informative. What are the books that you read most?**

My interest lies in four areas. My prime interest is literature and I have read both English and Tamil literature. Particularly, in Tamil literature, I have a strongest fascination towards Sangam (ancient) literature—*Ettu Thogai, Padhitru-pathu, Silappatikaram, and Kamba Ramayanam*. I get values and ethics only from those books. I also read English literature. I have read Shelley, Milton, and in fact all literary work of Shakespeare.

I am also interested in philosophy. From Plato to J. Krishnamurthy, I have widely read philosophy. My next area of interest is religion. I read Bhagavad Gita, Quran, and the Bible, and don't discriminate one from the other. Every religion teaches only one thing: Love your neighbor as yourself.

My area of interest is history. I read more than 12 hours in a day and don't waste even a minute. I read even while I journey, be it by train or plane or any mode of transport. You can get whatever you have lost, but not your time.

**You have been stressing education through mother tongue. In a competitive society, how do you think that this would help our youngsters to seek employment in India as well as abroad?**

I don't advise the youth to confine with learning only their mother tongue. They have to know their mother tongue in order to learn values. But, to eke out his life, it is necessary for him to know English.

I used to say that English is the language of humanity. It is a universal language. One may not be able to read Spanish,

Latin, Greek, or any other foreign language; but their works are definitely translated into English. So, if you know English, you can accumulate knowledge and be familiar with all sorts of literature, science, and philosophy.

English is a medium that would enrich your knowledge. It is therefore essential to know to read and write English. But, at the same time, if you are a Tamilian, you should know your mother tongue—Tamil. I used to say: you honor other languages, but worship your mother tongue.

There is an instance from Bharathiyar's life that has been shared by Va Ra (V.Ramaswamy) in Bharathiyar's biography. It states that when Bharathiyar was in Pondicherry, Va Ra went from Mayavaram to meet him. When Va Ra spoke in English, Bharathiyar called his wife Chellammal and said: "Some foreigner has come here and I don't know what he is trying to say. Ask and let me know what he says." Va Ra realized his fault and started speaking to him in Tamil.

Bharathiyar's intention was that, when one Tamilian meets another Tamilian, they have to convey their feelings and ideas only through their mother tongue.

**Today's youth are turning violent; impulsively reacting; and at times even causing damage to public and private property. Given this scenario, how have youth responded to your movement which preaches Gandhian principles?**

We cannot blame the youngsters alone for this. The parents should be teachers and the teachers should be the second parents for the children. The parents pour their love on their children, but at the same time do not know how to groom them. They thrust their impulsions, opinions, and ideas on them. Kahlil Gibran has said that children come through you and not from you. You pour love on them, but don't thrust

your passion, impression, or ideas on them.

But, it is contrary now. The quality of education is deteriorating. Earlier, people were seeking education to augment their knowledge and the sole aim was not to earn money. But now, everything revolves around money.

#### **Your advice for social workers?**

If you want to be a social worker, first you need to do selfless service. In *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo says: Life is to give, not to take. So, whatever you have, give it to others. Without expecting anything from the society, you have to sacrifice whatever you have. This is the prime quality which a social worker has to inculcate within himself.

*Inspirational stories of uncelebrated  
people whose organisations strive to make a  
difference in the lives of the deprived*

## **NGO PROFILE**



## Easing pain, bringing home care to the fore

Laxmi Iyer is 67 years old and has brain metastasis. She needs medical attention—more importantly morphine, which helps keep the intense pain at bay.

Surana is 57, suffering from lymphoma and needs medical dressing once a week along with counseling for the pain she goes through every single day.

Albertina Lawrence is also 57, with advanced breast cancer which has now ulcerated and needs weekly dressing and administering of morphine for the pain.

And then there is Shordap, who is 58 with ovarian cancer needing an oxygenator and a Fowlers Cot. She needs

medical attention, but she can barely move out of her home.

These are but a few who need home based care and pain management; thanks to the advanced stages of cancer and therefore terminally ill. The common thing for all of them is—the intense pain they go through, hardly have anyone who can care for them on a daily basis, and are very poor to boot.

What can they do if family and friends give up on them? Life is tough as it is without having to care for someone who is anyway going to die. Sounds callous? But, that is the reality for the terminally ill, where giving care and attention is something most of them simply cannot afford.

This is where palliative care comes in.

Palliative care in India is still in its nascent stages and there are few organisations that have taken up this aspect of looking after people who are terminally ill. Without going into statistics, one can say that the needs far exceed the facilities simply because the numbers of those living normally don't get much attention.

Most of these patients are too sick to even be able to go and visit the hospital and get medical attention, which is primarily to be pain free and be in a state where they can be given a dressing and kept reasonably clean till the last breath. By all accounts, this is a luxury.

The World Health Organisation defines Palliative Care as an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing problems associated with life threatening illness through prevention and relief of suffering. It integrates the physiological and emotional aspects of patient care and is a support system for both the

patient as well as for the family.

The thought of trying to do something for terminally ill people is what gave birth to 'Cancare Foundation'.

Four doctors and three others with a mission to do something in this direction got together and started Cancare Foundation. The purpose was to extend home based care to the terminally ill cancer patients and also support surgeries, radiation and chemotherapy of needy patients from low income groups.

Dr. S G Ramanan, Medical Oncologist and Managing Trustee, Cancare Foundation, says, "The trauma of cancer can be devastating for the patient and the family and more so to those from the low income groups. While cancer cannot add days to their life, the Cancare Foundation adds life to their days."

That's how Cancare Foundation was set up. Cancare therefore supports cancer surgeries, radiation, chemotherapy, bone marrow transplantation, and palliative care admissions. It also takes care of the nutritional needs of children undergoing chemotherapy, ensures home based care for those dying, and finally initiates education and research.

Eventually, Cancare Foundation will also initiate certificate courses in palliative care training.

"It is only two years since Cancare Foundation came into existence. In that time, it has reached out to many terminally ill patients with the help of a van donated by a well-wisher which has a doctor, a trained nurse and a social worker on call. Regular home visits has been possible with the help of these three who try and visit at least four to five homes in a day. While the steps have been small, they have been

persistent and consistent," says Akhila Srinivasan, Trustee, Cancare Foundation.

But, the journey has only begun. The road ahead is long and there is much more to cover. There is much to do and many more miles to cross. Death in the end needs to be peaceful and complete. Cancare Foundation strives to make it possible in the best of its abilities.

—*Chitra Mahesh*

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## My Garbage Is My Responsibility

If you thought that manure and compost were farmers' terms, irrelevant to apartment-life in the cities, then here is 'daily dump' to prove you wrong. Daily Dump is a unique project that was started in Bangalore in 2006, as a culmination of ideas from varied discourses. As a brand, daily dump is involved in developing a range of composting solutions, enabling common people to contribute their part in keeping the earth healthy.

Composting, as a process is inevitable because it is nature's way of recycling nutrients. So, how is this going to benefit us? "Composting prevents the production of methane – a greenhouse gas produced when organic waste is allowed to decompose in landfills. Also, there is substantial research showing that harmful emissions like methane can be contained by scientifically managing organic waste and

converting them to compost", explains Navneeth Raghavan, an environment enthusiast, besides being a freelance landscape consultant and teaching at Delhi School of Economics.

Compost increases organic matter in soils, reduces water demands of plants and trees, makes clay soils airy so they drain and gives sandy soils body to hold moisture. On the other hand, composting at our homes reduces the amount of waste that we throw out.

"On an average, household garbage comprises of 60 percent green waste (green leaves and garden clippings, kitchen, fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee grounds and tea bags), 20 percent recyclable waste (plastic, bottle and paper), and another 20 percent which is waste or reject," elaborates Navneeth, who is a Daily Dump Clone.

Segregation of household waste has not taken off seriously, because this concept has not been understood in completion. Segregation of waste to produce compost is the first step to promoting organic farming. "The problem is the attitude. Managing wastes is seen as someone else's responsibility," laments Navneeth while acknowledging that the municipal authorities cannot be accused of inaction because they are not able to handle the scale of garbage on a daily basis. "This is where realization of individual responsibility can make a big difference. The best way for an individual to help the waste issue in their city is to manage their waste at source," he adds.

Daily dump provides a range of outdoor composting products that are convenient to use in any of our homes. And, for those of us who wonder what could be done with the compost so produced, daily dump has an answer to that too—the compost will be purchased by them.

Interestingly, daily dump also offers community composting solutions. Therefore, families living in flats can embrace this collective endeavor towards better waste management. There are two methods prescribed – (1) A number of Leave-Pots are lined up (or distributed among the landscape area) and serve as the community composting facility, wherein you fill one by one and (2) A mix of Leave- Pots and Patta Kambhas, some are lined and some distributed to serve as the community composting facility.

“10 flats at an average can produce around 12 kilograms of compost a month after the first harvest that takes 90 days. It is very simple and the best way to promote it is to explain how easy it is to do,” smiles Navneeth who has sold about 2000 units of compost since 2007. Like they say, every drop in the ocean counts!

Ten minutes a day is all it takes. For those who find it difficult to manage, daily dump offers a service plan where all one has to do is just dump. Daily dump has trodden the path of simplifying things so that the ultimate purpose is met – a cleaner and greener neighbourhood.

The simplicity and usefulness were not enough for the idea to catch up with the people. “Awareness has been the most challenging aspect,” says Navneeth. Comparing Chennai and Bangalore can give us an idea of the role played by awareness. In fact, segregation can reduce the work at landfills which due to lack of proper management can create inconvenience to the people living in the locality. Remember how the dumping ground around Perungudi stinks?

Talking of awareness, Daily dump’s website is informative, user friendly, and allows readers to comprehend the difference every individual can make. The members of daily dump are also clear that daily dump is not the only solution to waste management at our homes and apartments. “Composting can be done in different ways and one can

choose the method he or she is comfortable with. Least, one can take the effort to give the segregated waste to someone who will do the composting,” informs Navneeth.

In short, daily dump is about doing your bit. All that matters is what you are willing to do!

—*Shanmuga Priya. R*

*For more information on Daily Dump, visit [dailydump.org](http://dailydump.org)*





## STEP BY STEP – A Better Life

Poverty as a concept remains debatable. However, access to credit as an effective means to contain this vicious circle is the lesson of the day. “Thanks to Mohammed Yunus who brought this concept to light,” begins John Alex, Programme Director, Equitas Development Initiatives Trust.

The company, Equitas Microfinance India Pvt. Ltd, floated the Trust in February 2008, in addition to other social initiatives that were undertaken. Equitas, as a company targets low income households that are not served by the formal financial sector, to improve their quality of life. The key is ‘access to credit’.

“Access to credit is a very complicated task, given the circumstances in our country. Grameen Bank model of microfinance, as a concept, works. It has worked in Europe, Russia, China, America, and in war torn areas like

Afghanistan and Africa which can be replicated with suitable adaptations. It works everywhere for the simple reason that women are better than men in repayment,” explains Alex.

“Financial services to the low income households created a large client base (about 15 lakh borrowers) for the company. The self-help group mechanism created a ‘peer force’ that ensured timely repayment. Our clients are not poor. They just did not have the access to credit. This is where Equitas pitched in,” he says.

Financial literacy is an integral part of the services provided by Equitas. At times, private moneylenders and even NGOs have charged exorbitant rates of interest that ranged between 35 and 60 percent. Assessing the ignorance of clients, Equitas educated people on these nuances. It became the first enterprise to reveal the interest rates to clients and operated in a transparent manner which resulted in a bond between the people and the company.

“All our clients have great dreams. Along with the increase in confidence levels of the women and their ability to face and approach authorities, Equitas also acknowledged their dreams. A better quality of life meant different things to different clients. Our company identified two crucial strands—improving income and reducing expenditure,” says Alex.

In order to augment income levels, Equitas provided the clients microfinance loans; trained them in skills that they chose to learn through Equitas Gyan Kendra; and offered placement of clients’ unemployed children in enterprises like Nokia and others. Recently, they have come up with the Business-to-Business initiative which is a for-profit model like the microfinance loans. In this, clients like vegetable

vendors make better profits by procuring goods directly from the producer and farmers use the distribution centres that have been created for this purpose.

“We are able to pass on 20 percent margin to our clients”, points out Alex. A market research team which studied the expenditure patterns of the clients revealed that 50 percent is spent on food, 20 percent on health, and 10 to 15 percent on education. Guided by the study, Equitas established Equitas Dhanya Kosha. These are retail shops which sell products at 10 percent lesser market price. Along with a monthly revolving credit of 1000 rupees, 6 percent of the discount is passed on to the members.

Three models—camps and referrals; health helpline; and telemedicine— were adopted to curtail health related expenditures. The field officers inform the self-help group members about medical camps during their regular visits. Soon, primary health care covered 6.6 lakh out of the 15 lakh client base. Further, the screened members were referred to doctors who provided discounts for treatment. “We played the number game too. Seeing 10 patients for 500 rupees per head versus 20 patients for 300 rupees per head was the cue. Fortunately, it worked,” laughs Alex.

Latest on the cards is the telemedicine-videoconferencing programme that was launched at the centres at T.Nagar, Selayur and Perambur. An excited Alex says, “This is first of its kind initiative that has been welcomed in many circles, including the government. What is inspiring is the prompt and responsible networking that facilitates the execution of these projects. The system provides a checkup, an ECG, and prescription at an affordable price of 50 rupees. Needless to mention, technology like the remedi-kit in health centres has come along since the beginning to ensure effectiveness of

this programme.

In the area of education, adopting a Corporation School was not possible, hence tuition centres was an alternative for Equitas. Today, there are 50 ‘Equitas Shiksha Centres’ across the state, benefiting 4000 students. Equitas has opened schools ‘Equitas Gurukul’ in Dindigul, Salem, Coimbatore and Trichy that provides quality education at an affordable price.

So, what followed ‘an increased income and reduced expenditure’?

“A person who has a bike aspires for a car. One who lives in a rented house wants to own one. This was the next dream we set out to fulfill”, says Alex, describing the second hand vehicle loans and housing loans. “Our principle was simple. We believe that any social initiative should reach at least 20 to 25 percent of our client base”.

Equitas also focused on the pavement dwellers. Interestingly, upliftment of pavement dwellers and beggars was the original idea and the company was to be named UPDB, an acronym for Upliftment of Pavement Dwellers and Beggars. However, it was renamed EQUITAS, a latin word meaning fair and equitable. Going back to the same group, they worked out a model to finance their deposit and rent houses to them.

Eventually, integrated approach was followed. The residents were enrolled in the skill training programmes and their products were sold in retail outlets. Children from these families were employed in warehouses through the placement programmes. Now, out of the 100 families that have been identified, 87 live in houses and 70 have started remitting the rent themselves. “As a guide and facilitator,

we always have to think ahead. We are now working to get ration cards for these families,” concluded Alex.

Thus, Equitas, as a corporate citizen, has walked that extra mile to prove that self-sustenance is true empowerment.

—*Shanmuga Priya.R.*

*For more information on Equitas, please contact Mr. Vasudev, Trustee at 9940577800 or visit [equitas.in](http://equitas.in).*



## With Little Help, They Can

From mental illness to mental health, we have come a long way. Subjective wellbeing has come into focus and the mentally challenged individuals are viewed as a whole. Yet, the reach of awareness on the different forms of mental illness and their symptoms is still not appreciable.

Mental illnesses can be functional or organic. While the former can be treated, the latter has limited scope for betterment. Depending upon the level of damage, the severity of symptoms varies. Lack of awareness makes it impractical for the families to cope with the affected persons' illness and take care of them.

This is where, community efforts come in, making life more comfortable for the mentally challenged. Given the multiple discriminations prevailing in our society, being mentally

challenged and a woman is certainly a cause for concern as they are easily abandoned by their families.

Friends for the Needy in Thirumullavoyal, Chennai is an effort to treat and rehabilitate such women. It was established in 1997 as Public Charitable Trust, in a temporary shelter. Within a year, a small house was purchased in Puzhal through a bank loan. "Regular funds remained a challenge then, and continue to be one today also," says Sr. Geetha Mathews, Founder, Friends for the Needy.

Soon, they could move to their own home. "Hard work will always be paid. We were noticed. A textile owner (Lalchand Mangaram) gifted this land for us," mentions Sr. Geetha. Although the case of illegal occupants is still on, she is hopeful that it will all be resolved. "It is the purpose that matters," she smiles.

Presently the home houses 35 patients. "We cannot take in more patients as individual attention would become impractical," she explains. Although most of the inmates here have been referred by Schizophrenia Research Foundation of India (SCARF), based in Chennai, some also come from contacts made on the helpline.

During every intake, the woman's case history is thoroughly analysed, which includes details about the family background, childhood trauma, and the like.

"The most difficult of all tasks is to get their family members believe that these illnesses can be treated," laments Sr. Geetha. Most of the women here are abandoned, divorced, or separated. Some have parents to support while others are totally rejected by their near and dear ones.

Mentioning about Schizophrenia, she expounds that it is one of the most terrible sicknesses that is often mistaken

for depression. It's very diagnosis is tricky. The patients experience auditory hallucinations, develop their own words with changing meanings (neologism), and ask repeated questions (echolalia). "With suicidal tendency being very high, we cannot risk leaving them to themselves. A recent incident where a man in Royapuram burnt himself to death, for no reason at sight, is a case in point."

The behaviour of these patients is highly unpredictable. Sr. Geetha illustrates a case where the patient defecated and began to consume her own excreta. Their poor socialising makes it a herculean task to help them connect their thoughts and associated people.

With its own team of dedicated doctors, Friends for the Needy provides regular counselling services for the inmates and their care givers. So far, 250 women have been re-united with their families after recovery. "The role of the family and society is a very important factor in patient's recovery. Every family who has a mentally challenged member needs a lot of support and education to deal with the patient."

The challenge in rehabilitating mentally ill patients is the high probability of relapse. Despite all guidance and support given, the relapse phase once again brings to light the lacuna in awareness. "Very few understand the difference between mental retardation and mental illness. For those who are mentally retarded, training can be given to control their behavior, while for the latter, treatment is available."

In our country, even today, patients are taken to temples to drive away the evil spirits. Promoting awareness on mental illness is a huge task that calls for sensibility, patience and perseverance. "Wanting to do something and being able to do something are two different things." Inadequate funds and staff have not allowed Friends for the Needy to make a

dent in the awareness of the communities.

What lies ahead is a thought Sr Geetha would not pay heed to. “When everyday sustenance is in itself a challenge, I cannot think of the future,” says she, who was interrupted twice during the conversation to interact with her sponsors. As a message for our readers, she concludes, “All I would want to communicate is that, with little help patients of mental illness can lead better and comfortable lives. Friends for the needy is just one such effort. Kindly support us in whichever way you can.”

— *Shanmuga Priya. R*

*Friends for the Needy is located at 58/812, C.T.H. Road,  
Thirumulavayal P.O. Chennai – 600 062. Phone: 044-26376755.  
website: friendsfortheneedy.org*



## Finding The Forgotten

A mission towards caring for the sick, dying and destitute has been Edgar Jones Paul’s calling for decades, now. The co-founder and trustee of Little Drops shares his experiences in establishing his home...

When Edgar Jones Paul was all of 12, he lost his father in a road accident. Part of a family of seven, the loss of the lone breadwinner could have easily proven to be disastrous to him and the family. However, an almost heart-warming devotion to the Almighty — he “dedicated (my) life to Jesus” — didn’t stop at bestowing him with qualities like faith, hope and courage, but also inspired him to do his bit for the abandoned. The story of Little Drops, the NGO that Paul would go on to establish a few decades later, is indeed a true reflection of the man and his mission.

“When my father died, the seven of us were suddenly confronted with the prospect of hard reality,” says Paul, reminiscing his early days, “It seemed as though life was going to be very tough; and indeed it was.” However, through sheer dedication, the lad went on to complete his elementary education from Madras Christian College School, and began pursuing a polytechnic diploma course on completion of schooling. “Back then, most of my friends were actively planning on pursuing professional courses like Medicine and Engineering,” he says, with a smile, “I didn’t have that option; the financial situation at home didn’t allow for that luxury. I had to enroll into a diploma programme and start working at the earliest, in order to support the family.” As fortune and perhaps providence would have it, Paul then found work at Indian Airlines — a stage of his life which brought him closure and bore the fruit of his dedicated work and faith. But that was not enough.

“I knew that my calling was more than leading a comfortable life,” he says, “I wanted to do something for the downtrodden; the homeless; the destitute — those that were forgotten, even by their own.” In 1991, Paul and close friend, Selvaraj Bovas, together established a home for the destitute. They named it Little Drops. “It was Mother Teresa who once said that although many tiny drops of water make an ocean, ‘the ocean would be less without that one drop’,” says Paul, explaining the origins of the name of his home, “That inspired us to come up with the name Little Drops — the thought that every little bit of help goes a long way in making a difference.”

After registering their home in 1991, the duo went about looking for a place to build their home. “A friend had a 1,800 sq ft land in Paraniyuthur — four kilometers from Porur. We

decided that it wouldn’t be a bad idea to start there,” says Paul, “We built our home there in 1993.” Not knowing how to begin rescuing the abandoned, Little Drops first began by offering services to the Mother Teresa’s Home at Saidapet. “Our dorm could take no more than 15 inhabitants. So, when the number increased, we would have to move people to the verandah,” he recounts, “Not long after, we built an additional floor.” Over time, Little Drops began expanding its reach. Volunteers ventured out to the streets and looked for the destitute. “We would inform the police if we decided to give someone a home,” says Paul, “Sometimes, the police commissioner would also call us if and when his men spotted someone in need of help.”

Over the next decade, Little Drops’ reach widened. Paul built another home at an adjacent village and even constructed a shelter in Sriperumbudur in 1998. Nearly another decade later, the NGO began work at Dharmapuri district. However, an intense struggle for funding was an ongoing battle that Paul waged, every single day that he carried out his mission. “When we had plans of expanding, we would go out, help raise funds and immediately try building another home at another place,” he says, “The priority was to get as many people possible under our care.” In the meanwhile, Little Drops also took the initiative to empower its very own staff.

“In Dharmapuri, we realized that there were single mothers — women whose husbands had either died or deserted them — who were raising children who were sent to foster homes,” he says, “We decided to provide employment to these women while providing education to their children at a school that we then established. Gradually, the school also started educating most children in the area, providing a more caring alternative to government education.”

As on date, Little Drops has nearly five homes, including one in Manipur that it opened in 2009. Along the way, the home has ensured that most of the region's destitute, have received adequate care and hospice. Be it regular hospital visits, conducting surgeries or even taking care of burials, the NGO has shepherded those in need. "And that has been my passion, my mission, the very life that I wanted to lead," says Paul. "We oversee nearly four burials in a week," he continues, "In the course of our existence, we have buried nearly 2000 people."

Challenges, however hard, have never deterred the man from his service to society.

The future for Paul lies in the continuance of his good work. "I have just one aim in life: to bring all the destitute in the country, under my roof," he says, "I just want the abandoned and dying to know that if nobody wants you, Little Drops is here for you." Apt, perhaps, for an organization that has dedicated a great deal into caring and easing the burdens of the forgotten.

—*Daniel Almeida*

*Little Drops is located at No.1, Kalluri Salai, Koluthuvanchery, Paraniyuthur, Chennai-602 101. Phone: +91 44 2476 7763 / 6530. Email: littledropshome@yahoo.com*



## Show Me The Way

A twist of fate was pretty much the one deciding factor that led to the formation of what is today, one of the better-known homes for children in the city. Dr A D S N Prasad's story of how he went about forming Pathways is as inspiring as it is touching...

With a private practice at Gandhi Nagar, Adyar in 1975 — at just 21 he was perhaps the only audiologist and speech pathologist in the city — Dr A D S N Prasad could have well told life what he wanted out of it. The only problem: life didn't give him that option. "In fact, I was viewing my practice in Chennai as a transitory phase in my life," he says, "I wanted to move to Indiana and settle there. The paperwork was in place too." Dr Prasad's practice in

Chennai was quite successful and the fact that he charged his patients ensured that he had sufficient money to live a good life. He was indeed as successful as he could possibly be. One day, however, his life changed.

“I was seeing around seven patients that day,” he says, “One of them was a child with an acute case of Microcephaly (a medical condition where the circumference of the head is abnormally small). The child had only one relative and she was his aunt.” Dr Prasad began treating the child and caring for him. “After one of our sessions one day, the aunt never turned up to pick the child up,” he says, “When I sent my cook to call on her, we discovered that she had expired.” Almost overnight, the doctor was faced with a decision that he had to make. He could have handed over the child to a social service organization. “But I decided to keep him,” he says, “He was very unwell. But I felt myself loving and caring for him a great deal. I was just 21 and the money I earned was more than sufficient to feed someone apart from myself.” That was of course, until he began caring just a little while later, for a child with Down’s syndrome. What then began were his baby steps towards something bigger. Before he knew it, he felt a need to care for lesser-fortunate children who needed to be looked after and treated for several medical conditions. In three months, he had 28 children under his care.

In a sense, that was how Pathways began — by accident. “I never imagined I’d do this when I began practice here in the city,” says Prasad. Quite naturally, caring for these children needed money. “I approached the Department of Social Welfare to ask the authorities there if there were any grants of sorts that I could make use of. I was turned down,” he says, “They obviously hadn’t heard of someone who was

doing the work that I was doing, back then.” However, his salary from the three hospitals he worked at, and his private practice ensured that Dr Prasad had just enough to care for the 110 children who were now under his care. “I had to sell my car and bike in order to raise more money,” he says, “I did just that.” Understandably, his dream of going abroad died a natural death.

In 1983, Dr Prasad married. He would now have a family to take care of, apart from the 100-odd children that he already cared for. “My wife (Chandra) sold her jewellery to raise enough money to sustain our little home,” he says, recalling the immense support that he received from his spouse, “Nobody else would have been so very understanding.” By this time, Prasad began writing letters to H Y Sharada Prasad — one of Indira Gandhi’s most noteworthy media advisors. “He was a distant relative of mine,” says Dr Prasad, “I requested him for help and he asked me to come on over to New Delhi. We left for the capital. With his help, we secured a Rs 60,000 annual grant, which in those days was a huge sum of money.”

With the financial aid that it received, Pathways then began treading the warpath. “We built a home at Thiruvanmiyur over 10,000 sq ft, which helped us move the children from Gandhi Nagar where we were staying on rent,” says Dr Prasad. By this time, friends from the United States also pitched in, hearing of the tremendous social work that Pathways was doing. One of them was Judge Williams Sheffield, who continues to be a beacon of support to the organization. “Our services were free of cost. We even started a medical centre where we cared for and treated nearly 4,500 people,” says Dr Prasad. By this time, the group had also extended care to nearly 125 children from

the adjoining slums. Although hard to come by, whatever money Pathways received, came from several one-time grants from establishments that ranged from well-known NGOs like Miserior to the Japanese Government. In fact, the funding from Miserior helped Pathways construct a centre for adults at Mahabalipuram in 1990. "These children began growing up into adults. We definitely needed to care for some of them," says Prasad.

"We planned on taking Pathways to other States," says Prasad, "Judge Sheffield and I sat down to discuss this one day. However, we realized that procuring land was bound to be a problem since not many were forthcoming about donating land for our cause." It was then that the organization expanded within Tamil Nadu itself, to Chengalpet. "We began an orphanage for normal children, there."

Having helped over 23,000 children (an average of around 600 children a month) since its inception in 1975, there's no denying that Pathways has indeed come a long way. "In fact, it's interesting that we named our NGO Pathways," says Prasad, "The words 'path' and 'way' mean pretty much the same thing. But together, the word 'Pathway' has a greater sense of direction, which we wanted to give the children." With over 112 volunteers and employees, care of the sick is definitely in good hands. But the battle, according to Dr Prasad is far from won. "The objective is to keep taking care of children long after our time," he says, "Needless to say, expenses keep rising as time goes by." However, that has not deterred quality away from Pathway's homes. With good facilities, including swimming pools, the children are taken care of to the best possible extent.

"We are looking for the right business model to sustain

the work that we do," concludes Dr Prasad, "We have volunteers from the US coming down on social assignments. All we care about is for the children and that they will be taken care of, for a long time to come."

—*Daniel Almeida*

*Pathway is located at E 76/1 12th West Street, Kamraj Nagar, Tiruvanmiyur, Chennai 600 041. Phone: +91 98400 29352.*

*Website: [pathway-india.com](http://pathway-india.com)*





## Healing Hands; Helping Hands

With innumerable people dying of terminally afflicted illness, palliative care has become imperative in the modern day context. While this could have been a necessity even earlier, a longstanding joint family system ensured that someone cared for such people albeit reluctantly in many cases.

But, in today's world where life is fast and often stressful, those with terminal illness simply don't have anyone to care for them in the last leg of their journey in this world. This is why palliative care has become such a vital bridge between people, families and the community as a whole.

In this context, The Pratham Hospice Trust was set up in 2006 as a Charitable Trust. Its objective is to establish services for the care and effective treatment of terminally

ill cancer patients, and those beyond hope. It also aims to work closely with other hospices, clinics and homes for the sick to provide palliative care.

It was indeed a very momentous day when the hospice space was located and inaugurated recently at T Nagar, Chennai. Some of the most concerned and responsible citizens of Chennai were present as this facility became operational.

"We hope to establish one or more hospices for the care and palliative treatment of those who are terminally ill with cancer, HIV or any other disease which needs care,' says Ranvir Shah one of key people behind Pratham Trust.

"We aim to provide this care to those who are poor, lonely, neglected, and dying in pain and indignity in surroundings that will be conducive to the comfort and peace of mind of such patients, so that they can be cared for until the time of their death. Our facilities make it possible for them to live without pain and suffering, and in conditions that would help them face the end with dignity by a focus on the prevention of pain and relief from suffering rather than life prolongation,'" adds Ranvir Shah.

At present the Trust is in a position to provide palliative care for such patients in their own homes. There is a fully qualified doctor on call, trained nurses, and volunteers who provide additional, periodic support to the patients by visiting him/her regularly.

At the Pratham Hospice Trust, it is believed that there is no need to die in pain, palliative care is about living and that it is ultimately not about the end of life. And, Ranvir believes that palliative care can provide an option between prolonged suffering and a better way of managing of pain and discomfort.

The Trust's services are offered to one and all, without any discrimination of caste or creed and irrespective of one's financial position. Home care is also provided, if the patients so desire.

So far, 77 terminally ill patients have been admitted in the hospice and homecare services were rendered to 53 patients until July 2012.

At present, the six-bedded ward of the Hospice is functions at: 16/8, Vijayaraghava Lane, [off: Vijayaraghava Road], T'Nagar, Chennai – 600 017. Ph: 9150002206 / 96770 10776 / 044 6452 5265

—*Chitra Mahesh*

*Pratham is located at: No. 15, Race Course Road, Guindy, Chennai –600 032 or call 044-66848484 / 9940623628.*



## Connecting the DOTs

It might surprise many that India with its huge population of about 1.2 billion, bears the largest TB burden in the world—in terms of absolute numbers of incident cases that emerge each year. It contributes almost one-fourth of the estimated global TB cases and what is really surprising is that this is a disease that is fully curable.

Facts and figures continue to be alarming as tuberculosis stalks this country when it absolutely need not do so. In this context the work done by REACH, a non-profit organization is very relevant when it comes to creating TB free societies. In fact, that is their motivating goal.

Established in 1998, the primary focus of REACH is on support, care, and treatment of TB. It does not stop here as

it covers other areas of work that include advocacy, public education, communication, and research. REACH works with a network of stake holders and is also a member of the WHO Stop TB Partnership and a member of the Partnership for TB Care and Control, India

REACH works with technical support and funding through specific project grants as well as programs and interventions designed, set up, and managed by REACH directly. It worked and continues to work with grants and technical support from The Global Fund to fight AIDS TB and Malaria, USAID. The Lilly MDR-TB Partnership and The International Union against TB and Lung disease (the Union) South East Asia Office.

REACH is led by an Executive Committee of distinguished members from different walks of life which is chaired by Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, Member Rajya Sabha and an eminent agricultural scientist, and works as an interface between the RNTCP, India's Revised National TB Control Program, private doctors, and hospitals to ensure that TB patients get high quality treatment they need and deserve. This initiative is known as the Private Public Mix (PPM), which has been the core of our work since inception. REACH works through a team of dedicated doctors, social workers and health workers.

Over the years REACH has built strong networks with private doctors and hospitals, which get in touch once a patient is diagnosed with tuberculosis. A drug box is then acquired from the government Tuberculosis Unit and begins on DOTS treatment for the patient. This is one of the unique aspects of the organization where the care giver is also the dots provider. Dots is the directly observed treatment rendered by anyone who can access the patient and many

are the inspiring stories of village postman, shop keeper tailors, and watchmen who have taken on the responsibility to do this as part of a community ethos.

REACH health workers educate and counsel patients about the disease and the importance of regular treatment. The patient's treatment is monitored till completion, and whenever required, patients are also supported with travel expenses, investigation costs, second opinions, and nutritional aid.

Some of the other activities include patient support—case referrals, treatment initiation through DOTS; counseling; creating awareness—through different mediums to reach out to different sections in society; resource mobilization—to serve the cause of TB eradication and provide training to private providers; sharing new research on TB; as well as updates in TB diagnosis and treatment.

TB is an infectious disease caused by bacteria and spreads through the air when an infected patient coughs or sneezes. Most people in India are infected with TB bacteria, but only a few get the disease.

A cough of two weeks or more needs to be investigated and the sputum microscopy examination is the best method of diagnosis.

However, TB is completely curable and high quality diagnosis and drugs are available through the RNTCP which is being implemented throughout the country. Regular treatment involving the TB patient taking the medicines under direct observation of a health worker or community volunteer ensures complete cure. This strategy known as DOTS recommended by the WHO, saves countless lives and dramatically improves the cure rate. Improper or

discontinued treatment can lead to a drug-resistant form of TB – MDR-TB. Therefore, untreated TB is dangerous both to the patient and the community. Of course it goes without saying that TB is an economic burden to the country, affecting those in their most productive ages.

Though TB is curable and treatment is available free of cost at all Government health centers across the country under the Revised National Tuberculosis Control Program (RNTCP), lack of awareness among the general public and the private health care providers prevents them from accessing the system and utilizing it effectively. Social stigma associated with the disease causes people to often refuse to accept the diagnosis due to fear of rejection by their families, loss of job, and social ostracism.

TB impacts women more severely, with many sent away from their homes; young women are especially vulnerable to this stigma and are often not considered eligible for marriage, even if they are fully cured. All these and other factors prevent people from seeking accurate and timely diagnosis or treatment. REACH has and continues to be a bridge between the patient, the private health care sector, and the government.

—*Anne Suresh Kumar*

*REACH can be reached at: [www.reachtbnetwork.org](http://www.reachtbnetwork.org)*

### **How can REACH be helped by society at large?**

#### *Volunteer*

REACH needs support from volunteers in certain specific areas or at certain times of the year. If you are interested in volunteering with REACH you can contact them.

#### *Become a DOTS provider:*

DOTS providers and community volunteers are the foundation stones of the TB program in India. A DOTS provider is a person who overlooks the treatment of a patient by directly observing the patient swallow tablets.

#### *Speak up to stop TB:*

Very simply, anyone can read about TB and Speak up to Stop TB. Anyone can help reduce the stigma that forces those with TB to remain silent. Anyone can help those with TB to receive the quality of diagnosis, treatment and care that they deserve.



## The buck does stop with the teacher

In 1998, a group of adoptive parents launched Relief Foundation to engage in family-based care for children who are placed at various governmental institutions in Tamil Nadu. Gradually, they worked with the homes and dealt with child-protection and rehabilitation issues. Soon they noticed that however hard they or the institutions that they worked with tried, children did not express a sense of belongingness to where they lived. Children living in homes were routinely found to be bitter, unhappy, dropping out of school, running away from the homes, and so on. “Why are we children here?” they would ask themselves. The answer was simple. This was a forced ‘option’ on the children as outside these homes they ran the risk of being attacked or exploited.

Up to 2008, Relief Foundation has been working closely with the Juvenile Justice System. Roping in educationists, corporates, as well as welfare specialists the organization has been conducting studies on education reform. Years of study on the factors that helped child growth and independence led them to one conclusion—if the school was right, then the chances of the child blossoming into a self-reliant and successful individual was far higher than if it was not.

Says Vidya Shankar, Chairperson, Relief Foundation, “We realized that we were all along working at the fag end of a lengthy problem. It was time to start focusing on schools and we did so without wasting further time.”

Thus began the school reform process. Relief Foundation, in collaboration with Shriram Foundation, adopted five schools around the Thirunermalai area where they conducted training programs for teachers, shared good practices, developed lesson plans, and worked on improving the general schooling experience for children.

“The first few months were disappointing because the teachers themselves fared poorly in the training programs. Their own baggage of bad education and lack of self-esteem led them to exhibit low caliber. This came as a challenge in our quest to establish the school as a social change agent,” says Vidya.

Relief Foundation continued to support these schools by providing infrastructure and logistical support by appointing a social worker in every school. The social worker did a community mapping of the area, and by involving the Shriram Group’s ‘Give a life’ sponsorship project developed a unique vocational training programme for the children.

“If children want to learn carpentry, or pottery, the school

should provide them a platform to learn and develop their skills. They can learn mathematics from farmlands. Sports as a career should also be promoted among discerning children. Why not?" asks a passionate Vidya, adding fervently, "The buck really does stop with the teacher. If there is a good teacher around, no child would feel a lack of love, understanding and nurturing in life."

Recently, in January 2012, Relief Foundation started work on setting up a 'Teachers' Lab'—a hunt for the most progressive thinking graduates with a love for learning and a love for teaching. The identified teachers will be placed with the five schools that the foundation works in collaboration with Shriram Foundation. This lab would further train and educate the graduate teachers and place them in these five schools. Although this programme is loosely based on the concept of 'Teach for India', the premise for this lab is to step into the education system as a preventive measure to stop exploitation.

Besides, the organization works on capacity building for parents and keeps in touch with the local communities. "The dialogue process has to be continual," says Vidya who believes that greater interaction with the communities can help resolve issues such as intolerance, migration, discontinuation of schooling, and delinquency. "When there's a good school around, parents don't mind shifting their homes there," says a confident Vidya, adding that, "when the community owns the school, there is nothing more powerful or game-changing than that!"

Relief Foundation also believes in supporting young adults and any other willing, enthusiastic social entrepreneurs to start their own community schools. It is presently tying up with several corporate houses to ensure a steady flow of

funds that may be awarded in the form of fellowships for candidates with the most creative idea to set up schools, especially in rural areas. "Whether a fellow or a teacher, we aim to design a pay package that is attractive, not meager," says a resolute Vidya.

The organization is presently gathering a pool of intelligentsia, a think-tank of individuals from all walks of life who can contribute towards the shaping of better schooling environment for today's children.

"Just think about education. Two or three years of your life may not be much in a whole lifetime, but if spent with children those may be an experience of a lifetime! You will see your life differently. Join a Teachers' Lab today!" urges Vidya.

It may be well worth a shot.

—*Archanaa R.*

*If you wish to contact Relief Foundation, call 044-24527644 or write to [relieffoundationindia@gmail.com](mailto:relieffoundationindia@gmail.com).*



## Eye Care Services Approaching The Poor

Pammal is a town in Kanchipuram district of Tamil Nadu, claimed to be the second richest Panchayat Union in India after Ambattur. Yet, access to quality education and health care remained elusive for years to the people here.

In an effort to plug these gaps in the quality of lives of the people, Sri Sankara Vidyalaya was established in 1983, with the help of Rotary Club of Meenambakkam, Chennai. Soon, Sri Sankara Health Centre was set up in 1984, which remained an out-patient unit until 1990. As primary and secondary health care needs of the people grew with time,

it became imperative to start a General Hospital in Shankara Nagar.

A 20-bed-hospital was instituted in 1990 on the land gifted by Appasami Real Estates. Despite growing to a 60-bed-hospital catering to the needs of general medicine, maternity and surgery, there still persisted an obstacle—access to doctors. Doctors disliked coming to the hospital as it was located far away. “This was the time when we had to introduce specialized services in the hospital and at the same time ensure that the services are accessed by the people,” says Visvanathan, Trustee and Secretary of Sankara Eye Hospital.

While the management was trying to make inroads in this regard, the Rotary Club of Madras Fort was instrumental under the leadership of B.P.Jain in establishing the eye care department here. By 1997, the activities of the General Hospital were closed down and it became an exclusive Eye Care Hospital.

*“Sarvendriyanam nayanam pradanam – eye is the most important organ. People here required to be treated for refractive errors and other ailments,”* explains Visvanathan. Eye camps are conducted regularly since 1994 in the neighborhood villages and during these camps it was learnt that people from the rural areas were affected by cataract and other disorders. “We left no stone unturned in bringing the people to the hospital. Awareness building and free treatment had to be commensurate,” exclaims Visvanathan.

The outreach programme of the hospital is designed to reach the rural poor in the districts of Kanchipuram, Tiruvallur, Chittoor (Andhra Pradesh), and Chennai. Those with ailments are brought to the hospital, treated, provided with food and accommodation, and finally sent back to their

villages. All they have to do is to report at the pickup point at the said time.

With ISO 9001:2008 certification, Sri Sankara Eye Hospital began to be a part of the National Programme for Control of Blindness. "The hospital was offered 250 rupees for every surgery that was performed, besides a one-time grant to improve its services," he informs.

Having performed 2000 surgeries between 1994 and 1999, assistance from the Central Government came in handy for Sankara Eye Hospital to increase the surgical output by providing better infrastructure.

"It's true that our work speaks for us. We owe our sustainability to our sponsors – starting from Sight Savers International to the local banks, insurance companies, friends and others. For the record, the number of surgeries performed so far stand at 1.5 lakh, of which 92 percent were performed free of cost for the poor. The hospital also houses an eye bank in its premises," states Visvanathan.

The project 'Vanavil' is completely dedicated to school students in the region. With District Collectors acting as facilitators, around 12.13 lakh children are screened and 30888 spectacles are distributed.

The hospital has evolved ways and means to enable the staff recognize its patients. Diabetic patients are given a green gown while those from Chittoor district are given a pink one.

'Mission for Vision' has provided continuous support to help the management handle the shortfall of funds. "Consistent funding is a crucial challenge in tertiary health care," explains Visvanathan, under whom the management decided to increase the number of paid surgeries to 20

percent so that a ratio of 20:80 is maintained.

"We are now engaged in marketing to popularize the quality of services provided at affordable prices," he quips. The hospital has been recognized by the Government of India to raise donations that will be given a 100 percent tax exemption. Networking has built further inroads with insurance companies encouraging cashless treatment. Sankara Eye Hospital is now aiming at creating a corpus of Rs. 10 crores.

Sankara Eye Hospital has now delved into academics as well. National Board of Examinations has approved the institution to conduct Diploma in Ophthalmology. It also offers an 18-months fellowship programme in Comprehensive/General Ophthalmology and Medical & Surgical Retina for Indian and Foreign Ophthalmologists; and for candidates completing their DO/MS/DNB. Besides, the hospital also offers a two-year Diploma in Optometry for students who have completed their twelfth standard.

This quintessential institution has been recognized by various groups including District Collectors, Rotary, Lions clubs, besides others. Recently, the hospital was awarded the Dr K S Sanjeevi Award by CIOSA.

Speaking of future plans, Viswanathan says: "Accrual demands regular work. We intend to provide all kinds of eye care services in our hospital. With new reasons for eye ailments, there is bound to be continuous expansion of our work. Our management is interacting with a hospital in Odisha to share their expertise in achieving targets."

More such accolades and a vision to provide good quality eye care services have allowed Sankara Eye Hospital to niche its own trajectory in tertiary health care. Let's wish them all success in future!

— *Shanmuga Priya R*

*Students interested to enroll in the academic programmes can contact Mr S Visvanathan, Trustee & Secretary, Sankara Eye Hospital, Sri Sankara Nagar, Pammal, Chennai – 600075.  
Phone: 044-22484799, 044 22485299.*



## **A Story of Toil and Rejuvenation**

The Zonta Club of Madras has been in operation since 1966. Its members, known as Zontians, have been working on women's issues, namely, conducting vocational guidance and placement programmes, giving career talks in schools and colleges, conducting workshops, and training women to take up offbeat occupations such as being masons, auto-rickshaw drivers, etc. Since 1989, however, a proposal was put forth to establish the Zonta Resource Center, an autonomous non-governmental organization that would better fulfill the mission of the Club with respect to empowerment of women. This proposal was fructified in 1990, when the first woman Chief Engineer of Tamil Nadu Housing Board Mrs. May George and her friend Late Mrs. Janaki Krishnan founded the Zonta Resource Center with little resources and lots of passion. The present

Board members include Mrs. May George, Ms. Sampoorna Garine, a counseling psychologist, architects Ms. Kalpana Shanmugham and Ms. Mythili Babou, and Mrs. Latha Suresh, Director, CSIM.

The octogenarian Mrs. May George comes across as a treasure trove of rich, labor-laden memories. "I forget a lot these days," she says a little apologetically, but when she begins to talk, there follows many a fascinating anecdote and her zeal is infectious. The center has been serving as a placement bureau for women, has conducted adult literacy programmes, and is a short stay home for women and children living with HIV/AIDS.

In the 1990s when several women were being rescued from prostitution in Bombay, the Zonta Resource Center (ZRC) took in several of them into its shelter. These women were provided care and counseling. Upon finding out that some of the women were infected by HIV, the center vowed to provide timely medical care, good nutrition, and also helped them become self-reliant by providing them training them on vocational skills. At the short stay home, these women were taught soldering and assembly; embroidery and tailoring; mat weaving; screen printing; mehendi; natural mosquito-repellant making; handicrafts; candlemaking; and doll-making. Further, the center also provided these women with job opportunities.

Setting up this short stay home has involved laborious toiling on the part of its founders and their associates. Says Mrs. May, "We first stayed at a rented premises at Palavakkam. We moved a couple of places until we could finally purchase a piece of land at Madambakkam. In those days the place used to be more village-like. At first, the

government allotted us a large plot of land right on the ECR. Due to some inter-party rivalry that allotment was cancelled. It is then that we decided to purchase our own land by sourcing private donations. Once the construction work began at Madambakkam, we even engaged some of our trained women masons." She adds with some pride, "we used the zip-lock system, (which I introduced in Chennai) to hold the building together."

May reminisces her friend Janaki's contributions by saying, "She took care of everything pertaining to the day to day affairs of the center. She was a great administrator."

Zonta Resource Center developed a literacy programme for women residing in slums. Training was offered to teachers and the program was conducted mostly during the afternoons so that working women could also attend the classes. As the enthusiasm of the learners kept increasing by leaps and bounds, it led to the starting of 40 different adult literacy centers all over Chennai. The program continued until the Tamil Nadu Government took up the Arivoli Iyakkam with the same objective. This literacy program has successfully reached out to more than 500 women till date.

Through all these years of service to the communities, Zonta Resource Center remains predominantly known for its care for HIV positive women. Rehabilitation of these women through counseling, medical attention and vocational training has enabled several hundreds of women to gain a new lease of life.

When the Tsunami struck in 2005, ZRC offered shelter and care to women who were rendered homeless. It also participated in the psychological counseling programme for tsunami affected persons as well as in the drawing up of

structural designs.

In the last few years, ZRC has been part of the Government of India sponsored Women's Helpline Program. It is a 24 hour helpline available to girls and women in distress who are in need of counseling and advice, and a shelter too if need be.

Speaking to Mrs. May George rekindles a fire within the listener to strive for those who are less provided for. After all, she has dedicated her entire life to the service of the marginalized people. As for the Zonta Resource Center, it is a place where the sweat and passion of a group of passionate women has combined, along with the goodwill of their supporters.

—*Archanaa R.*

*If you wish to support Zonta Resource Centre, please write to  
zontamadr@gmail.com*

***PIONEERS***

*A glance through a few personalities  
who have made their mark in the  
social work sector through their  
pioneering efforts*



## **A Welcome Relief**

For most developing countries, the need to evolve a system for the hygienic disposal of human waste is paramount. And for us Indians, the problem is all too familiar as even in cities, several pockets suffer from the lack of proper sanitation facilities.

Post his MBA, Rajeev Kher was on an internship in North America in 1999, when he struck upon the idea to start a venture of his own that would generate employment and simultaneously serve a social need. He realised that providing sanitation solutions in India fit the bill, is non-seasonal and at the same time, would generate some revenues.

“Even today, it is a small business. He narrates how 3S

Shramik (the service brand under Saraplast Pvt. Ltd.) came into being in Pune. Both his parents were supportive of his aspirations.

On the first job he undertook, Kher was the only employee and personally took responsibility for the cleaning of the toilet at the wedding site he installed the toilets in. And even today, it is the cleaning and maintenance services of the portable toilets that 3S Shramik generates its revenues from. It serves a variety of areas—right from event locations and construction sites to slums and rural areas.

#### **How it works**

Typically, the company charges for maintenance, cleaning and repair of the toilets at the site. It operates a cleaning truck with a service technician to visit the sites. “The truck has suction equipment to evacuate the waste, since the toilets are drain free, and cleans the toilet for further use,” explains Kher. It could be daily or on alternate days, depending on the usage of the toilets and customer requirements.

In the west, the market is mature and estimated to be a US \$7 billion business. In India, it is yet to be recognised as an industry. But most importantly, there is tremendous need for education and training, and that is also one of the focus areas of the company.

3S Shramik has offices across seven cities—including Mumbai, Pune, Bengaluru, Chennai, Puducherry, and Goa—and is planning to enter cities such as Hyderabad, Lucknow, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Nasik, Nagpur, Kolhapur, and Aurangabad. It also services refineries and has a few thousand toilets in Paradeep and Puducherry among others.

#### **Bringing in the units**

The company started by importing its units from Germany and the U.S. Kher states that these toilets are of very high quality and comparable to the best in the world. His thinking was, the better the toilet, the more people will be willing to use it. Having started with only Rs. 5,000, he had no bank loans or anyone to back him up as his idea did not seem profitable. Yet, one German company trusted him enough to lend him the unit and take the payment when he was able to make it.

The growth was slow till 2006-2007 when Kher along with his brother Ranjeet and friend Ulka Sagalkar started manufacturing the toilet units in India and formed the company Saraplast. “We continue to source the raw material from our original supplier, which has now been taken over by an American company,” says Kher. Today, it is a small workshop that manufactures 10,000 parts per unit.

#### **Witnessing the boom**

In 2009, Shramik was funded by Aavishkaar, a social venture fund, to the tune of US \$500,000 and since then, its story has changed dramatically. Currently, the company’s growth is pegged at 30 per cent, growing from revenues of Rs. 2 to 3 crore in 2009 to a projected Rs. 12 to 15 crore this fiscal.

3S Shramik now employs 200 people and has three levels of workforce—top management, the supervisors, and the workers. The supervisory line has been trained to take independent decisions on daily operations to allow the top management to focus on strategic decisions. The profile of people includes ex-defence personnel, ACOs (authorised contracting officers) and officer cadres, young MBAs and graduates from smaller cities. “There is no glamour in our

job and we find people from smaller towns are more open to join us. They think they can go back and do something for their regions too,” points out Kher.

### **Going forward**

With 3S Shramik seeing fast-paced growth, Kher is more confident of achieving his vision of partnering with the government in raising the bar for sanitation in the country. He has been focusing on creating microenterprises, wherein local people are given these portable units, provided training and cleaning support on a revenue-sharing basis. “We cannot be everywhere, but this way, we will be able to create opportunities for local people as well as ensure a certain level of sanitation in slums, places of pilgrimage and locations where large events are held,” he points out.

For the company, construction sites will continue to be the main revenue generators. Working with non-governmental organisations for pay-and-use toilets will be another area of focus. Thirdly, like the kirana store, Shramik will create toilets that come with a range of associated products like soaps, condoms, and sanitary napkins.

The company has created 15 to 20 micro-entrepreneurs and services about one lakh people every day. By June 2012, many more are expected to become a part of the network.

Kher is a director and the only representative from a developing country of Portable Sanitation Association in the U.S. He calls it a great learning experience that enables him to design solutions for Indian needs. He is also working with the municipalities in Maharashtra to redefine the concept of a clean toilet to bring it to more acceptable levels and hopes to expand his reach.

“Revenues will eventually flow but we are keener on seeing a transformation in the hygiene levels across the country,” says Kher. And all his energies are focused on just that.

— **S. Meera**

*Source: The Smart CEO (www.thesmartceo.in)*



## Bicycle Sharing

Cycle Chalao! is a popular slogan in every bicycle rally in India. The shout out is used by everyone who cares for the environment, the public transportation, and our society.

Raj Janagam and Jui Gangan, two enterprising Management Graduates in Mumbai, are the leading experts in Bicycle Sharing Systems for developing countries, with an award winning and world recognized brand – ‘Cycle Chalao!’ that they founded in India.

They have spent the last three years in pioneering work for bicycle sharing systems for which they were featured by Forbes, Fast Company, and Outlook Business Magazines. They have been also acclaimed as social entrepreneurs and fellows at Unreasonable Institute, Unlimited India, Foundation for Youth in Social Entrepreneurship and PUKAR.

Presently, they are working with the Ministry of Urban Development (Government of India) and Pune City Municipal Corporation in designing and implementing mass-based high impact bicycle sharing systems in India.

“We could not find a better word to describe what we are doing! We are India’s leading bicycle sharing social enterprise. Bicycle Sharing (known as Bike Sharing in the west) is one of the major activities for us coupled with Bicycle Promotions and Bicycle Advocacy. It’s all about giving YOU the power to—curb air and noise pollution; save fuel; burn calories and improve fitness; save time and save money,” says the founders.

The project was first piloted at Mumbai and this was their strategy:

Place: Mulund East Railway Station to Vaze Kelkar College  
(Distance: 2.5kms)

Logistics: 30 regular MTB’s with self locks, customized mudguards, few bicycles with baskets, robust locking facility near railway station, registers, toolbox, first aid kit, and the founders.

### *Customers: Students of Vaze Kelkar College*

The Students of Kelkar College have used bicycles in their routine commuting between college and railway station for the last few months. By picking up a bike from station and dropping it at the college and vice-versa, reaching college has never been so fun, easy, green and cool for these youngsters.

“I subscribed to the service not only for economic and eco-friendly reasons, but also because it is fun riding a bicycle and it makes a lot of sense to travel this way. I swiftly ride

through the traffic and actually reach my college early,” says Swejal, a student.

“The best part was that all our subscriptions were sold off in the first week of the launch itself,” says Rai. “We’ve successfully converted many students who used to travel by auto-rickshaws to bicycles. Apart from cutting their carbon footprints and burning calories they also saved money and made the vicinity of their college a bit cleaner, greener, and quieter. We’ve crossed our benchmarks to measure the success of the pilot phase in the first month itself, and are still wondering on all the factors which lead us to the beautiful numbers,” quips Gangan.

“I am really thankful to Cycle Chalao! Team as they have made me go back to my childhood days. I enjoy riding the bicycle and feel really fresh and peaceful to cycle at 6.45 A.M. It forms part of my daily exercise and keeps me fit. It is also convenient to use this service as the promoters are very friendly and are always there to help us out in the best possible ways. Apart from this, I feel happy that I don’t have to deal with the auto rickshaw guys,” says Shalaka Patankar, student.

“The success of the model operationally and financially showed the feasibility of Cycle Chalao! and answers all the doubts raised by our critics in the best way possible. We are now set to scale and need your support to reach our vision ‘To make cycling as the best mode of public transportation in India,” concludes Gangan.

—*Latha Suresh*



## Classrooms Unplugged

“Give two hours of your time today, to create a better tomorrow” is the mantra advocated by Venkat Sriraman, Founder, eVidyaloka. A CSIM Hyderabad alumnus and a successful management professional from a reputed computer manufacturing company, Venkat started eVidyaloka along with Satish Viswanathan, a friend and former colleague of his, two years ago.

He says, “While we were toying with the idea of a community level project, the problem which we saw glaringly affecting people was a shortage of teachers and poor quality of available teachers. In order to address these two problems, we started eVidyaloka as a pilot project aimed at removing any obstacle standing in the way of education, especially for children studying in government schools in remote villages with poor teaching-learning environments. We thought that an idea in action is worth two on paper, so the project took off to a fighting start, in three different

linguistic regions—Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Jharkhand. In each place we targeted the students of classes six, seven, and eight, as they were found to be the right age group to introduce this kind of technology enabled learning environments to.”

The model that eVidyaloka applies is a synergetic model in which the project ropes in local non-governmental bodies to partner in the managing of these remote classrooms. The advantage here being that the NGOs in question would already have the trust of the local residents, and the partnership works out cost-effectively for both parties. eVidyaloka classrooms uses a simplistic, non-intrusive four-gadget set-up, enabling children to enter and use the classroom in a hassle-free manner. The medium of instruction is the regional language, and the modules are basically the same as prescribed in school text books, only enriched with pictorial and audio-visual presentations.

Presently, five centers are operational—three in Tamil Nadu and one each in Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh. Says Venkat, “We strongly believe that we can use technology to connect people and intertwine relationships. We are particular about wanting to work with remote villages only, as the need is greater there. We ensure that we do not tamper with the school lessons, instead merely bolster those lessons with relevant videos and presentations. We have a very strong value-oriented approach to our classes and we adhere as best as possible to local cultures of the regions which we reach out to.”

Teachers of eVidyaloka are incepted on a voluntary basis. “We have actually tested and found that volunteers make greater impact on the children due to their higher levels of commitment than paid-for teachers. There is also the

fact that we cannot afford to pay teachers at the moment. However, we hope to arrive at a sustainable quality-control model in due course of time,” says Venkat enthusiastically.

The project, still in its nascent stages, presently runs on private donations. While the classroom space, internet and electricity expenses are largely locally managed, one person is employed by eVidyaloka to manage the equipment at each center. Each center runs on a nominal operating cost of Rs. 3500 and it takes about Rs. 50,000 to initially set up a center. Venkat observes that the operating cost, starting at Rs. 80 to 90 per student per subject per month, reduces by almost half in the course of the year, given that each center caters to about 40 to 50 children.

Venkat plans to get into managing eVidyaloka full time in the next few months, and has already drawn up elaborate plans for expanding the project. “We are looking at scaling up our operations from 5 to 50 centers in different states in the next two or three years. With a strong delivery model in place, we are sure to be able to fulfill our mission to bring quality education to the doorsteps of children,” says he.

“To educate anywhere, anytime” is the byline of eVidyaloka. With a well-equipped and easily navigable website, eVidyaloka educates the reader on various policies and statistics pertaining to education in India, besides displaying lesson plans and modules. Following overall transparency and a welcome tone, eVidyaloka’s commitment towards connecting people is palpable.

“We have realized that it does not take much time nor money nor efforts to bring about a change. Those who really make the greatest changes, start with the simplest of things—giving away two hours of their time, for instance.

I would urge anybody who is willing to participate in the change-making process to start with the same—two hours of your time and passion coming through in your action. This is enough material for transformation,” says Venkat.

Now isn't that some inspiration!

—*Archanaa R.*



## Creating Innovators

Learn by rote, score well in exams and get the best course with great job prospects – the life of a student is mapped even before he or she even understands the purpose of education. As a result, schools become machines that churn out high scorers, and the focus all along remains on coaching students to get higher scores.

From Aamir Khan to Azim Premji, everyone has busted the myth that high scorers are good at their jobs and this has led to some efforts being taken to correct the learning methodologies. Apart from the government announcing measures to change the method of assessment, especially

in the central board, there are also a few who believe that they can contribute by facilitating hands-on learning so that students understand the underlying concepts. One such is Hyderabad-based Butterfly Fields, started by K. Sharat Chandra, an alumnus of IIT- Bombay and IIM-Ahmedabad.

Butterfly Fields provides low-cost models for application-oriented learning to children from 8 to 16 years of age. Started in 2005, it works with government and private schools, and has developed models that integrate with the school curriculum, regardless of the board the school is affiliated to. It also supports schools and trains the trainers.

### **The genesis**

Sharat Chandra was on an exchange program to Germany while doing his entrepreneurship course at IIM-A and worked with the SME (small & medium enterprises) sector there. What impressed him most was the amount of innovation that was evident even at these businesses, which he realised was because of the education system followed in Germany that encourages students to think out of the box. And this was a complete contrast to the Indian system, where the application of what is learnt is completely ignored, with a greater focus on learning for exams. "Of course, there are growth stories amongst the Indian industry, but mostly in the services segment, not much in product development," he points out. He realised that right from childhood, if children are encouraged to innovate and develop their own products, this would create a confidence to experiment as adults.

Convinced that the need of the hour was to move away from traditional teaching methods, K. Sharat Chandra started working on developing low cost experiments that can be used for project work in schools.

Sharat Chandra examined the systems used in the West and realised that the class sizes are smaller and the government invests heavily in education. This is unlike the Indian system where class sizes are large, with an average of 70 children per class in government schools. The investment is also lower from the government. The onus on the teacher is high and the dependence on paper-pencil-chalk-board teaching is inevitable. "Any innovation means a hike in the school fee, which many in India cannot afford," he adds.

Convinced that the need of the hour was to move away from traditional teaching methods, Sharat Chandra started working on developing low cost models that can be used for project work in schools. These projects are based on the concepts from the curriculum. Though each board has its own schedule to teach a particular topic to a child, the concepts taught are the same. "So, one topic may be introduced in Class 6 by one board and in Class 8 by another," he explains. Therefore, the models can be common, only used for different age groups by different schools depending on the board they follow.

Since this is a social venture, the primary focus is on government schools. However, Butterfly Fields also has private schools as partners, who source the models from the company. The revenue it generates from here is used to cross finance its social venture of working with government schools.

### **The reach**

Butterfly Fields is currently present in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. It works with 3,000 government schools in Andhra Pradesh and an additional 1,000 schools spread across the private sector in the three states. Sharat Chandra states that government school requirements are

more intense so, he intends to create a foundation before expanding aggressively. In the government segment, budget becomes a big constraint, and the focus is to deliver products in a box so that there is less of a programme/service component.

The company also works with corporate entities that focus on education as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. In the CSR segment, it works with several private companies such as GMR group, Chennai-based Ramky, Microsoft and Sarah Dell Foundation, which are active in supporting education for the underprivileged. Butterfly Fields works with around 70 schools in this category.

In the private segment, Butterfly Fields focuses on mid-range schools which charge a school fee in the range of Rs 12,000 a year. In all the three states, the company focuses on the top two cities. In the next 15 months, the company plans to reach out to 10 states. Offices will be setup in five states by November 2012 and discussions with schools are already on in Kerala and Maharashtra. "Here, the sales cycle is longer as there are multiple stakeholders and so, the decision making time is that much longer," he says.

Butterfly Fields is also active in providing hands-on training programmes after school hours and is targeting an expansion in this segment. Many private schools too opt to encourage this since the regular fee is not affected and the decision to send the child for these classes lies with parents. It's also working with partners for this and Hyderabad-based Eenadu Group is already a partner and does workshops in 20 districts in Andhra Pradesh. By the summer of 2012, the company had 70 summer camps under this model, with 30 through the Eenadu tie-up. The plan is to expand the reach across the geography.

Interestingly, the schools business is a seasonal one and the after-schools classes make up during the lean months. The company is also looking to take the retail route by the next year and create off-the-shelf boxes that parents can buy for their children, so they can try the concepts at home.

### **The growth story**

The company was self-funded and worked on a bootstrap budget till in September 2010, until Aavishkaar, a social venture capital fund, invested in Butterfly Fields to the tune of Rs. 5 crore. This enabled the company to scale up. As Butterfly Fields plans to enter the retail segment, it expects the finance requirement to go up and plans to seek a second round of funding by September this year.

One of the major challenges the company faced in the initial years was that of acceptance. But with the introduction of continuous and comprehensive evaluation in central board schools, there has been a perceived need to introduce alternative teaching methodologies. Referrals are another factor that has enabled the company to expand its customer base.

In the initial three to four years, the company doubled its revenues. This year, the company is targeting a four-fold growth to touch revenues of Rs. 7.5 crore to Rs. 8 crore by 2013. The back end is being made scalable to match the growth. Butterfly Fields clearly has an eye on profits, but also has a social purpose, which it fulfils through its work with government schools and companies active in CSR. Most importantly, it aims to bring the children up to speed and fulfil the Indian dream of enabling the youth of tomorrow to innovate.

—S. Meera

*This article was first published in The Smart CEO Magazine*



## Dialogue In The Dark

I spent the last weekend of March with my sister's family at Hyderabad. We visited the In orbit mall hi-tech city for shopping and participated in an activity called 'Dialogue In The Dark' at level 5 of the mall.

Knowing about this activity, my sister was keen on experiencing the event as she wanted to assess the process whether it could be part of a corporate training module for which she is a consultant.

My brother-in-law, my niece, and I joined her in the experiment. Initially, I had my doubts whether at all I should venture into the exercise, which faded on seeing the enthusiasm of the rest.

At the start of the programme, a video was screened giving us instructions and an overview of what we can expect. We had to leave behind all our belongings—wrist watches, mobile phones, and any object that we carried which might emit.

Our group consisted of six people and we were lead into an area by a guide. Each one of us was given a stick (which visually impaired use) and the guide explained to us how to use it. We were then passed on to another guide who was visually impaired. This guide was introduced to each of us and he spelt our names to ensure that he pronounced it right.

All of us walked into a room of complete darkness, holding the person ahead of us and walking in a chain, as if we were forming a train. I found myself focusing on the voice of my guide as that alone could help me proceed in this dark journey.

This guided journey of Dialogue in the Dark put us through several situations. As we walked, we felt the plants around us and realized that we were taking a walk in the park. A few yards later, we crossed a shaking bridge and entered a supermarket. We touched each object that was displayed here and recognized them by its texture and smell. An audio was played and we identified the persons, whose voices were heard, realizing that the voice of every person was unique.

We were guided into the boat, and after seating ourselves we gave away the stick. We sang and also proclaimed together loudly: "I am very happy." The boat took us to the cafeteria managed by a visually impaired person. We got back our sticks and we waded through the darkness, focusing on the guide's voice and went to the counter and placed an order for coffee and drinks. We also transacted with the cashier in the dark. We sat on the sofa and were served our drinks. The guide asked if we had any questions. We exchanged our views about what we felt through the process and expressed

that we did not realize that we have spent an hour in darkness.

Once again we gathered one behind the other as instructed by the guide and moved further until we saw light. After stepping out from the zone of darkness it took us some time to get adjusted to the light.

This journey enlightened me on many aspects of life. It seemed to be a meditation (moving) guided by the voice during which the space and time factor took a back stage and I experienced the present moment completely and peacefully. I also experienced self-awareness throughout the journey and felt that the rest of my senses—touch, smell and sound—were sharpened. At the end of the journey, I thanked my eyes for empowering me with the capacity to see. I resolved at that instant, that I would donate my eyes.

I quote from Vigyan bhairava tantra (112 meditations for Self Realisation) a translation and commentary by Mr Ranjit Choudary which has relevance here. “Light and darkness are not opposites. They are different degrees of the same thing. Both are a pathway to the divine.”

This reminded me of our sages and saints who do penance in caves. ACE, an acronym for Art, Culture and Entertainment has brought Dialogue in the Dark to our country for the first time. This is a very unique, innovative and entertaining activity. Being a social enterprise, ACE aims to empower the differently abled by creating meaningful employment opportunities for them and sensitizing people through their experiences.

—*Jayanthi Karthikeyan*



## **From a fashion publicist to a social entrepreneur**

From a fashion publicist to a social entrepreneur to an anti-graft activist, Radhika Ganesh has a portfolio that is as diverse and vibrant as her personality. An alumna of the prestigious London College of Fashion, UK with a dual degree in Fashion Design and Marketing, she has always been a driven achiever.

At a very young age she decided her calling was to be a part of endeavors that make a difference. Growing up in a family that broke all social clichés, further nurtured here desire to be a part of platforms that aid positive transformation within her society. Equipped with excellent communication skills she involved herself in a number of social causes and

initiated several projects.

She saw her access to good education and global exposure as her strength and advantage to enable the change she envisioned. At the age of 17, as a fashion design student, Radhika launched the “Thandavam” project that initiated hearing and speech-impaired children into design studies. The project went on to train several specially abled children in a vocation that never occurred a possibility to them until then.

After her higher education in London, Radhika was well on the way to a flourishing career as a successful fashion publicist. She worked with top PR firms and represented several globally renowned brands before her love for India and her innate commitment to change towed her back.

On her return, she set up Syllogic Consultants, a social enterprise that now works on several community and social transformation projects. Syllogic with its vision of “Enabling Integral Sustainable Growth in Indian Businesses” is vigorously working towards creating equitable and sustainable platforms for artists and artisans from Indian communities. Syllogic aims to recreate marketability and demand for products and produce that are truly Indian in nature, that promote wellness, conscious living and empower communities.

Syllogic partnered with Upasana, Auroville to launch Paruthi, an organic cotton brand born out of Kapas, a project aimed at educating and rehabilitating cotton farmers in Tamil Nadu. Paruthi has successfully inducted over 500 cotton-farming families, across 27 villages, into organic farming practices and has created an equitable and sustainable ecosystem for them. It is now a standing example of how

communities can successfully and effectively be integrated into modern business practices.

Understanding the brutal reality of the dire straits our farming communities are in, Radhika is currently in the process of initiating her next venture. An integral education and sustenance project, that looks at providing education, awareness and life skills training to orphan children from the suffering farming community.

Radhika has been a part of several forums and platforms that address sustainability at all levels. Amongst several other, she has had the privilege of being one of the contributing world speakers at the renowned “Think Forum” conducted by the Columbia University, USA, and she was one among the three international speakers who had the opportunity of addressing the congressional gathering about the policy deficits and lack of community growth aiding decision making within foreign policies before the 2010 UK general elections.

Apart from her passion for working on community endeavors, Radhika has always strived to be a vigilant citizen constantly lending her voice to social movements. She fierily took part in the fight for implementation of the Right to Information Act. She currently is also playing an active role in the Indian anti-graft movement under Shri. Anna Hazare.

—Source: *tedxchennai.com*



### **Humble man but a great soul, Venkatraman stands tall for his selflessness**

The sky is overcast, a cold wind is blowing, and the met department says a cyclone is expected to cross in a few hours. Nature at its awesome best; not bound by season, cruising freely, now moving, now staying still, setting its own time table, and keeping everyone guessing!

Nothing inspires likes nature. Human beings rarely do. But, men like V Venkatraman are an exception. These are the 'unsung heroes,' the kind of people who would be moved by the sufferings and hardships of others, and then figure out ways to help them.

Venkatraman is The Weekend Leader's 'Person of the Year 2011'. He lives in Erode, a town that lies about 400 km south west of Chennai and has been running a small eatery in the town since last eight years. Venkatraman is not a wealthy man and has no other business. Like most of us, he has a family to look after. His wife is a yoga teacher and both his daughters are in college. He has little savings. One would expect a man like him to constantly think of ways to develop his business and make more money. That's what 'normal' people would have done anyway.

But 49-year-old Venkatraman is a different kind of person. He has no such worries. His only concern is to see how he could continue with the Lunch @ Re 1 scheme at his hotel. For over four years, Venkatraman has been giving lunch every day for about thirty persons at his hotel for just Re 1. The beneficiaries are mostly attendants of poor in-patients from the nearby Government General Hospital, who pay just Re 1 for a meal that is priced at Rs. 40 for other customers.

Venkatraman may have served at least 40,000 Re 1 meals till date. The prices of food grains, oil, spices, and vegetables have gone up many times in the last four years, but the one rupee lunch has remained unaffected.

"For other customers, the price has been revised. Four years ago, the cost of a lunch at our hotel was Rs 25; now it is Rs 40," says Venkatraman, who also gives a 20 percent discount for the disabled. Though he is facing financial difficulties, Venkatraman receives solace from the 'divine blessings'.

"I have the full support of my family in whatever I am doing. My second daughter scored 1085 marks (out of 1200) in her Plus 2 examination. We were unable to admit her in an engineering college, because we could not afford

the fees. But, thanks to a person in Ramakrishna Mutt, she got a seat in a reputed engineering college in Chennai. The management has also given her a fee waiver. “I have reasons to believe that such good things have happened in my life because of the small acts of service to the poor that I have been doing. It gives me great satisfaction,” says Venkatraman. May the likes of Venkatraman increase in this land!

— *P C Vinoj Kumar*  
*theweekendleader.com*



## Igniting minds

It's just another day at one of the Government schools in Thiruvallur. A bunch of school kids walk past, their incessant chatter filling the air. They spot a van and run excitedly towards it. Once they step in, they are greeted by giant screens, test tubes, laptops, a range of colourful chemicals, lab instruments and friendly teachers. They get down to work as they mix chemicals and perform experiments of their choice. In the process they discover that science can be fun, and that practical hands-on training in labs is crucial to understanding the subject. That is pretty much the philosophy behind Vignan Rath—science labs on wheels, an initiative by V Pasupathy, a city-based scientist and food safety consultant with Parikshan Charitable Trust,

an NGO that works towards empowering society through science.

Pasupathy believes that science is an art form, and like any other performing art can be perfected by practice. He says, "There is a significant difference between students in cities and those in smaller villages. One of the reasons for this difference is the fact that teachers in many rural schools are not qualified enough to pass on their knowledge to kids. Besides, most rural schools do not have the infrastructure to support practical training in the form of labs. Although the Government has introduced a variety of measures to support rural education, they may not be effective unless it involves active participation from the students themselves."

It is with this backdrop that Pasupathy introduced Vignan Rath three years ago; he wanted to make science accessible to children in rural areas, and help them discover the joy of learning through experimentation. He adds, "Our initial plan was to station our van in Thiruvallur district for a period of six months and let children from government schools in the district use the facilities. But, the response has been so overwhelming that we haven't been able to move our van out from there for three years now!"

The Vignan Rath comes equipped with instruments and chemicals necessary to perform over 2,500 experiments. It has a projector, laptops, screen, and four friendly qualified science teachers. "We have at least 150 to 200 children each day at the van, and they do about two to three experiments each, per day. In a month, we reach to around 3,000 to 4,000 kids," adds Pasupathy. It helps that the atmosphere in the van is informal, and that students can get their doubts cleared in the local language, making it easier for them to understand even complex scientific principles.

Apart from the Vignan Rath concept, the NGO also conducts some large-scale science camps and fairs. For instance, the foundation's 15-day annual science camp in Chennai. "This camp," says Pasupathy, "is aimed at mobilising funds for our various programmes, besides sharpening our science skills. That's why it is a paid programme. Participants have to pay 1,500 rupees per head and they can do about 45 experiments each."

Pasupathy, by his own admission, is not a fan of fundraising, but believes that it is sometimes essential to meet the growing expenses of the NGO. The operation costs for the van alone is about Rs 48,000 per month, on an average. He is not one to brag about his work either; he believes in letting his work speak for itself. "Cognizant Foundation funded our second van for the Vignan Rath programme. They were convinced with the work that we have been doing and decided to donate a fully-equipped van, on their own accord," he adds.

Recognition for their work has come from all quarters. For instance, whenever there is a science exhibition anywhere in Thiruvallur, the district authorities invite Parikshan to participate. Besides, the NGO also participated in Anna University's science fair. The National Innovation Foundation, a national science and technology body that supports grassroots innovations, has approached the NGO to invite scientific ideas and suggestions from school children. Recently, the NGO joined hands with Agastya Foundation, an education trust, to host a three-day mega science fair in which thousands of school children participated.

The NGO is also part of Give India, a network of Indian NGOs that helps route donations, and that has helped it gain more visibility and work with other such organisations

that follow a similar approach.

Parikshan has managed to re-define students' approach to science, in its own small way. While, earlier, at science exhibitions in Thiruvallur, students would merely put up charts, now they exhibit live experiments. Pasupathy, however, does not want to take credit for this change. "I'd like to thank our dedicated staff, our teachers, and head of the teaching programme, Arivarasan. All of them are accomplished science graduates in their own right, and they have played a key role in inspiring these children, and being so patient. Most of them work on a voluntary basis and are paid a very small token amount. Yet, they work from their hearts," says Pasupathy.

As of now, the trust has two vans, one in Thiruvallur and one in Kanchipuram district. "The country needs 800 such vans to cover its entire geographic extent, but we only have two," says Pasupathy with a smile, "We have been invited by other states, but taking the programme far and wide is a logistical nightmare. Right now, though, we plan to take the van to Vaniyambadi. It has a sizable population of Muslims, and some of the girls in the community have no exposure to the benefits of education. We are keen to expose them to the magic of science." The NGO also has long-term plans of setting up district education/science centres.

One of the biggest challenges to the NGO's functioning, apart from logistics management, is funds. Pasupathy believes that this has something to do with the mindsets of people. "I am part of various NGOs," he says, "I have noticed that if I'm involved with providing food or housing for the needy, funds pour in. But the same people raise questions when it comes to funding a science programme for rural children. One reason is that, it's not a tangible thing,

unlike food or a house, where there are concrete results to be seen."

He feels that the native intelligence of the country has not yet played a big role in national development – it seems to be reserved for a bunch of English-speaking people from the IITs or IIMs. "This is where the Government needs to pitch in. I believe that the Government is the biggest social worker—we are merely enablers or tools, if you like. So, if they create the necessary infrastructure, we are more than willing to be knowledge partners, with no strings attached." He adds that exposing rural children to science and its benefits is crucial for the country's progress in a number of fields, mainly agriculture. Rural empowerment, he adds, will make Government programmes more meaningful.

At this stage, though, Pasupathy is happy to ignite just a spark of inspiration to rural children. But he feels that for this to have a lasting impact, society needs to change, and understand that investing in education is essential for the nation's progress. "It is a long process though, and we have to wait. And I hope Parikshan lasts long enough to see it happen," he sums up. We hope so too.

—*Harini Sriram*



## **PARDADA PARDADI—Great Grand Father and Great Grand Mother**

The *India NGO Awards* is a unique national competition that celebrates and rewards the best non-governmental organization for best practice and successful resource mobilization. Jointly organized by the *Resource Alliance* and the *Rockefeller Foundation*, the competition had over 210 organizations that applied for the award. Pardada Pardadi Educational Society (PPES) is one among the fifteen awardees that won in the regional category (North). PPES is also among the three organizations that won the National Award for 2010.

### **Sam the Pardada**

The great grandfather of this movement is Virendra (Sam) Singh, who migrated in the early 60's post his Engineering

degree to work in the US with the world leader DuPont, very few Indians could have dreamt of.

Sam's daughters are settled in US, but he lives and breathes at Anupshahr village where he did his schooling. He has seeded a revolution of empowering the girl children. I had the privilege of reporting to him for five years, and I have seen his corporate success and the western affluence – one who will not drink water, if not bottled. Post retirement as South Asia Head of DuPont, Washington should have been his desired destination, but he chose to root himself in Anupshahr.

### **Back to the roots**

Sam started Pardada Pardada Education Society (PPES) in this rural setting, 12 years ago to address the issue of gender bias in society and to raise rural girls and their families out of their state of poverty. Pardada Pardadi Girls Vocational School (PPGVS) started with 45 children who were from the poorest families of the area that had more than 1200 girl children, who are emancipated from hunger, some from incest, many from exploitation, greed and early motherhood.

PPGVS plans to expand its mission. With support from Airtel and its CSR wing Satya Bharti Foundation, PPGVS has undertaken to build many primary schools in the villages surrounding Anupshahr to educate boys and girls from kindergarten to fifth standard.

### **Sustainability by Replicability**

'A model is only good if it can be replicated. The school therefore aims to become self-sustainable in the next seven years. The school was intentionally designed to serve as a model to be used in other parts of India and other

developing countries on how to address issues of gender bias and poverty. Many corporate, well-meaning individuals have helped to enhance sustenance, and plans are on for revenue generation for furtherance of the purpose.

### *Everything Free - Cycles, books, food, clothes and outstanding teaching*

The draw of a free education complete with free textbooks and free meals encourages families who might otherwise not send their daughters to school – either for lack of money or for lack of interest – to allow them to get an education.

The girls are further encouraged to attend school regularly through the school's savings plan. In this, every student has a bank account into which 10 rupees is deposited for each day she attends school. The account is set up jointly in the names of the girl and her mother, and the money is handed over only when the girl passes class tenth examination or at the time of her wedding (if this is after her 18th birthday) or on her 21st birthday. By the time the girl completes her graduation, she would have saved 30,000 rupees.

Academics are taught in the mornings and the school follows the U.P. Board syllabus. In 2004, through a grant from the Public Affairs Office of the US Embassy in Delhi, the school set up a computer lab for girls and computer classes were conducted twice a week. In addition to the regular teaching staff, the school also enlisted volunteers to introduce and implement forward-thinking teaching methods and to assist in teaching English as well as other subjects.

### **Vocational training**

During the afternoons, vocational classes are conducted wherein the girls are trained in hand embroidery or stitching. The girls are able to produce fine hand embroidered linen appliqué work, block printing, table cloths, luncheon sets,

bed covers and sheets, curtains, and cushion covers.

This vocational training is key in making the school-model self-sustainable as well as practical as the sale of these products funds the running expenses of the school. The training provides the girls' with a marketable skill they can use to support themselves after graduation. Some of the girls have moved to Bangalore to do advance technical training in NTTF.

### **Livelihoods Guaranteed**

The school continues to support its students even after they have completed their graduation by encouraging them pursue higher studies or by guaranteeing them with an employment in an organization. Some return to PPGVS as teachers, some get married, and many start earning a decent income.

### **Value-Based education**

The school strives to expand its services to its girls by including non-academic, non-vocational elements in its curriculum. The value-based education also includes lessons on leadership and personality development, health and hygiene, legal awareness, and ethics. Some of the girls run a moment called 'I am the Change' wherein they re-enroll girls who have been forced by their parents not to attend school. This peer movement has resulted in tremendous reduction in absenteeism.

Cultural programs that are organized once in a month expose the girls to various aspects of Indian culture and also allow them to exhibit their singing and dancing abilities.

Some of the girls have visited US and many have participated in helping other deprived children in India as well as in other countries.

### **Rags to Pads- Hygiene Outreach**

PPES has expanded its mission of development to include community outreach in various areas. These efforts include educational plays by PPGVS students, a toilet construction programme, and health and cataract camps offered to the community.

In July 2008, PPES launched an initiative called 'Rags to Pads' to produce low-cost menstrual pads for local women. As part of this initiative, the organization also trains PPGVS graduates to operate the production and marketing of this business.

PPES hopes that the availability of low-cost sanitary pads will reduce the incidence of vaginal infections and urinary tract infections. Government of India probably followed this to make the Rags to Pads a national movement has now made this scheme

### **Communal Harmony**

Communities, religions and economic status converge in Pardada Pardadi to enable the hapless girl children to be empowered. If women are empowered, mother India will be more prosperous, and so will Sam.

—*S. Deenadayalan*



### **Speak Up, Rural India**

Gram Vaani, as the name suggests, aims to give voice to rural India through technology-based solutions. A social venture, it began as a technology company to provide radios to community radio stations at highly competitive rates. Today, it offers a range of services to enable rural communities to voice their opinions and report on development-related activities. Its team profile has changed from just technical staff to include journalists and people with experience of having worked with non-governmental organisations.

Mayank Shivam, one of the three founders of this New Delhi-based company incubated at Indian Institute of Technology,

New Delhi, was working with McKinsey & Company but had always dreamed of becoming an entrepreneur. During a stint in Amsterdam in 2008, his friend Dr. Aditeshwar Seth called him to discuss his research. He was working on a product that would be relevant for social development in India and wanted a business plan. Based on the business plan Shivam designed, the duo managed to raise seed funding from the US-based fund, Knight Foundation. This was used to set up the office and kick start the venture.

### **Community empowerment**

Gram Vaani was started with GRINS – Gramin Radio Inter-Networking System, a radio automation system for community radios. Currently, the interaction between the government and the people is one-way. The government announces schemes that various agencies are supposed to implement. But, there is no feedback from the people as to whether it is relevant and if it is being implemented as planned.

Community radio service is a vision of the government to enable two-way communication. Operators like Gram Vaani provide solutions to enable this communication. The government had a target to establish 4,000 community radio stations by 2012. This gave Gram Vaani a huge market to capitalise on.

The company priced its assembled product competitively so that community centres could afford the equipment. “There are branded products in the market. But the rural centres and the urban poor cannot afford them. We felt their need,” Shivam points out. However, the reality is that there are only 120 community centres as of now. And so Gram Vaani found its market severely restricted. Simultaneously, it also realised that merely providing hardware was not enough. The need

of the hour was to educate masses and more importantly, Gram Vaani needed to set up media centres.

### **Crowd sourcing for news**

As the media centres were set up in the main office, the nature of the team also underwent a shift to include journalists and those with NGO experience. The news service is localised, covering a radius of 20 kilometres of a village. Locals can call the agency and report any event or news which would then be verified and broadcast.

“The news here is very different from that in the mass media. These reports are typically those about corruption, leakages and human rights violations. In the first 40 days of our launch in August 2011, there were 60,000 calls, showing the need for such a service,” points out Shivam.

The other service started by Gram Vaani is Mericity.in, which is a monitoring system for garbage cleaning in the city of New Delhi. The local contractor reports to the Municipal Corporation through the website on whether the garbage has been cleared from a particular locality. The people in the neighbourhood can login to the site and verify this, or raise a complaint if the work is not to their satisfaction. “We wish to expand these services to other cities too. In this, the other players are mostly NGOs or social ventures and they are more like collaborators than competitors,” he explains.

### **Future vision**

Enabling every Indian to voice his or her view and interact with the local elected representative for transparency in spending money for local development – that is the objective Gram Vaani works towards. The company sees itself more as a platform player now, rather than a technology player. And through these two platforms, the company aims to reach out

to a million people.

Gram Vaani's growth focus is going to be in mobile news and by taking Mericity.in to other geographies. In the short to medium term, Mericity.in will be deployed as a customised application for civic agencies such as the Municipal Corporation for a fee. In the long term, it will be developed as a citizen engagement platform with registered users. The user base will then be leveraged for targeted advertising.

In case of News (mobile news), advertising, market research for companies targeting the rural consumer, who is tough to reach through traditional media, and licensing content to mainstream media are some of the sources of its revenue.

With expansion in mind, the current team of 10 will be increased conservatively. "We plan to double the technology team and take in three to four more people with project management and a journalistic profile," says Shivam. The company will also partner with local NGOs for localising its services and providing domain expertise in various aspects related to the developmental issues of the country.

As for GRINS, the market expansion plans include exploring international markets. Currently, the organisation has a presence in Africa. Resellers who provide technology and sales support in east-Asian countries and the Middle East will be developed.

With a host of initiatives, the company has grown from seeing no returns in its initial two years to currently registering a 100 per cent growth. It first saw this growth trend in 2011 and intends to sustain the same for the next four years. In fact, the funds from Knight Foundation are still available for further growth. But shortly after this time

frame, the organisation will seek more investment.

### **Learning from experience**

For the founders of Gram Vaani, this journey has helped them grow as individuals. One of the greatest lessons for Gram Vaani was that of market understanding. Considering the promised potential of the community radio stations and the reality on the ground, there was a clear message that one cannot always predict external circumstances. Additionally, the team learnt that technology was just one of the means to resolve the social development issues of India. The problems that rural India faces are more complex in nature and addressing them requires changing the existing mindset.

Shivam voices this view as he says that democracy can be effective only if there is citizen participation. His dream is to enable this by providing the people with the necessary platform to be able to voice their views. He has also found that entrepreneurship itself is a different ball game from being an employee – and the accountability is that much higher. Social entrepreneurship especially requires the entrepreneur to stretch himself to the maximum. And he is ready to take this commitment, head on.

—S. Meera

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(www.thesmartceo.in)*



## The Virtual Library

In India and in the west, books and e-commerce have always had a special relationship. Taking this one step further, we're witnessing the advent of online libraries.

Books take readers to an alternate world where realities change from page to page, story to story. Today, the art of reading has made a comeback as more people are rediscovering the joys of it. Libraries thrive on helping people live this joy as many find libraries a sensible alternative to accessing books, due to constraints of purchasing cost and storage space.

Unfortunately, as one gets stuck in the mundanity of daily life, library visits often get forgotten. For those in smaller cities, another challenge that presents itself is the availability of certain titles. Gunjan Veda, CEO, IndiaReads explains, "While in larger cities, the time to reach a library or a book

store is an impediment, in smaller towns—even in non-metro capital cities in the country, many books reach only after months of being launched."

This former Planning Commission employee, who worked with women and children across the country, realised there was a crying need for an online library that one can borrow books from anywhere in the country. Thus, was born Indiareads.com in December 2009 in New Delhi.

"Considering the growth in the literate population, the growing hunger for education and the growth in the publishing industry, it was obvious that there is an unmet demand. We did four weeks of ground level market research and confirmed this," explains Kaber Vasuki, marketing manager of Chennai-based Iloveread.in.

Smart Library Network runs Thelibrary.in to cater to the National Capital Region (except Noida and Faridabad) for a similar purpose. "Lack of proper book reading facilities, distance of public library services, rising cost of books and a service oriented business option were some of the reasons that prompted me to start this online library venture," says Shishir Miglani, its founder.

### Books at the doorstep

One of the greatest advantages these libraries provide is that they deliver and pick up books from homes at no extra cost, making it convenient for the readers to visit the online library, sign up for a membership and select books from the catalogue available online. On placing an order, the libraries then set the motion of delivering the books in place. If a book is not available, these libraries purchase and stock them. "More than 50 per cent of books we buy are on member requests. Even if it is an obscure, unheard of book,

we buy it if a member asks for it. Which is why we are probably the only library in the country to stock books on Japanese gardening and tailoring quilts," says Vasuki.

As Miglani points out, that is the very essence of having a library—to make books accessible. And so if a book is not available on its network, efforts are taken to source it. Apart from bookstores, sourcing from other online book stores has also made the process more convenient.

Veda adds that IndiaReads has counsellors who help the readers select a book based on their interests. "In addition to listening to our customers, we also provide consultation, especially to students, on good books they can read," she adds.

Importantly, the fact that no corner of the country is out of bounds despite delivery challenges has won its clients' loyalty. The company has also started an online book store in 2010 and has both the library and bookstore operational on its site. As a result, the team in many libraries is there not just to pick up and drop books, but also to source the right books and make recommendations. "Employees with a passion for books are a must," Veda explains – a lesson she learnt from experience. Having employed people from different backgrounds, she realises that finally only those who love books themselves can do justice to this job. In the case of Iloveread too, Vasuki says that many a time, its readers turn employees.

### **Stumbling blocks**

The challenge for these enterprises is the logistics. "Distribution across a wide geographical area within NCR is in itself a huge task," explains Miglani. While technology helps in keeping track, it requires resourcefulness to pick up and deliver on time. "It has been over 30 months since

we went live. We have figured it out now," says Vasuki. Basic things like preventive maintenance of bikes, factoring in the petrol price hike while creating membership plans, protecting against attrition and absenteeism are worked into its strategies. Currently, Iloveread caters to Chennai and Coimbatore, and plans to expand through franchises.

Indiareads has courier partners and relies on speed post for places where there is no courier service. "It is one of our greatest challenges and having local partners is our next plan," says Veda. In New Delhi, the library already has its own delivery team and plans to extend this to Mumbai and Kolkata – places where it has a certain number of members. As the critical mass is achieved in different regions, delivery teams will also be established. "Right now, we even deliver to tea estates in remote locations. Smoothing out logistic challenges continues to be our greatest focus area," she adds.

### **Gaining visibility**

Referrals are a great way to get members and have worked in the past for these online libraries. The libraries are self-sufficient and have managed to grow and expand through internal accruals and private funding.

Being online, technology is a critical component to ensure efficient tracking and managing of inventory. "We have an in-house team of developers and servers to allow users 24x7 access to our website. We also promote authors on our website and make them accessible to our readers through our Facebook and onsite efforts," explains Miglani. Book cafes and e-books are also on the anvil for this library.

As Vasuki explains, being a community library, spending time with customers on phone is one important way of

networking and keeping customers happy. “We run a very popular Facebook page and a blog to connect with book lovers,” he adds. Iloveread also collaborates with Chennai Live 104.8 FM’s PaperBack radio show (the only radio book club in the country) that airs every Saturday, where the members are the guests of the show.

Hosting events like the Mad Librarian’s Tea Party and a book club on Saturdays (apart from PaperBack) brings readers together. “We have an initiative where we place books in auto rickshaws for people to read while they travel,” shares Vasuki. Indiareads goes to campuses with books and, more importantly, involves authors for the students to interact with during its Literathon. Reputed institutions are targeted for this. Book events inviting authors and reviews on the site are other ways of getting the readers to interact. The library is already working with educational institutions to design their libraries. This year, the focus will expand to include corporate companies as well.

### **In the future**

The online libraries collectively believe that they have only touched the tip of the iceberg. And each of them states that there is room for competition as it will create growth for the segment itself. What will be critical is for these libraries to create new avenues in the same space and bring about a judicious mix of the online and brick-and-mortar elements. Using this as a mantra, online libraries can more than do their part to encourage the art of reading.

—*S. Meera*

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([www.thesmartceo.in](http://www.thesmartceo.in))*

## **TRENDSETTERS**

*Powerful stories of entrepreneurs  
for whom humanity matters*



## **A Home is a Home**

Heterogeneity is expressed in every strand of life in India. Housing is one that reflects both— one’s own culture and absorption from other cultures. The richness in our architectural history grew out of local materials and local labor responding to regional climatic conditions.

With migration being the norm in our rural areas, rural homelessness needs a fresh impetus to accommodate the personal and cultural needs of the people. “Nivasa is an effort in this direction,” says Ms. Akhila Ramesh, Founder, Nivasa – a rural housing initiative.

“Rural India is home to 71 percent of the population, of which, one in every five rural dweller lives in a *kuchha* house. Schemes underway do not accommodate the cultural

needs of the people, nor are they friendly to their life style. Nivasa is a venture to redefine rural landscapes through culturally sensitive, site driven and cost effective design and construction,” points out Akhila.

A corporate life after Masters in Project Management and Urban Design did not satiate Akhila. In her desire to do something meaningful, she realized that the forces that drive others (like money, corporate ladder) did not drive her. “My firm belief is equality in this mixed society. As an architect, I decided to work for 10 years and then embrace the task of giving back something meaningful to the society,” she says.

Nivasa is the product of her effort in bringing together her training in architecture and her passion for equality. “I am not a social worker, nor am I an activist. All I have is my passion,” smiles Akhila. Before recognizing where she would fit in, she spent a year researching on various options and volunteered with different organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Sandhya Kirana, and Sambhav Foundation.

Building a dry toilet in a village unveiled her inclination towards rural areas. While meeting Ashoka’s Director of Housing, in Ahmedabad, she realized that cities did not enthuse her and it was villages where she wanted to be. The final spark came when she met a veteran architect in Ahmedabad, Mr. Kirti Shah who. He had told her: “It is either rural or urban, and never both.” Thus, Nivasa was born to provide professional design and construction support for rural housing and infrastructure as a design and build venture.

Akhila came to know about CSIM through her mentor, Dr Usha Vasthare, a neuroscientist, and Founder of the NGO, Yogakshema. “The course on social entrepreneurship is just

the right package for individuals who wish to contribute towards change and development. The knowledge that I acquired here has brought me a long way. Networking was taught as an art in itself and it helped me in approaching people from a wide spectrum,” elaborates Akhila.

On 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2012, Nivasa will be launching its first project in Timmaianadoddi Village, located in the outskirts of Bangalore. Nivasa is involving the community in the construction to give them an alternate source of income. Physical scaled models for various options of design are being presented to the community so that they could choose which model would suit them best. Additionally, the materials already existing are being reused– like asbestos sheets for cow sheds or toilets. “It takes about three months to build each house,” says Akhila.

Nivasa has gradually identified other needs of the people that can be addressed in the process of constructing the houses and rain water harvesting was one such concern that demanded attention. Nivasa roped in Mr. Aiyappa Masagi, an Ashoka fellow and founder of Water Literacy Foundation and proposed for rainwater harvesting in this village. NIVASA has involved Ex IISc Professor Dr. Yogananda to provide expert guidance on cost effective materials and construction techniques on optimizing construction costs without diluting the quality. A bamboo expert has been roped in to enable the basket weaving community to learn usage of bamboo in construction. The Panchayat is also supportive, and NIVASA hopes to get financial support towards toilets and labour component while constructing public infrastructure. NIVASA is extremely lucky to have corporate backing for its first project.

Nivasa’s growth has been largely influenced by the earlier

travel and volunteering experiences undertaken by the founder. Nivasa was part of a vernacular study of three villages in Hubli, along with Habitat for Humanity, on their cultural usage of space. “We realized that people are keen to build their houses and are also willing to contribute towards the same,” states Akhila.

On future plans of Nivasa, she says, “Nivasa must grow on the principle that a house is meant not just to provide shelter. It is a home, giving way to improved living conditions.

“I want Nivasa to grow organically and not be driven by targets. It is always one village after another. Only then will comfort and passion go together for creating better lives for the rural people,” smiles Akhila.

With all these in place Nivasa aims at finally evolving houses at a cost of fifty thousand rupees, a tall order given the rocketing costs of materials. “I have a long way to go,” she says.

Let’s wish Nivasa the best in their mission!

—*Shanmuga Priya. R.*



## A new lease of life

The story of Kalpana Gore, who rolled *beedis* for 20 years, is synonymous with the many women in Ahmednagar and their struggle to make ends meet. Nidhi Adlakha has her story.

She was married at the age of 17 and started rolling *beedis* a year later. A task Kalpana learnt from her mother and taught her siblings, rolling *beedis* was an integral part of her daily routine for 20 years. “I picked up the trade from my family members and it was a great pastime after school hours. As a kid, I noticed most women were forced into the trade due to lack of other avenues of employment and it was easy

money," says Kalpana.

With her father's death when she was just 2 months old, education never took priority. She studied only till the fourth grade and was married early. "Post my marriage, I had to continue rolling *beedis* as it supplemented our household income. I used to be from 5 am to 11 pm and slept with the thread of my sons cradle tied to my toe," she says. Kalpana earned a meager Rs 9 for every 1,000 *beedis* she rolled and continued working until the night her second child was born. Recalling the incident, Kalpana says, "I still remember the day my daughter, Rani, was born. I had rolled the last set of *beedis* for the day and slept around 12 am. She was born a few hours later."

Kalpana's husband, a gardener, deserted the family for three years and Kalpana had no option but to continue the trade and fend for her children. "It was a tough time but I had to keep myself engaged and earn money," she recalls.

The *beedi* industry in Maharashtra is huge and private companies that exploit labourers such as Kalpana thrive in districts such as Solapur, Sangamnagar, and Ahmednagar. The company that Kalpana worked for back then, paid for the delivery of her children a sum of Rs 240.

Provided with the tendu leaves, tobacco and thread, the medical expenses of those employed were taken care of. Considering the deteriorating health conditions of the women employed in the trade, medical expenses form a major chunk of their household expenditure. "The 20 years I rolled *beedis* I suffered from constant joint pains and severe backaches. I developed gaps in my spinal cord that led to Spondylitis and I suffer from backaches even today," says Kalpana, who discontinued the trade five years ago.

"My son, Devendra, developed asthma due to the constant exposure to tobacco. He used to have severe attacks and the consequences of rolling *beedis* took a huge toll on our lives." It is unfortunate that most women do not live long enough to avail their pension. "Companies pay you a pension if you work till the age of 58, but most women fall sick and don't live to collect the money," she says.

Ask her why she quit, Kalpana says, "Although, today, they pay Rs 100 for every 1,000 *beedis* you roll, the task is physically straining and I chose to quit. I work as a cook and my husband has a steady job as well. The children are educated and I plan on concentrating on settling their lives."

Pointing out the irregularities and exploitation of workers, Kalpana says that even though they were provided with the yearly Diwali bonus, rent allowance, many workers, including her were cheated as there were a number of middlemen involved in the settling of accounts. "The provident fund that I was entitled too was not paid entirely. Middlemen get us to sign papers in the name of bonus and at the time of payment we receive only half the amount. Most women are uneducated and thus exploited," she adds.

— *Nidhi Adlakhia*



## A Ray of Hope

Meena K Jain started to give meaning to issues related to children since the age of eight. The sight of the street children would raise questions like these in her mind: 'why life has to treat them this way; 'what has been their mistake'; 'How can the lives of orphan children, especially girls with physical and mental problems be bettered?'

Meena's mother who shaped her thoughts as she used to take care of the food and clothing needs of a mentally disabled girl as well as an orphaned girl who lived in a nearby ashram.

Meena determined to make a difference in the lives of such children and chose education as a way to enable her aspiration. She did her graduation in English Literature, pursued her Masters in Sociology and Psychology, and Doctorate in Psychology and Women Study.

At the age of 17, she started working with cancer patients. She would travel along with her mother to the families who had terminally ill children and try to fulfill the child's last wish.

During 10 years of her work life, Meena had the opportunity to work with experts in the medical field like Dr. R N Varma, Professor Milton, Dr. Nandini Muthkudan, Mr. V P Krishna Swamy, Dr. Mahadevaiah, Sree Neetu Srinivas Rao, and many more.

She has been inspired by her director who was a Harvard scholar. Her exposure in Community Based Rehabilitation work and Rehabilitation science facilitated her writing a manual on dealing with mental retardation and intervention in early childhood. She worked as project coordinator for seven projects and handled technical aspects, administration, finance, community service, community projects, and rehabilitation programmes for people with disability. She also worked at Nirmala Shishu bhavan that catered to children with multiple disabilities.

Meena's team was the first to set up a remedial resource room at Kumaran School in Bangalore for children with mind disability, and also established a resource room for children with learning disability. Later, an Army school was also launched to serve such children.

### Setting up of NGO

Meena's exposure in the development sector helped her to

launch her own NGO. With a loan of Rs. 5000 that was lent by Mr. Avlani, she launched 'Srishti' along with two of her friends.

Today, corporate houses in India take pride in partnering with Srishti. Meena used to sell lot of art work created by her to raise funds for the NGO that she set up.

Srishti first started with sale of *panipuris* (a popular Indian snack) and squashes as a means to raise funds for the organization. At first, her friend's father ridiculed them for renting a place for Rs. 5000 and earning less than the rental amount, but a year later, he spoke with pride about his daughter's venture.

Meena graduated as a Social Entrepreneur in 1995 and within a decade she was able to cater to the needs of many needy children. She also mastered the nuances of NGO Governance.

### **A new start**

As Srishti became sustainable over a period of time, Meena chose to part with the organization. She was selected as a member of Child Welfare Committee and her social activism got her elevated as the Chairperson of this committee.

She questioned the very basis of human existence and issues like the rape of a 10-year-old, child kidnap, and all atrocities on children. She toughened on the evil doers and focused to make a difference in the Juvenile Justice Act of India.

While serving as Chairperson of CWC in Bangalore, Meena revamped its policies and systems and became the role model for other states.

### **Sambhav Foundation**

In 2006, with the help of her family and friends, Meena started Sambhav, a home for those with disability and ability. "We have 100 percent success cases—whether it is a child with disability or a person who needs mental health intervention. I can't choose any one case as being close to my heart, as every case that we deal with are close to my heart. When I see the happiness on a mother's face when she hears her child who was unable to speak earlier, call her amma, I feel elated," says Meena.

Sambhav works with delay in development of mind of the children. Intervention therapy, special education, and physiotherapy are provided to children and Sambhav aims to mainstream one or two of their children in regular schools every year.

For children over 16 years of age and who are suffering from epilepsy, Sambhav provides them treatment through Dr. Rajesh Iyer, an epileptologist. For those who cannot afford the medical expenses, Sambhav identifies a sponsor too.

### **Sakshi for vulnerably background sector girls**

'Balika siksha' is an education programme that supports girl children who hail from economically weaker families.

### **Developmental Programmes**

Life skill training is imparted to school children and modules on self-awareness, effective communication that are based on WHO principles are imparted. Volunteers from different corporate houses train these children on Saturdays.

### **Rural Development programme**

Sambhav also adopts economically and socially backward

villages like Kuppachari village near Madhugiri in Karnataka. Based on the funds available, medical camps are organized; toilets are constructed, and children education programmes are conducted here.

### **The Differentiator**

There is a lot of preventive work that can be done in India. For Meena Jain, any and every issue related to children who are in difficult circumstances is a priority. She wishes that all stake holders who work from prevention to rehabilitation come together to address this issue.

Meena strongly confirms that **we are all culturally influenced and socially stigmatized and says that** the child today is a confused individual as he lacks direction or focus in life.

“There are experts who are trying to find solutions to problems, which is wonderful, but as a social society are we ready to accept them with all these problems? Are we open to accept a HIV positive child? Can we accept a prostitute who wishes to reform? Will we give her a dignified life without a stigma?” she asks.

Although Meena had many offers to go abroad since the time she started working, she chose to remain in India, as she wanted to care for her aged mother.

Meena believes that the world can be bettered, and the pain and suffering in the world can be reduced only if everybody comes together and work towards the cause.

— *Vijaya Madhavi*



### **Philanthropist Speak**

A Rotarian since 1969, Sri. R. Narasimhan is the Chairman – Public Relations of the Rotary Club of K.K. Nagar in Chennai. A Post Graduate in Chemical Engineering from Annamalai University, his career was marked by his experience in Enterprises like DCW and Mico Farm Chemicals and is presently the Director of Protech Consultants Pvt. Ltd. His association with Rotary Club began with the Rotary movement Rotary Club of Mettur Dam, and since then has been part of several social welfare projects coordinated through the Rotary Club of Chennai KK Nagar.

*In conversation with Shanmuga Priya, he shares his thoughts on public safety which his major area of concern.*

**What are the projects that Rotary club of KK Nagar is currently working on?**

The major projects executed by our club are: providing drinking water purification; a gohar gas plant and solar street lights for Sivasakthi Kaakum Karangal, a residential home for the mentally challenged children and adults; providing facilities to an Integrated Child Development Centre in Ambattur; and providing drinking water supply system with water treatment plant for a school at T.Nagar.

At present, RC KK Nagar is doing a project for The New Life Charitable Trust, a Home for children and old age destitute people at Eraiyoorr Village in Kanchipuram District. This is a Matching Grant Project assisted by a Rotary Club of Euskirchen – Burfey, Germany.

This year RC KK Nagar has taken up a proposal to provide equipment and other facilities to RMD Pain and Palliative Care Trust for their Hospice Centre at Alapakkam. This facility will provide pain management and palliative care treatment free of cost to terminally ill patients who are suffering from cancer, HIV, hepatitis, heart, or liver diseases.

Right now, we are working to create a facility for pain and palliative care. The plan is to establish a 60-bed hospice in Thiruvannamalai district of Tamil Nadu. It is an ambitious project that will be implemented in three phases—visit hospice; out-patient hospice; and residential hospice.

**Why has public safety been very much your area of concern?**

Ideally, it should be everybody's concern. I am myself a victim of rash wrong side driving, and I have my hip replaced in 1999. The number of accidents in a day stands

testimony to this. In fact, more saddening is the indifference of people to safety rules. I started reading more about such incidents, rash driving, violation of rules, and lack of care and deliberate ignorance of rules despite knowing them already. I realized that it was the educated who are the most indifferent. Change in attitude is very much the need of the hour and I am just doing my bit here.

**The pamphlets that you circulate out of public interest mention about the WHO report showing that India has the highest fatalities of 1.3 lakhs annually due to road accidents. How could one bring about attitudinal change?**

Every day there are 14 persons under 25 years of age, who die in road accidents. What often goes unnoticed is the trauma that the victim's family members go through. I have traveled across Europe, America, Japan, China, and many other countries. Something intriguing is how Indians, obedient everywhere outside India, unabashedly flout rules the moment they land in our soil.

Attitudinal change is a personal trait with public implications. 'How' can be a question of introspection, but designating responsibility is a complicated task. 'Doing your bit' is simply the way. Every drop in the ocean counts!

Visual media can play an effective role in this respect. Their contributions to matters such as these are underestimated. On the other hand, Community Policing can bring in a phenomenal impact on people in multiple ways.

We cannot forget our Government authorities and the police who play a major role. Unfortunately, they do not create a hope among the public to voice our concerns freely.

**What are the other social issues that bother you?**

Water wastage and garbage disposal are some issues that bother us in our day to day lives. Public's indifference only exacerbates the situation. A person who goes to the hotel only for a cup of tea or coffee does not bother to decline the drinking water that is being served. In the end, this gets wasted.

Another issue of concern is the way our elderly are treated. In my opinion, the railway department should encourage volunteers to help the elderly carry their luggage at the railway stations. I voiced this to the concerned authorities at T Nagar railway station as we find no escalator or walkways here and unfortunately till date, I have not received any positive response.

**How do you manage time in handling the role of a Rotarian and that of a Chemical Engineer, directing Protech Consultants Pvt Ltd.?**

I don't think it is ever a question of time. In fact, at the age of 70, I would like to devote more time for such activities and am happy to be engaged with these. I try and do everything I can. This is what I earlier mentioned as 'doing your bit'.

I am also supporting and educating my maid's son who is pursuing his Diploma in Electrical Engineering. I am happy to mention that he will be completing the course this year. I would be providing him with skill and language training so that he can get a good placement.

I have been inspired by many individuals and organizations. One of them that I would like to mention is Mr. Chezian, a visually challenged person at Thiruvannamalai District in Tamil Nadu who took the initiative to train 60 to 70

women in tailoring. I am touched by his gesture and I have contributed to his initiative and his programs.

**What is your message for our Conversations readers?**

I would urge everyone to always follow rules; any rules for that matter. Never forget that every action of yours has an implication on another person. Do what you can and you will see the fruits multiplying!



## Clockwork Precision

Mental Retardation is the colloquial term used to refer to a complex range of diseases that affect the human brain. It is also a loosely used term, and a social taboo is prevalent upon anybody who is said to suffer from it. In other words, a person with mental retardation is said to be unfit for any form of social interaction and therefore many families hide or restrict the very existence of such an individual to the confines of their homes. That people with mental retardation can also be productive individuals is something that is often overlooked by many. Here is an organization that not only nurtures skillful individuals but also has managed to tap into their award-winning abilities.

Navajyoti Trust was founded by a prosperous industrialist D.J.K. Cornelius in 1968 at Bangalore. The objective of this trust was to start a vocational training center for youth aged between 14 to 22 years. In the nineties, the Trust launched a centre in Chennai. A campus spanning 10 acres of land in the prime industrial locality at Ambattur, this center serves as a home and workshop for young men who have a mild form of mental disability.

“We take in boys who are fairly independent as far as their personal chores are concerned. Their IQ levels need to be above 40 in order to qualify. Here the boys are trained in academics as well as mild engineering assembly skills. The trust not only takes care of their training and accommodation, but also helps them in procuring their disability ID cards and the MTC bus pass. Attenders are available to keep the boys some company,” Says Balakrishnan, Trustee, Navjyoti.

The work timings for the Trust are from 9:00 am. to 5:00 pm. The trust offers the boys a week’s holiday once in every four months. “We started off with just eight boys, but today we have 28 boys and three teachers at our centre. We do not offer an annual leave for the boys, since a long break from work would hinder their ability to recollect what they had learnt before the holidays,” says Balakrishnan.

Teachers in the centre have been trained specifically to work with persons with disabilities. The Navajyoti Trust offers a one-year Diploma in Vocational Rehabilitation which is recognized by the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), the apex body governing the interests of persons with disabilities at the national level. This diploma course has been offered by Navajyoti Trust since 1995 and Navajyoti is one of the first NGOs to launch such a course. Today,

according to Balakrishnan, there are 13 other institutions that offer similar programs.

Navajyoti Trust gets its funding from Central and State government grants, corporate support as well as from private donations. "The grants take care of our training costs and teachers' salaries. We invest our donations in fixed deposits and use the interest amount to meet our expenses which is around nine lakh rupees per year," he says.

The boys who stay for the three year period at Navajyoti Trust learn to become self-reliant and independent. The teachers take them on field visits and teach them important life skills, such as how to take a train or bus to and from a particular place. Placements are done through the Shell-Employee Trust. Companies such as Delphi-TVS, Diamond Chain, Brakes India Ltd. recruit the boys.

"Our boys come from poor families. So it is essential for us to find placements for the boys so that they may contribute to the family's income. We largely tie up with printing presses, automobile assembly centers, and banks even," adds Balakrishnan.

"We design the factory fixtures to suit the boys' abilities. Their medical condition leaves no room for error in mechanical tasks and their enthusiasm and commitment to their job is infectious. Recently Delphi-TVS presented us an award for being their Outstanding Supplier! It was all because the boys would turn in their goods well ahead of time because of their dogged commitment," he says with pride.

Each boy earns an average of Rs. 3,500 per month. There is a certain pride and dignity and a boost of self-confidence that inculcates in the child.

Navajyoti Trust has two centers in Chennai, one in Ambattur

and another at Sriperumbudur. Being located close to the industrial belt of the city, the trust enjoys the affiliation of the best industries.

In 2008 the trust celebrated its 40th anniversary with great gusto. Over the years it has adapted itself to the times and today it stands testimony to the long standing struggle for the rights of persons with disabilities, especially mental disabilities.

Tucked away in a corner of the city, quietly working away are 28 boys who are more than what meets the eye. The world still calls them names, but little does it know that their eye for precision at work and sense of time surpasses that of anybody else.

A nod to Navajyoti Trust, an organization that respects these individuals for their worth and carefully nurtures them so that they may shine.

—*Archanaa R.*



## Exceptionally Devoted to the Cause

The Madhuram Narayanan Center for Exceptional Children (MNC) is one of the pioneering institutions to offer specialized services in the area of early intervention for children with developmental disorders. Talking to Mr. S. Krishnan, an advisor of the organization, we get a bird's eye view of the institution, which right from its beginnings up to its latest contributions to the society has been setting the trends in this field.

MNC is the brain-child of Mrs. Jaya Krishnaswamy and Late Air Vice Marshal Krishnaswamy. After his retirement from the Indian Air Force, the couple decided to relocate to Chennai. It was here in the late eighties, while Air Vice Marshal Krishnaswamy was a consultant with the Sanmar Group and the Indchem Research Laboratories, that the idea

for an organization working for children with developmental disabilities sprung up. The then Chairman of the Sanmar Group Mr. K.S. Narayanan had suggested that a school be opened for such children. After consultations with veterans such as Prof. Jeyachandran, who is considered as the father of early intervention in India, it was decided that a program on early intervention be started.

As this would be a first of its kind in the state and probably in the country even, the team started gathering data on parenting patterns by talking to people from various walks of life, many of whom were also parents and grandparents of children with developmental disabilities. In 1989, the Upanayan Program was started. Systematic assessment of children's developmental milestones was done, based on which individualised training plans were formulated. 'Upanayan' means 'to lead along' and the program did just that, by engaging the parents at every stage.

Mr. Krishnan reaffirms that this program was tailored to suit the Indian sensibilities and it was evolved after testing a program which was heavily influenced by the western culture. Originally, incorporated as Ind Chem Foundation in 1991, the Upanayan Program was inaugurated by Mother Theresa. The current name was adapted in 1997.

MNC functions as a day-care center for infants and children aged up to six years of age. Their objectives are: Early Detection and Intervention; Empowering and rehabilitation of parents; Creating awareness about detection at birth; Research and development; and Outreach to all institutions that work on similar projects. Annually, a national workshop is held to bring together like-minded people from various parts of the country. Once in three years, an international conference is also held.

MNC takes up an integrated approach towards intervention. Parent-involvement is heavily incorporated into the regimen. A software called 'Upanita' has been developed to make a complete assessment of every child and to graph his/her progress as the year passes by. The parents sit through training sessions for the children and also attend separate training sessions wherein they are equipped to handle and guide their children in their day-to-day lives. For every child an individualized education plan is drawn up. The curriculum is duly upgraded and it also includes yoga and music therapy. Annual Day and Sports Day are also celebrated.

Once in a month the birthdays of everyone born in that particular month is celebrated. Festivals of all religions are also celebrated. Motor, Cognitive, Socialization, Communication, and Self-Help skills of the child are all honed. Mr. Krishna states that on an average, 10% of all children who attend the MNC school are mainstreamed.

The main projects designed and undertaken by MNC are 'Sanmargam', 'Annapurna', 'Sankarshana' and 'Sambhavam'. MNC operates at four different centers in different parts of Tamil Nadu as part of the National Rural Health Mission. Through these projects, the organization creates awareness, teaches life-skills, maintains an active network and nurtures its children and their parents.

MNC follows a 'zero-rejection' policy. In this, either a child is accepted into the system or is referred to another organization which is credible in the eyes and experience of MNC. The organization is supported in its finances by both the Central as well as the State Government. While over 55 percent of the funds come from the government, the rest is collected through individual and corporate donations.

"The Tamil Nadu government has been exceptionally forthcoming in terms of supporting not only MNC but in several projects related to disabilities. Since it is essential to maintain a healthy and sustainable relationship with the children's families, a minimal contribution is collected from them as well. Even in that, the relatively richer families are encouraged to contribute the share of the relatively poorer ones," says Mr. Krishnan.

Mr. Krishnan mentions, not without a certain pride, that the organization is transparent and has successfully conducted its social audit too.

Towards the end of this conversation, Mr. Krishnan introduces the Principal of the School, Mrs. Priya Rajkumar. A parent herself, Mrs. Priya Rajkumar epitomises the parent-involvement in the intervention process and how it ultimately translates into the culture of this organization.

Originally from Salem, Mrs. Rajkumar used to be an outstation parent in 1990, travelling with her then little son (who has severe Cerebral Palsy) every few weeks to Chennai for therapy and training. In 1994, she settled with her family in Chennai and joined as a staff at MNC. Since 2007, she has been serving as Principal for this organization.

"I could see the positive changes in my son soon after he joined MNC. I realized that he could have been worse had he not been put through schooling here. Having been a part of this organization for several years now, I have sensed satisfaction in what I do every single day here," says Mrs. Priya Rajkumar.

She moves on to explain about the vocational training programs of MNC and about how keenly they work towards placing the children either in the right schools or in the right

sheltered workshops wherein the children can lead their lives with as much independence as their conditions will allow them to be. She recalls with pride the students who have finished their tenth standard, twelfth standard, and even some who are now pursuing their college education. She urges parents to identify developmental delays in their children at the earliest and refer them for early intervention.

In developmental disabilities, early detection is as good as prevention. Let's take a cue today.

—*Archanaa R.*



## Help in a heartbeat

In the midst of a busy work-day routine, a silent brigade of volunteers continue to get together to bring some betterment in the lives of those who are not as fortunate as they are. This spirit of volunteerism glows bright and the numbers keep multiplying, adding strength to the common interests held by each. It is common knowledge that efforts when multiplied reap exponentially large returns. That is roughly how Udhavum Ullangal operates. Here is an excerpt of a conversation with Shankar Mahadevan, Founder Trustee.

“In 1998, we started this concept of ‘Ananda-Deepawali’. Since not everybody can afford to celebrate important festivals like Deepawali with the same pomp and show as others, we thought of initiating mass celebrations. In our first attempt, we brought 300 children together. Subsequently, this concept has caught on like a rapid-fire and our numbers

have become as large as 1500 each year," says Shankar Mahadevan.

From then on, this group of volunteers met every Sunday and started helping out at orphanages and homes. Support for education was one of the main services provided. A mentorship system was introduced wherein every volunteer would be attached to a handful of children and a detailed compilation of information on every child was carried out. Over 500 such children are kept in the records.

Udhavum Ullangal works along with the National Child Labour Project and has so far successfully brought back over 200 children to their formal schools both in and around Chennai as well as Sivakasi. "We strive to support any number of genuine cases," state Shankar Mahadevan.

In the area of Healthcare, multiple projects have been undertaken. "When we were pondering what would be the best way to attract the interests of doctors towards public health, we chanced upon the idea of celebrating Doctors' Day, as a means to felicitate those who are already doing yeomen service to the community and also to build a strong network of committed individuals," says Shankar Mahadevan.

Since 2004, Udhavum Ullangal has been giving away Sanjeevi Awards to doctors for their extended work in communities all over the state. Furthermore, young doctors are brought together for continued medical education. In 2009, 120 doctors had attended this program in Courtallam; in 2010, the same was organized in Tuticorin; and in 2011, a Cancer Prevention Center was inaugurated by Dr. Shantha of Cancer Institute of Chennai. This center, manned by four social investigators and medical officers is engaged

in screening, awareness and education of people about prevention and cures of different types of cancers.

Melapalayam district, where there is a predominance of *Beedi* Rollers' belonging to the Muslim community, Udhavum Ullangal places a special focus on cancer education. A 100-bed-hospital has been proposed at Thirunelveli for which Dr. Shantha and famed oncologist Dr. Krishnakumar are on the advisory board.

Apart from this, 150 families ridden with leprosy and blindness are being provided with monthly rations worth Rs. 400 each for the last four years.

Udhavum Ullangal also works in the area of livelihoods. A skill development center, each at Nanmangalam (Medavakkam) and Hastinapuram (Chromepet), offer training programs for interested persons in computer education, tailoring, and beautician training. These centers run in association with Accenture Technologies Pvt. Ltd. These training programs are offered free of cost and the desired objective is to generate incomes.

Given the free-ranging nature of volunteerism, it is surprising to note how well coordinated the whole exercise is. The proof of great team work is evident from all the projects mentioned above which have so far withstood the test of time. When asked to tell us about some of the pillars behind the success story of Udhavum Ullangal, Shankar Mahadevan mentions with enthusiasm about his colleagues.

Having taken voluntary retirement from the Indian Bank after 35 years of service, Shankar Mahadevan is one of the founders of Udhavum Ullangal. The other trustees are: Mr. Santhanam, a Public Works Dept. officer; Mr. S.V.G. Subramaniam who works with the Shankar Nethralaya

Eye Bank; Mrs. Premalatha of the Madras Voluntary Blood Bureau; and Mr. Ramesh Kumar, Director at Innova Eye Solutions. “In fact, it is the contacts and professional network of Mr. Ramesh Kumar that helped us frame our HR policy and source enough funding for our organization,” expresses Shankar Mahadevan gratefully. Indeed, for an organization which started with funds of just over a lakh of rupees, today Udhavum Ullangal’s operations attract funding for over one crore of rupees for each year.

Reflecting on the journey so far, Shankar Mahadevan opines that steady volunteerism is absent these days. Yet, he has firm belief in the transformation that a handful of committed volunteers can bring to society. Tucked away in a quiet corner of bustling T.Nagar is an office of Udhavum Ullangal, where a social worker and a part time resource person handle the day-to-day affairs. Without them and the scores of volunteers who spend their weekends working for the underprivileged, our society would be a little more wanting than what it is today.

—*Archanaa R.*



## Me And My Drops

“Education is the chief defense of a nation,” said Burke. Little did he know of the multiple forms of discrimination that would make its accomplishment an onerous task. Obstacles are aplenty, especially in our country. “Enrollments are not the figures to go by,” says Jayanthi Raghavan, Founder, Adi Parasakthi Kuzhandaikalvi Arakkattalai, an NGO in Madipakkam, Chennai.

With increasing facilities and programmes to make elementary education universal, the obstacles have also grown manifold and complicated. “Whatever be the reasons, there are children out there who need care, who need to be taught clean habits, who need a place to acquire basic skills”.

This institution is one such place. Registered as a trust in 1986, it has managed to make a mark in the lives of several underprivileged children. With just twelve children to begin with, they never imagined the responsibility to stand at the present proportion.

“We began with the children in Tirusulam, engaged in land mines. Our team found it very hard to convince the parents of these children that education was necessary for their kids to lead better lives. Socio economic conditions compelled these parents to prefer their children to work than study. Going door-to-door was the only option that seemed workable. Leaving no stone unturned, we managed to garner attention in the locality,” recollects Jayanthi.

Primarily, the children were taught basic hygiene practices—use of soap, comb, oil. Provision of noon meals was an added incentive. Over the years, Arakkattalai’s presence in the region was acknowledged and their work got noticed. Today, Arakkattalai houses 85 children who go to government schools. “Our success lies in the fact that people have started to value education and so do their children. One of our boys is an engineer today and he inspires the other children to take up professional courses,” states Jayanthi with pride.

Having begun this institution as a President of the Rotary Club, Jayanthi has received immense support from Ms. Sakunthala Chidambaram (the school’s Principal) and Ms. Parvadavardhini (the Coordinator). The children are taught English, Tamil, Hindi and basic arithmetic. With this foundation, they are admitted in government schools in the neighbourhood. “Private schools are here to stay, but not for the underprivileged,” she laments.

Recently, another house has been taken up for rent at Uzhaipali Nagar to accommodate the children whose parents and care givers cannot afford to get them educated. As they work during the day, the children learn their basics here. “It is important to sow the seeds of learning in the formative years of life,” says Jayanthi.

Jayanthi narrates the story of three children who were sent out of school for not paying their fees. On meeting Jayanthi at a function, the kids approached her for support. After completing classes V and VI at Arakkattalai, these children were admitted to a Government High School. “One of them, Yamuna, has stood first in class from seventh to twelfth standard. What more do you need,” exclaims Jayanthi.

These children come to meet their teachers at Arakkattalai as often as they can. “You have given us our lives,” are the words echoing in all their minds and hearts. “One of the boys, a first generation learner, is now earning seven thousand rupees a month. He donates five hundred rupees every month to Arakkattalai. It is important to give back,” says Jayanthi.

With the education programme making its mark, Jayanthi and team felt the need to help the abandoned elderly. Jayanthi stays with them and takes care of their schedule, specifically, their food. “When they approached us, we could not say no,” says Jayanthi, who has also performed the final rights to the deceased. Apparently, the institution is bogged by inadequacy of funds, so much so that they cannot afford to recruit many care takers.

The challenge of funds persisting, the team continues to attend to the needs of its inmates. As for the children between 5 to 15 years of age, who do not wish to continue

their studies, vocational training in carpentry, tailoring are organized and vocations are stabilized through loans from the Rotary Club. "Since parents are disinterested and preoccupied with making both ends meet, it becomes very difficult to motivate these children. Yet, we emphasise our students to complete tenth standard," she says.

Talking about future plans, Jayanthi shrugs. The debates on institutionalization do not seem to bother her. "This work will go on forever. I don't have big plans and just want to continue what I could do," says Jayanthi who misses her friends at the home even if she is out for one day. One of them, Saraswathi, says: "I have been here for one month. My son is abroad and I do not wish to stay with my relatives. I got to know about 'mami' through a friend and decided to come here. I really feel at home."

Jayanthi is all smiles to see her care and concern for the needy evolving constructively. "All I want is to see this institution become a landmark to this locality in the future," she concludes.

—*Shanmuga Priya .R*



## Of A Rare Kind

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act of 2000 makes considerable provisions to fulfill its objective. Children below 18 years of age who are reportedly without a secure home are governed by this act. They are sent to live in rescue-homes, shelter-homes, or orphanages, as their case may be. Once a child completes 18 years of age, he/she is deemed to be old enough to take care of him/herself. If one has even the slightest idea of what it is like to live in an orphanage or a similar home, one would definitely know that they do not exactly offer the most conducive environment for a child to grow up in.

Khushboo Kantharia, founder of Caravan Life (popularly known as Disha Foundation) tells us how vastly different the lives of children in institutional set ups are, as compared to those children who live in their natural families. An Ashoka

Youth Ventrue Fellow, Khushboo founded this organization in (2009), as a support structure to help children, especially girls of the 16-18 years bracket, to reintegrate them with the rest of the society.

“Life in an institution is a life of few needs, all of which are already fulfilled. Everything circles around the ringing of a single bell. When the bell rings, you wake up; when the bell rings you eat, or sleep, or wash clothes, and so on. All that one needs for bare minimum existence is given. There is no scope or room for choice,” says Khushboo, continuing her argument, “As soon as a child completes 18 years of age, he/she is sent out into the big world, without a clue of what they need to do with themselves. The child does not even know that he/she has an individual personality, leave alone that he/she is of some worth to the world around them.”

Khushboo, through her organisation reaches out to girls in several child care institutions in Maharashtra, and trains them on life-skills; healing therapies; goal-orientation; and planning and focus, so that they may start their independent lives with confidence, determination, and dignity. “Life for a single woman is full of challenges. In cities like Mumbai, there is every chance that a young woman is either prone to lurking dangers to her safety, or to the spiteful remarks of unkindly neighbours. She has to constantly fight against the tide even to coexist in her neighborhood. We believe that every girl is perfectly capable of carving a meaningful life for herself. We merely play the role of a facilitator, and open their minds to see opportunities in the world outside. It is up to them to decide what is best for their course of life,” says Khushboo.

Principle of self-determination of individuals is easy to comprehend, but hard to internalize and actually practice. However, that seems to be the reigning principle behind

Khushboo’s many initiatives. All of 22 years, she has taken on the mantle of leadership to rare heights already. The inspiration for all of her work springs from a deeply touching experience.

Khushboo was born into a wealthy family in Surat. When her mother died, due to various reasons, she was sent into a shelter home. She was 17 years old then. It was here she saw how utterly cut-off institutions are from a regular environment. She says: “Living in a shelter home, I met girls who were brought into the home as infants. They had never seen the outside world and therefore their awareness about things were far lower than that of children who were brought up in a regular household . For instance, they did not know how to use money, or how to travel independently, or how to mingle with boys. When such children came out of the institution, the world seemed as one large maze. It is easy for them to get lost. I knew some girls who would very quickly marry an auto rickshaw driver or work at a bar, just because they did not know what else they could do.”

Khushboo, on the other hand, had experienced life in a normal family as well in an institution. She had seen herself be an argumentative rich kid, as well as the submissive one. In all humility she says referring to her association with the organizations Ashoka Youth Ventures and Saathi, “Touchwood! I stumbled upon the right kind of people and got the right kind of support at the right time.”

Khushboo also keenly observed what the counselors did when they had visited the home where she was put up. This sparked in her an urge to work with girls who are in the transition-stage of their stay in a home, to assist them to discover their own potential and to look progressively at their lives. She identified a group of volunteers, and based

on various resources available such as UNICEF's life-skills program trained these volunteers to be trainers on life skills.

"At Caravan Life, we build a life-long relationship with our girls. The most beautiful part about our work is how it brings together individuals who are otherwise completely unrelated to each other to become strong pillars of support. All that we need have to do is to provide space to keep the conversation flowing. The girls group up to discuss their problems, and come up with their own solutions," says a proud Khushboo, adding that, "it is essential that the girls know that there is always someone whom they can count upon when there is a need."

As her passion grew into what she now calls 'her life-long mission', Khushboo decided to pursue a suitable education to aide her efforts. She did a certificate program in Social Work from the College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan, and is presently preparing for a course in psychology and counseling. On being asked how effective her education has been, her response is, "Education to me has been a deeply personal experience—one that came out of my own necessity to succeed in my mission. I had started Disha on an emotional premise, that no other girl should suffer the way I did. Now, I have a vision for my organization. I want to be professional in my work. Although hands-on experience may be a great teacher, it takes 15 years to understand the field. Whereas, education condenses that information and insight into a few hours of lessons. People look for a professional no matter what your achievements are. Thanks to my education, I can now start new centres of Caravan Life, the next two being planned in Uttarakhand and Gujarat. We will shortly start working with boys as well. Also, we will be customizing all our programs to suit the individual needs of every child care institution that we work with."

Another side of Khushboo's vibrant personality is her interest in adventure sports. The spirit of adventure and independence that she radiates is palpable and infectious. Perhaps that is where her practical, "no-free lunch" attitude towards her organization also comes from. "We go trekking to well-researched jungle areas where we deliberately keep a distance of 5 to 6 feet between two individuals. Our girls nurse fears of all kinds and initially they feel utterly lost in the solitude and nothingness of the jungle. Some shout and some scream to be let out, but we move on until they finish their course., This activity is necessary for our girls to unwind. That is where they actually get rid of their doubts, fears, and inertia. When they are done, they keep asking for more such treks!" chuckles Khushboo, who is also getting a certificate for being an adventure sports facilitators and dance movement therapist. As she recalls one of her most profound successes, she says, "One of my girls, after a particularly tiring trek, woke me up at the middle of the night and walked me into a deep pocket of the jungle. There, under the starry sky, she started pouring her heart about all things sundry. She spoke and spoke and I listened until the sky lit up at dawn. That to me is an important landmark."

For Khushboo, her biggest success is when a girl, whether a victim of rape or trafficking, comes to her one day to shows off proudly the stars she received at her employee-assessment time at work. That, she says is equivalent to getting an Oscar!

As she signs off, Khushboo leaves us with one piece of advice, "As and when possible, let someone know that you sincerely believe in them. It works magic for their self-esteem. I know it works, because someone told me they believed in me, and that sent my spirits flying ever since. I salute such people."

*So do we!*

—Archanaa R



## Painting the World Green

“I have to plant at least one sapling every day, otherwise I don’t get a sound sleep that night,” says Mullaivanam, a businessman and an avid environment-enthusiast who is promoting tree-planting through his Tree-Bank in Sriperumbudur. Introduced in 2008, the tree-bank is a voluntary association of environmental conservation activists and volunteers who give away free saplings to anybody who seeks them. Mullaivanam is one of the seven trustees who have set up this Tree-Bank.

“We have requests pouring in from schools, colleges, from families for birthdays and other special occasions. We coordinate home-deliveries within the city, but mostly we suggest spots which are conducive for planting and meet people here. We agree to part with the saplings only when we get a commitment from the other party to take care of the plant.”

“We receive large orders from individuals as well as public and private organizations. Since we do not have the necessary transport to deliver across cities, we take utmost care in packaging the plants. In case of bulk orders, we ask the receivers to prepare the planting slots prior to delivery of the saplings,” says Mullaivanam.

For Mullaivanam, nature is mankind’s first mother. He says: “When a child is born, even before the mother holds and nourishes the child, it is Mother Nature who provides the first nourishment—air for the child to breathe and water. A cradle is made out of wood and so is a coffin. It pains me to see how we as a race have destroyed so much of nature’s bounty. Every day I wake up thinking what I am going to do to nourish the earth?”

Such deep-felt concern for nature was instilled in him since his early days. Reminiscing his childhood, he says, “My Grandfather and father were both farmers. Although I was raised in the city, I would always accompany my grandfather in his daily gardening chores. He was always planting saplings around the house. He would simply collect any leftover seeds from the fruits and vegetables that we ate at home and sow them. He would recycle old rubber-tyres, plastic-covers, containers, and coconut shells, and use them as flower pots. It is from him that I learnt how easy this can be, and now it is a habit that I enjoy continuing.”

According to Mullaivanam, donation of a sapling is the best form of help. “I believe that every other kind of donation serves merely as a means to satisfy man’s selfish motives. Tree-donation alone helps build a safer, more vibrant world not just for mankind, but for all living creatures on the planet,” he opines.

When Mullaivanam and his friends go about tree-planting, the passersby are largely indifferent. Some ask why, but only a few care to find out how to do it themselves. It is for

this reason that Mullaivanam has taken up the responsibility of spreading this message to the society. He visits schools, colleges, and corporate houses along with his friends to talk about the necessity for tree-planting exercises. He also lobbies with the government to bring about systems that would encourage the general public to engage in tree planting.

“I would suggest that for every two-wheeler that is purchased, the RTO must insist the buyer to plant and maintains two saplings, and in the case of a four-wheeler, to plant and maintain four saplings,” says Mullaivanam.

Another idea that he proposes is to divert waste water from roadside eateries to water trees that are planted on the sides of main roads. “Instead of letting stinking waste water run along the road or into the drain, why not recycle it?” he asks. He reckons that most states in our country are in sheer negligence. He cites the examples of Kerala and Karnataka who have taken care to maintain greenery in their state.

For a man of such passion towards nature, Mullaivanam’s family extends whole-hearted and ready support. “My son and daughter accompany me during most of my tree-planting drives,” he says enthusiastically.

As he signs off, Mullaivanam says, “Whatever I do is just a drop in the ocean. I would love to gift a sapling to every human being on earth. Since that is not possible, I’m doing my best to reach out to people and make them environment conscious.”

“No excuse can be given to not maintain a plant or a tree. All one needs is a square-foot of space in a corner of your house and one litre of water a day. Tell me, is that too difficult?”

A pertinent question indeed! Let us take a cue and let us bring a plant to life today!

— Archanaa R.



## Where Schools Go To Children

Multiple streams in the education system have often been a bone of contention. Specifically, because of the inequity it builds. Given that the parents would like their children to receive some kind of education, small scale efforts like the ‘Single Teacher Schools’ come in handy, applauding the purpose.

Single Teacher Schools is a project of Swami Vivekananda Rural Development Society, founded on the principles of taking schools to children, ensuring that access does not restrict literacy to the rural poor. Since its establishment in 2006 in the remote villages of Thiruvallur and Kanchipuram districts of Tamil Nadu, the number of such schools has multiplied from 150 to 657 today.

“Starting a movement is relatively easier. Sustaining is truly an onerous task,” says Mohan who is with the movement

since six months post-retirement. He was a marketing professional at Everest India Limited and served as Assistant Project Officer with Tamil Nadu Government's Magalir Thittam in Salem District. He acknowledges that true India is in the rural areas and a holistic development calls for the participation of NGOs on a significant scale.

The best part of the conception is making use of local resources—both human and material—for the education of children. Educated youth from the villages are identified and encouraged to teach. They are trained to impart skills based on the syllabus prepared. Simultaneously, they are also trained to serve as health workers thereby becoming an interface between the people and the primary health centres.

The teacher being a localite makes a big difference in the rural areas as people are often apprehensive to mix with the mainstream. Getting to the economics of it, the costs work out to be 100 rupees per child per month. "With 1200 rupees, a child's education throughout the year is taken care of. The syllabus for Tamil, English, Arithmetic, and Science are provided by the schools. Discipline, hygiene, and elementary yoga are also taught with a focus on character building," he says.

The movement has had its own moments of ups and downs. From a time when the availability of financial resources decided the next discourse, the movement has today reached a stage where the reach of resources has to be made known. "We have sustained this silent revolution," smiles Mohan. Asking about people's support for the movement, Mohan says, "We have no protests from the localites against our activities which is in itself an endorsement of our work."

Alongside teacher training, a suitable place is identified to serve as a classroom for about 30 students. It could be a community hall, temple or even space under a huge tree.

"All that the children need is a place to learn and a trained teacher," simplifies Mohan. Classes from first to fifth standard are conducted six days a week. Interestingly, the schools function between 5:30 pm and 8:30 pm thereby not giving room for wage labour to interfere in the pursuit of basic education.

"The movement is gradually making inroads in the district of Vellore, with 35 centres already being established. The success of this programme lies in the fact that we are being asked to set up similar centres in Theni district. Strictly driven by community needs, we have just begun the survey here. Work in Thiruvannamalai and Vizhupuram districts are also on the cards," he elaborates.

After fifth standard, most of the children join government or panchayat board schools to pursue their education. "It is imperative to catch them young and provide an opportunity in the formative years itself. It is only when they complete their primary schooling, can they reach high school," asserts Mohan.

Asking him about how satisfactory it gets, one would be surprised to learn that the changes in the cultural aspects are more heartening than the improvement in the curriculum.

On concerns about the children's future, the team takes pleasure in making the children 'DREAM'. "Our children can tell you what they want to become. Making them dreamers is the most contending experience," he exults.

The members are consistently involved in creating better infrastructure for the centres, providing educational aids, and setting up a monitoring system. Internal and external audits have contributed to their growth over the years.

"The suggestion for exposure visits has worked very well. The children's exposure to city college students demonstrated the rural-urban divide. Children realized

what they could become in the future. To put it simply, a judicious mix of science, mathematics, English, moral science, hygiene, games, have gone into making the rural children a better generation than their parents,” says Mohan.

In his happiness, he narrates an incident where a school headmaster had mentioned that children from these schools fared better than the others. So, what made the difference? “Identify good teachers, train and imbibe the right attitude towards teaching. There lies the challenge. It makes a world of difference,” concludes Mohan.

Let’s wait to see the wonders that the replication of this model is set to create!

—Shanmuga Priya. R

*The book is rightly subtitled, ‘Stories of people for whom humanity matters’. Hailing from humble backgrounds, the changemakers featured here are extraordinarily impressive and their selfless dedication to the cause they strive for is unparalleled.*

*A special mention needs to be made of each CSIM alumnae’s work. Their yeomen service reveals the brilliant mentoring done by the CSIM team as they have proved to convert their social ideas into action systematically.*

—T N Venkatesh, IAS



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