

Stories of people for whom humanity matters

Volume
IV

UNSUNG BEACONS

Centre for Social Initiative and Management

UNSUNG BEACONS
VOLUME IV

*Stories of people for
whom humanity matters*

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

By CSIM PUBLICATIONS

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Sl#	Contents	Page no
	Foreword	
	Editor's Note	
I	Alumni Talk	
1	Aishwarya Raman	13
2	Dhanalakshmi	18
3	Hansavel	22
4	Manjit Nath	26
5	Namita	32
6	Ponni	36
7	Seenuvasan	40
8	I H Sekhar	45
9	Senthil Kumar	49
10	Sethupathi	53
11	Shantnu Tandon	57
12	Vanitha Chinnasamy	62
II	Inspiring Conversations	
1	Dr. Christodas Gandhi IAS	68
2	Dr. Chef Damodaran	72
3	Shri. DN Kar IRS	77

Sl#	Contents	Page no
4	Shri. Karuna Sagar IPS	82
5	Shri.Mathivanan IAS	87
6	Dr.Prateep V Philip IPS	91
7	Smt. Qudsia Gandhi IAS	97
8	Rtn. V. Raja Seenivasan	102
9	Shri. V. Shankar	107
10	Shri. R. V. Shekar	113
11	Shri. T N Venkatesh IAS	118
12	Dr. Vijay Shankar	124
III	Changemakers	
1	Action for Rural Upliftment and Leadership	130
2	Aim for Seva Trust	134
3	Akshaya Trust	138
4	Anandam	143
5	Anbagam	148
6	Apollo MedSkills training program	151
7	Aseema Trust	155
8	Banyan Academy of Leadership	159
9	Bhumi	163

Sl#	Contents	Page no
10	Eureka Child Foundation	168
11	Gandhi Study Centre	172
12	Karna Prayag Trust	176
13	Lakshmi Pain and Palliative Care	180
14	Loyola Outreach Programs	184
15	Pudiyador	188
16	Ramana Sunritya Aalaya	192
17	Rehoboth	197
18	Sri Ram Charan Charitable Trust	202
19	STEPS	208
20	Sukriti	212
21	United Way of Chennai	216
22	Vinnyasa Premier Art Gallery	220
23	Bulls and Music	224
24	Coffee to Go	228
25	Food Security	232
IV	Trendsetters	
1	Asking The Right Questions	239
2	Ensuring Safety For Children	243
3	Hero – Today And Tomorrow	252
4	Successful Experiments In Integration	256

Sl#	Contents	Page no
5	Convergence Of Needs And Capacities	261
6	Finding Families For Children	265
7	The Beginning, The Progress, And The Success	270
8	From Mother To Daughter	276
9	Milk Gandhi	280
10	Ideas Will Follow Intention	287
11	Charity Begins At Home	292
12	Angels In Disguise	296



Foreword

Unsung Beacons – Volume IV is an exceptional publication that showcases several personalities whose contribution has made a remarkable impact in our society.

The social work profession has existed for over a century and has enriched many lives. It requires skills which are broad and applicable in a variety of settings and this makes the profession unique and vitally important. Social enterprises in our country are evolving into one of the most inspiring and innovative areas to work for those passionate about making a difference to society.

As you flip the pages of this book, you'll see examples of social entrepreneurs and social workers whose life lessons teach us the value of perseverance, dedication, and service. Practical experience and professional ethics have prepared these social change agents to provide a diverse range of services within communities.

CSIM's alumni have carved a niche in the social sector and I believe that their stories will advance our understanding about social entrepreneurship. The story about Auto Raja reveals the efforts of the founders Aishwarya and Anubhav in organising the auto driver community through a social enterprise.

The chapter ‘Inspiring Conversations’ is aptly titled. Each of the personalities who are featured in this section are outstanding in their profession.

Likewise, narrations in the section on change-makers and trend-setters are exemplary. From providing support to the homeless, to educating special needs children through theatre arts—each of their stories are unique and inspiring.

I appreciate the effort taken by Marie Banu and her team in publishing Conversations Today. I am sure that this book will inspire many more people to engage in social service.

Rajendra Ratnoo, IAS
Director of Town Panchayats
Government of Tamil Nadu



Editor's Note

I am delighted to present the fourth edition of *Unsung Beacons*. Our choice of 'Unsung Beacons' as a title reflects the strong personalities who are featured in this publication.

Social entrepreneurship and social enterprise have become popular rallying points for those trying to improve the world. Social entrepreneurs are developing innovative business models that blend traditional capitalism with solutions that address the long-term needs of our society. They are tackling social problems, ranging from education to healthcare, and work in close collaboration with local communities.

Unsung Beacons provides valuable insights into successful business techniques and strategies in the emerging field of social entrepreneurship. To the casual reader, this book will be impressive because of its sheer size and simple language, but I am sure that social entrepreneurs as well as corporates engaged in CSR will find this as a handbook to seek reference from.

This publication is a culmination of 12 months of intensive work which has taken us across the lives of social change agents. I owe

a debt of gratitude to a number of people who have assisted me in compiling this book.

I would like to thank all the bureaucrats and celebrities for giving me an interview. Each of them were distinctive in their work and meeting them were extremely fulfilling.

My special thanks to Mrs Latha Suresh for providing me with the opportunity to become the Editor for this publication. Thank you for listening, offering me advice, and supporting me through this entire process.

I wish to place my thanks and gratitude to Mr. PN Devarajan, Founder – CSIM and Mr. PN Subramanian, Managing Trustee for their continuous support and encouragement.

My warmest thanks and appreciation to my fellow writers who were carefully chosen in order to provide the perfect blend of knowledge and skills.

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

Happy reading!

Marie Banu J
Chief Editor – Conversations Today/
Director – CSIM

ALUMNI TALK

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



Rajas & Ranis For Easy Commutation

Experts say that 80 percent of people who share their ideas do not work on them. Clearly, there is no dearth of ideas. There are individuals who have contemplated on ideas, categorically defined indicators of change and remain focused on money as the complementary component. Such enterprises are becoming the order of the day, inspiring many from the business and government quarters. One such Social Enterprise is Auto Raja, founded by Anubhav Agrawal and Aishwarya Raman in April 2013, in Chennai.

Aishwarya, CEO and Co-Founder of Auto Raja is a post graduate in Sociology, who studied the lives of auto drivers in Chennai for her UG dissertation. “I visited their houses, largely located in slums, interacted with their families, union leaders who have the greatest influence on these drivers to learn the economics of surviving through auto rickshaws,” shares Aishwarya. These

visits also helped her understand the influence of socio-economic background in choosing a career in the organized sector. With this came up a volley of questions – is there a support system for workers in the unorganized sector? Particularly, auto drivers? “These questions took me to people I never imagined I would meet, yet turned out to be very resourceful – liquor shop owners, bureaucrats, union leaders and others,” she adds.

Interviewing 75 auto drivers and 25 customers across the city brought in new answers to reflect upon. Incidentally, this was a first of its kind study looking at how customers rated auto drivers. “This thesis was a very unique experience, in the sense that I was facing questions at every turn. The reflection on which has brought me to where I am today,” recalls Aishwarya. The findings of her study introduced her to the possibility of organizing unorganized workers like auto drivers, fixing this whole sector wherein the survival strategy adds value to the lives of these drivers. With no ready answers and persistent contemplation, there were only two words ringing in her mind – ‘What next?’ During her post-graduation days at the University of Oxford, “Anubhav Agrawal, Founder, Auto Raja, was already working on this idea. He had come across my profile in the blog and wrote to me about his line of thoughts. We began brain storming and finally decided to start a for-profit social enterprise to address the problems faced by customers by addressing those faced by auto drivers. Thus was born Auto Raja!” she reveals.

A holistic analysis of the target groups’ profile, openness to new models of organization and other factors brought many facts to light. “Globally, 75 percent of the auto rickshaw population are in India and 229 million customers use auto rickshaws on a daily

basis. We then looked at customer profiles across cities and states in India. Realising that there was scope in what we were trying to embark on, we began to meet experts in the field, other social entrepreneurs, NGOs that worked with auto drivers, think tanks working on sustainable transport solutions, etc.,” she says.

Aishwarya knew about CSIM during her UG days at MOP Vaishnav College for Women. “The resource persons from CSIM introduced me to social enterprises as an alternative to solving social issues. Thanks to CSIM for introducing me to people working with multiple perspectives. Their hand holding is guiding us even today. Ms. Latha Suresh, Honorary Director of CSIM is one of the honorary members of our Board and Mr. P.N. Subramanian is our Advisor,” says Aishwarya. It was soon clear for the team on what they were trying to do — provide a seamless, hassle free, economical service to customers across the country. And this required them to work with auto drivers, Rajas.

Auto Raja works on a three pronged strategy – facilitating access to institutional credit, affordable health care and quality education. As a call auto rickshaw service, their networking has led to sustainable partnerships with social organisations and corporates. “Facilitating access to institutional credit through the All India Bank Officers’ Association made sure that our Rajas did not go to money lenders who charged high rates of interest. This sense of ownership created a behavioral change in them, encouraging them to think of moving up the social ladder.” Auto Raja is also providing soft loans to help them repay money lenders, build a house of their own, etc.

Networking with hospitals for regular health camps led them to the adoption of Kannagi Nagar – where more than half of the 15,000 families depend on auto rickshaw operations. Free health check-

up for auto drivers and Auto Raja cards for treatment facility at discounted rates are on cards. Quality education for women and children from the Rajas families introduced them to opportunities that the families had hardly thought of. Women are offered training in computer skills, spoken English, optometry, home nursing and driving. Besides, children are sent to an organization that provides after school activities. Bringing back Rajas' to the focus, and improving their literacy was seen paramount as some of them could not even write Tamil fluently. Rajas are also educated on gender sensitization, family dynamics, significance of financial health, customer relations and safety trainings.

All these efforts also led to a partnership with the Manual Labourers Welfare Board under Government of Tamil Nadu to provide socio economic security for unorganized workers. Only a little over 10,000 drivers in the State had registered with this Board while Chennai alone accounts for more than one lakh registered drivers. Auto Raja is trying to getting its Rajas' registered with the Board so that they can avail benefits like pension, scholarships for children, maternity benefit for their wives and moratorium. A beginning with just 13 Rajas in their fleet, Auto Raja today has 550 Rajas enrolled. Based on call service model, mobile triangulation limits their ability to engage only 125 Rajas on a daily basis.

With a mobile app and online booking services in the making, Auto Raja has stepped into introducing its women fleet of Auto Ranis'. "We are in talks with TVS to manufacture autos with different colors for women exclusively." Reflecting on this journey of 8 months, Aishwarya says that working in Chennai has been the most challenging, as there was no standard rates fixed or a formula in use. "While there was a campaign to reintroduce meters in autos revealing 25 rupees per kilometer as the present

slab, we came up with 12 rupees per kilometer proposition. Going at half the regular rates and convincing Rajas' of our system was a huge task then," she recollects.

Aishwarya feels that the most unexpected outcome was the integration of sexual minorities with 'mainstream. Auto Raja has transgenders and sex workers working with it. "We did not envisage this as a livelihood project. It just happened when we came across a profile for recruiting a driver manager. With this positive result, we are now on to recruit physically challenged individuals at our call centre." Auto Raja's success has inspired many institutions to seek partnership with them. The most rewarding mile stone came immediately after Auto Raja was invited on board by the Tamil Nadu Government when it decided to revise auto fares in the State. "Our proposition of 12 rupees per kilometer was accepted unanimously and is now implemented across the state," she proudly notes.

Going back to customers to learn their attitudes towards the Rajas, and recently their drivers from the transgender community has been an inherent strength of this enterprise, allowing them to work on establishing equal opportunities for all. With no second thoughts, one can admit that Auto Raja is definitely an exemplar to show that immediate public transport works.

— *Shanmuga Priya. T*



“I respect what I do!”

It is not quite often that we come across a person who has emerged unscathed from all the obstacles that she had to face to realise her respect for self. Dhanalakshmi alias Dhanam is one. At 33 years, she runs a tailoring centre in Vandavasi. And this centre speaks volumes of her perseverance and hard work.

Dhanam was born normal as any kid, but fell prey to polio at the age of 5. “I crawl everywhere like a child,” she remarks quirkily.

With five siblings around her, she thought she was taken good care of in the family. But, the scenes changed soon as she was left with her maternal grandmother. “There are a lot of times that I have felt isolated. Yet, I was helpless,” she says.

Dhanam had always wanted to go to school and study. Her grandmother, her boon of support, carried her every day to school

and brought her back home on time, so that she could spend more hours in the evening to study. However, this did not last longer. She had to discontinue school after eighth standard as her grandmother could no longer carry her to school. But, Dhanam was determined not to idle at home sighting disability as a reason. “I wanted to do something,” says a poignant Dhanam.

One of her friends was learning tailoring at a nearby institute and Dhanam decided to join the classes with her friend. With no regard to talent or interest, the only fact that she was crippled made her teachers think that she was ineligible to learn. “I did not see any point in enquiring more such centres, because they were all profuse with more such teachers,” recalls Dhanam, who finally decided to learn from her friend. Every evening, her friend would come to her house right after her classes and teach her all that she taught during the day. This again, had to come to an end with her friend’s marriage. “I was left alone again. This feeling really kills and drains all your positive energy. I was directionless again,” says Dhanam.

One day, as Dhanam passed by a provisional store on her street, a woman named Geetha came by and enquired about her. When Dhanam said that she loved tailoring, yet nobody came forward to teach her, Geetha suggested a place where she can stay and take tailoring lessons, and also promised to buy her a sewing machine.

Soon, Dhanam enrolled for a three-month course and resided at a Home in Thiruvannamalai. The course was extended for another three months, and on completion she worked for three years earning 2000 rupees a month.

Feeling equipped, confident and independent, Dhanam started looking out for better job options. “Nobody employed me. No

one was even ready to test my ability,” says Dhanam recollecting the disappointment she faced when she approached several companies seeking employment.

To her luck, Paro Ubakaram at Vandavasi offered her an opportunity. Dhanam was asked to train young girls in tailoring and for a year and a half she kept herself totally engaged here. “I liked being busy,” smiles Dhanam, “It was here that I got to know about CSIM through Ms Ujala Begum. CSIM showed me what it is to plan and achieve. Jothi Sir, Latha Madam, Rosy Madam—these are names I think of when I begin each day,” remembers Dhanam. The Social Entrepreneurship programme gave her the confidence to establish her own tailoring centre.

As the adage goes, all good things happen together. The Life Unit from the Home, where Dhanam learnt tailoring, agreed to provide funds to meet the room rent and machinery costs. Thus, she established the tailoring centre in March 2012.

How does she feel now? How is she looked at? “There are certain things that never change. Even now, when I go out, I feel isolated and looked down upon. That moment, I will not feel like saying anything. Today, my family members approach me only when they need my help. People around you are so opportunistic,” she remarks.

The tailoring centre did not garner success soon after it came into being. Attracting students was a huge task, more so when the teacher is a physically challenged person like Dhanam. From 1 to 5 members initially, the centre now trains 10 members at a time. She did not restrict classes only for the disabled. She welcomed anyone who aspired to learn tailoring, and did not charge the disabled any fee.

Dhanam wanted this chance to be used optimally by them. “Among the few physically challenged who got trained, only two of them have taken up the vocation seriously. It is an independent choice. I am happy that I have taught them the skill,” quips Dhanam.

Dhanam’s future plans are simple. She wants more people to benefit from her tailoring centre, especially the disabled. She opines that few government incentives and benefits that are available does not reach people who are at the bottom of the socio economic ladder. Accessibility and respect are two crucial things to help people like Dhanam lead independent lives. How further we are looking at is a question we all know the answers to.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



We Cannot Ignore Our Farmers!

The numerous debates and declamation on global warming have garnered some attention on the community that is usually neglected from our policy spheres—the farmers. Given that India is largely an agrarian economy, it becomes imperative to work closely with our farmers to ensure food security, against the challenge of global warming. Hamsavel, Founder Trustee of NESAM (National Environmental and Social Awareness Programme) is working on this front.

Born and brought up in a village called Elanthampatti, 8 kilometers from Banrutti, Hamsavel has always been a part of social activities happening in his village. As part of National Social Service (NSS) at school, he had participated in a number of campaigns and activities. He grew up moved by the atrocities against the dalits in the village. This wooed him to study Social Work, but he couldn't. He was forced to take up Economics due to low percentile in twelfth standard. However, this did not affect his inclination towards social work. He was equally active as

before in village activities and youth groups.

In 1995-1996, he became the National Coordinator of Nehru Yuva Kendra (NYK). It was a forum for youngsters to volunteer for different activities like presenting the villagers' letters or complaints to the District Collector, cleaning the streets, organizing sports events for children and adults, etc. To him, holistic development of villages is incomplete if all the sections are not involved. "That was a big lesson from my NSS days. Alongside NYK, I also observed the non-government organisations in the locality that were doing a lot of work on the ground. I grew more confident about taking it as a career option, despite coming from an economics background," he recollects.

We all are aware of the change Green Revolution ushered in the quantity of food production in India. What is often left unheard is the voice of one of our ministers of that time who warned us that farming not in consonance with the principles of nature is only detrimental to our long term food security. Hamsavel's work reminds us of all that.

NESAM organizes farmers in the villages and provides awareness programmes on organic farming and its usefulness. "Ignoring our traditional food crops like *ragi*, *jowar*, *bajra*, etc., and switching over to cash crops has depleted our soil to such an extent that if we do not act now, tomorrow might be too late. Our people must be supported by our food. And that is food security," he dwells deeper into the subject.

To Hamsavel, farmers are the people who must receive immediate attention and policies pertaining to agriculture must be based on indigenous ecosystems. "Our leaders are not in line with these principles. That is why people like us come in to advocate for

organic farming, against all odds,” he laments about people having forgotten their roots and is totally upset about the respect shown towards farmers and farming.

The aforesaid food crops, collectively referred as to as *sirudaniyangal* require less input for growth and provide food for a minimum of four months with ample nutrition. “We cannot afford to forget these crops that also have the inherent nature of revitalizing the soil,” warns Hamsavel, who has organized men into groups to inculcate the habit of saving and depositing in a bank. So far, 43 such groups have been formed.

“But why men?” “Women groups can be organized easily, whereas men’s pattern of socialization does not allow one to do that. They take to alcohol easily. Thus, the necessity to organise these men and focus on them,” he explains.

The awareness programmes provide inputs on various techniques used in organic farming. *Meenpaagu*, for example, made from fish and jaggery protects the crops from insects and also enhances growth. *Panchakavya*, *amudakaraichal* are other products that can be produced by the farmers using their farm wastes, and involves no input costs. “By dint of hard work, the awareness programmes are beginning to show positive results. It is during this transition that farmers need all the support,” he reiterates.

Alongside organic farming, Hamsavel is also promoting the concept of planting trees in the villages. The most noteworthy of his efforts is the creation of local markets where farmers come together, decide the prices of their produce and sell it within themselves, without any intermediate. NESAM largely sustained by donations, is now preparing to launch a website.

Ask him how he manages the functioning of NESAM and he

immediately sprang stating, “CSIM.” “Although I got to observe the functioning of an NGO very closely, managing it myself was a herculean task. The Social Entrepreneurship course at CSIM made all the difference.”

“I was not even aware of something called 80G! NGO management seemed a whole new world to me during the course,” recalls Hamsavel who applied and got the 80G certificate right after the completion of the CSIM course. He elaborates on how donations can raise speculations among the observers. When there was a need to tap a variety of resources, he did not know how to go about it. “Through the course I came to know about institutions like NABARD and others who can be approached. CSIM helped me rediscover my field of work professionally, reintroducing it to me from the perspective of sustainability,” he says.

On approaching NABARD, NESAM was given two lakh rupees to form farmers’ clubs in the villages. The visibility received through this programme helped Hamsavel expand his network and plan new initiatives for the farmers. His focus now is to create a *uyir soozhal gramam*, translated as *an ideal village*, that which has no use of plastics, fertilisers, or pesticides. The NESAM team under him is working to establish exemplar villages in Elandampatti, Thiruvamur, Eripalayam and Thenakottai of Banrutti Taluk.

In this endeavor, he has managed to register 226 organic farmers with the Tamil Nadu government’s Department of Organic Farming. “With this certification, our farmers can export their produce anywhere,” says Hamsavel with a pride indicating his faith in natural and traditional methods of farming. Let’s wish him and our farmer’s success!

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



Social Entrepreneur from Goalpara makes it to Oxford

Little did Manjit Nath know that a public library started in memoriam of his father at his native village Agia, would culminate into a whirlwind of social change. Driven by his father's life-long passion for books and a dream to start a community library, Nath's entrepreneurial streak combined with his father's bibliophilic inclinations proved a perfect combination for the upliftment of 27,000 people from ten Gaon panchayats, with the inauguration of the 'Maheswar Nath Memorial Library' on 1st June, 2009.

Sharing the dismal state of the reading habit in the village, he says, "There wasn't even a single school library then. It was a completely new concept, so everyone looked at with doubt and

scepticism. But, we slowly began making it more people friendly by subscribing to 4 to 5 regional magazines; children enjoyed the colour and the cheer of storybooks.”

But, the turning point came when the library decided to focus on community-based initiatives. “We felt the library created a group of book-lovers of all ages and their help could be of use to help the village community through various issues. So, we started with small projects like conservation and cleanups of the rivers nearby, cleanliness initiatives and so on,” he adds.

Thus, the idea of a trust took shape. With the objective of Encourage|Enable|Evolve, MN Memorial Trust (www.mnmtrust.org) was established subsequently for which Manjit received appreciation letter from the Chief Minister of Assam and was categorically featured in The Assam Tribune. “After converting the library into a non-profit trust, I was confused at the direction it was taking and unaware of the scale of running the trust. I wanted to face these worries head-on and decided to enroll in CSIM Hyderabad’s certificate course in Social entrepreneurship. The basics of running an organization – from preparing annual reports and accounts to developing communication skills and networking helped me understand what goes into a non-profit better,” says Manjit

Proving to be a major boost, the experience of running the library helped Manjit initiate the first ever free career counseling portal (www.xomidhan.org) of Northeast India with his college senior from NIT Durgapur. ‘Xomidhan’ has catered to the needs of more than 900 students in the last 3.4 years with a volunteer counselor base of 330 subject matter experts drawn from a range of academic and industrial backgrounds. “When students want to go for different options other than the usual engineering or

medicine courses, we thought of bringing in people who are achievers in their respective fields to counsel them and answer their queries. People from over 33 disciplines have volunteered, and Xomidhan as such, has a core team of 10 people. Xomidhan, I feel, is a real solution of sorts for the current generation, we have the knowledge to connect, share and empower each other through this concept,” says Manjit who has also travelled across India as a facilitator of Tata Jagriti Yatra with the mission to awaken the entrepreneurial spirit of the Indian youth.

Manjit has always been a socially aware individual, conscious of the societal and cultural impact of Assam’s communities on the country, specifically through language. After completing his schooling from an Assamese medium Government school at Agia, Manjit first amalgamated his language skills with his technology background when he contributed to the Language Interface Pack (LIP) development of Microsoft’s Windows OS and Ms-Office. His efforts with e-Jonaki-jug (www.ejonakijug.org) and Xahitya (www.xahitya.org) usher a new era of Assamese Unicode e-literature among the netizens. The effort of team Xahitya to popularize the Assamese language via a Facebook group called ‘Axomiyat Kotha Batora’ was commended by various social media experts of Northeast India region.

Manjit has therefore, been a force to be reckoned with it when it comes to making a change from outside the government. But ask him about the power of NGOs in creating change, and he believes it has its shortcomings. “I feel when social organizations try to accomplish everything including Government’s responsibilities, the outcome is not fruitful always. For example, under e-Jonaki-Jug initiative, we appealed to Unicode Consortium for two years to give independent status to Assamese language; but not

much success until Govt. of Assam intervened. People ask me to replicate my home library model across Assam. But, I don't find this as attractive as the option of tweaking the policy for the Government's already existing Rural Library program," expresses Manjit.

The search for an alternate solution takes Manjit to some new found knowledge and a tough decision to go back to student life again. In India, policymaking is mainly controlled by the officers of administrative role, be it in central or state level. But lack of interest and domain knowledge of these seasoned administrators result in biased perspectives and outsourcing most of the activities to foreign consultancy firms. But the scenario will not be the same in coming years with more and more people like Manjit opting for Public Policy courses from reputed universities like Oxford.

"Hardly any Indian universities provide a Masters course in Public Policy, and Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government is the major policy school in Europe. Of course, the decision is a bit difficult when you are turning 29 and most of your friends are fathers. But studying in Oxford has been a long cherished dream since childhood," beams Manjit, who is vocal about his childhood experiences surrounding insurgency and his utmost love for Northeast India.

When asked about the reason behind leaving a lucrative job in Microsoft and coming back to Northeast India, Manjit expressed his desire to work in redefining the Look-East policy of Government of India. Northeast should contribute to 25 percent of India's total foreign trade and commerce, says Manjit, who has also been conferred with prestigious 'Young Engineer Award' and 'E-Northeast award-2011'.

Manjit's mother, Hiran Prova Devi who is a school teacher tells us that she is happy to see her son finally pursue his education. "For the last 2 years, he has been trying to convince me that he would get into world's top five universities one day. I was unsure how much to believe him, but I prayed to God everyday so that my son gets success," says Hiran, who is also the chief librarian of MN Memorial Library.

The first person from Northeast India to be admitted into the newly opened policy school of Oxford and to also be awarded with the highly competitive BSG-UNIV scholarship, Manjit Nath is elated at the prospect of being an Oxfordian.

But, does this new move indicate the end of a social entrepreneur?

"I don't feel so. I hope I will learn a lot of things which I can take back to the Indian government. The concept of the government entrepreneur is emerging and I wish every government department begins to function as a social enterprise," says Manjit.

An ardent advocate of using technology for good governance, Manjit believes that the policies of the government like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan lacks systematic implementation and needs a technological revamp. "In 4 to 5 years, the government will change the way it looks at people's identities – a progressive approach that exploits the best scientific knowledge out there will prevail," says a confident Manjit adding, "AADHAAR, the much debated about universal ID system is a testimony to this revolution, but what about the many concerns regarding its authenticity and loopholes? I think we're reading too much into it, everything has its initial advantages and disadvantages. If we don't experiment with the concept of technology influencing public policy right now, when will we?"

And that's exactly what Nath has in mind when he attends Oxford this September. "I'm set on the idea of an e-government. It can change the way citizens interact with the government for the better. Keeping at it and developing a model currently, I hope the idea comes to fruition," he signs off.

— *Pranjal Kalita & Divya Karthikeyan*



Sustainable Technology With A Twist

Addressing the much voiced concerns of sanitation in the Indian Railways is a Herculean effort of sorts, and clearly enterprises think twice before entering the squeamish world of toilet-revamps.

“Everyone’s day begins with the requirement of water and sanitation, so isn’t it easily the most important thing?” asks Namita, who heads Banka Biolo, a one-of-a-kind environmental enterprise that is changing the way we see the average toilet. A textile science graduate from Lady Irwin College, Delhi University and a Post Graduate in Jewellery Designing, manufacturing and appraising, Namita is a first generation entrepreneur in her family. The initial brush with the business world began with diamond

jewellery designing and manufacturing in 1999 in Surat. Wildly successful, the business continued for almost 8 years where she brought the concept of customized diamond jewellery that suited all pockets. The business was very revolutionary in the way that the dream of owning and wearing a diamond had become a reality with her clients of all strata, and making accessibility a priority is something she still continues to follow.

While pursuing a weekend certificate program in Social Entrepreneurship at Center for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) at Hyderabad in 2009, her mind opened to the wonders of social enterprise. “I came across social entrepreneurship and met people who inspired me to work towards betterment of the environment and people, and to also take it as a full-time profession. To be honest, it changed my outlook on how social enterprises work, and the faculty that we get to interact with has truly made it a turning point in my life. The primary idea that I picked up from them was the motive to connect with people and not earn from them.”

“Once we had to move to Hyderabad, I knew the existing business model of customisable diamond jewellery would not work for various reasons. So I came up with the idea of print cartridge recycling, and Cartridge Café came to being,” she says. But the idea soon went bust, as their franchisees had not marketed or supplied the products efficiently.

Acknowledging her family’s roots in the Railways, she began pursuing the Indian Railways to adopt environmental friendly solutions and services to help effectively manage their resources. A persuasive nudge got her actively working with railway officials and vendors as a liaisoner to improve the sanitation situation in the coaches by continuous monitoring and attending to the schedules

of these toilets on daily basis, all for free.

This helped in improving the once-abysmal state of CDTs (Control Discharge Toilet System) and helped her bag the tender from the Railways for two years in a row, from 2011 to 2013. “The Bio-Loo idea came to me when I started my portable toilet rental service in Hyderabad in 2011. The bio toilet is a system which degrades human waste inside the toilet’s system itself, without having to go through many processes, and the method being used is the most eco-friendly way. Being a very economical idea, it’s also customisable for homes.”

They currently cater to schools, villages, resorts, construction sites, Indian railways and industrial factories. “I learnt that DRDO has a technology which can be utilized for treatment of human waste where one need not empty the waste collection tank, which in turn helps reduce the cost of transporting and disposing the sewage form the location.” This led her to convert her firm to a corporate entity in August 2012 and with the commissions she received, took a giant leap in setting up manufacturing units for Bio loos.

Currently exploring the possibility of including water-waste management in their already fruitful model of human waste management, Namita has her mind set on revolutionising the untapped potential of effective waste management through eco-friendly technologies.

“We’re also looking at solid-waste management, but as of now it remains tough to make it happen on a large scale level. Right now, we can only work with the Sanitation department of the Government to deal with the issue on a household level.”

Her milestones include winning the Sankalp Award for Excellence

in Health, Water and Sanitation Sector, the inauguration of a bioloo project at DRDO Dhamra by the then Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh and the Kovai Outstanding achievement award for Biotechnology. Also a finalist of the Cartier Woman's Initiative awards, she represents India among 18 finalists and will contend for the award at Paris in October. As for her struggles she says, "I have received much flak for my being a woman in a Marwari household and starting an enterprise on my own. But it doesn't get to me. I think the most important thing is to not heed to the hurdles in front of you but stay focused on the overall vision that you have."

— *Divya Karthikeyan*



Dancer In The Dark

Just like a bright flame that sways in a room filled with darkness, dancer and social entrepreneur Ponni's life is dedicated to throwing light on a cause that many in a world of ignorance, shun and show indifference to. Illuminating various causes affecting the transgender community through the medium of dance is her mission.

A love for Bhartanatyam at a young age spurred Ponni to launch Abhinaya Nrithyalaya, a dance school in Vyasarpadi. With over 30 students currently enrolled at the school, Ponni and her troupe have performed throughout the state and at major metropolitan cities, even winning honours and accolades. Recalling her passion for the art at the age of 13, her admittance to a dance class in her hometown Thoothukudi was far from easy, if not for a fellow transgender individual who spotted her eagerness and aided her. "At that moment, I knew I wanted to teach children who wanted to learn the art as much as I did, but didn't have

the opportunities around them to.” After completing a Bachelor’s degree in Mathematics, she went on to earn her diploma in Bhartanatyam and began training 20 interested students at Theni, who also happened to be from the transgender community.

“A little apprehension was present because of whether the students would accept me, but they were so welcoming of me and they saw me as an artist and not as a transgender.” The dance workshop in Theni is also where Ponni met Anjali, a fellow dancer and co-founder of the dance school. “I also felt a need to brush up on my skills in order to kick start the idea of opening the school, and the diploma from CSIM helped me see an entrepreneurial side of me that I never thought I had.” She credits her knowledge of basic documentation skills, time management and her ability to communicate as the prime reasons for who she is today. As for her performances, the urge to work towards bringing about a social change predominated. “Starting out with 10 transgenders, I addressed social issues such as dowry, female infanticide. We were also probably the first to address the problems faced by transgenders in society through a time-line based performance called *‘Netru Indu Naalai’*. Though we are transgenders to the rest of the world, we see ourselves as women performers with a mission to educate and entertain.”

Ponni recounts her toughest battle to be acquiring land for her school. “The way they stare down at you and disarm you with their gaze feels like a stab in your soul. It’s demeaning and hurtful, but I realised that for all the good work that I want to do, I had to be stronger than that.” A staunch belief in the strength of character and passion for work, she believes that in the end, those qualities are what carry one through life’s ordeals—not gender, sex, or status.

To her surprise, the Tamil Nadu Industrial Investment Corporation came forward with a loan to help her launch the school and everything gradually fell into place. Other issues that still stand in the way are the mindsets of parents whose children are eager to join her class. “Some never come back; some ask me a lot of questions—there is still an air of hesitation and apprehension. I give them the benefit of the doubt by asking them to observe my class, and patiently answer all their questions. Patience and not anger is what will help destroy preconceived notions about any community that has been misunderstood by society.”

Radiating optimism, she exclaims, “We are getting many queries on classes and performances and we’re overjoyed by how easily people are welcoming our initiative.” Citing this openness a wonderful improvement from the reception to the community 10 years ago, Ponni says that the school’s public performances have emphasised on the importance of parents accepting a transgendered child for what he or she is, and shifting the idea of ‘transgender’ as a primary identity.

Horror stories of forced sex-work are still recurrent and Ponni feels it is her responsibility to make sure that the community is known for so much more than just their hurdles. “Not only will healthy attitudes of society and family help their inter-personal relationships, but also steer them in the right direction where they can go on to become empowered individuals. Some families have embraced their children for who they are, some have still yet a long way to go, but we received a startlingly heartfelt response for *‘Netru Indru Naalai’* with audience members hugging their parents and reminiscing on the abuse and anger they faced. At the end of an emotionally-charged performance, all that remained was forgiveness and acceptance - just like the calm after a storm.”

Opening more dance schools and performing at many more venues are currently on the agenda. The school's existence has also drastically improved the surrounding neighbourhood's idea of the transgender community. However, Ponni feels the current government needs to be more co-operative and encouraging of schemes to help the transgender community as a whole. "We also help fellow transgenders get voter ID cards and spread as much awareness as we can of schemes that can help them empower themselves. Just as any other citizen, we have the right to vote and own land and the government can really help further our cause by implementing more schemes and laws that work to our favour."

— *Divya Karthikeyan*



Earn And Learn: Paving The Way For High Productivity

A humble, quaint, two-roomed office, situated in the middle of a street littered with houses, shops and even chickens, exudes positivity and hope for the youth of Tindivanam, a town in Villupuram district of Tamilnadu. Over the recent years, productivity among youth has taken precedence in the country's affairs, be it in small towns or metropolitan cities.

With much anticipation and a negligible amount of struggle, I reached the office and was welcomed by a composed yet enthusiastic man who, along with 9 trustees, founded Ellorkum Ellam Educational Trust, an organisation that predominantly aims to provide education and work to unemployed youth of the town. The trust also focuses on education and awareness of organic farming and lucrative farming techniques across villages in the state. Targeted at young men and women between the ages of 18-25 years, Ellorkum Ellam (which in English

translates to, 'Everything for everyone') Trust is the brainchild of Dr.Seenuvasan. An enterprising individual by nature, he founded the trust in 2011 after he completed a certificate course by CSIM in Social Entrepreneurship at his hometown. Earlier, he had earned his Bachelors degree in Mathematics and went on to pursue a Masters in Computer Science, after which he successfully completed and received a Doctorate in Sociology. Apart from running the trust, he is also the Head of Department of Computer Science at a local college. Crediting his participation in various college councils such as N.C.C and N.S.S for providing the drive to take up social work, he staunchly believes that occupying oneself in productive work at almost all times is pivotal to the growth and development of one's personality and self-image. "There exist many distractions and missed opportunities which stand a nagging testimony of under-utilised or even, untapped potential among youngsters. My trust aims to make youth independent and stand on their own two feet through the method of earning while learning." Simple yet handy skills like DTP work, candle making, printing banners and servicing computers are taught at the trust on a daily basis. These skills, most popularly, binding are all taught to differently-abled people as well, and the marketing of the finished goods are taken care of by the trust.

Over 100 ably skilled students have been produced, and approximately 70 of them have been employed in companies or have started their own businesses across different cities. "Our educational trust doesn't intend to be an intermediary between a rich, established person and an economically disadvantaged student. Self-sustenance is the key. Momentarily providing money is not the answer. Teaching skills that will help one earn for a lifetime, is." Awareness on organic farming and basic farming methods is also on the agenda. The trust visited villages and

co-operative banks, surveyed various accessible schemes with zero interest, and propagated awareness of low cost, high yield variety seeds among farmers. Ellorkum Ellam also worked with NABARD to establish Farmer's Clubs in 8 different villages. As of now, Seenuvasan intends on establishing a teaching institute at Mailam, his native village. 42 skills that will be taught at the institute are awaiting permission for certification at the village's District Industrial Centre (DIC).

When asked if he scouts for donations, he answers, "We have made sure that we work with the resources that we have. That we don't have to ask anyone for funds to run our trust. Hopefully, we will not require funding from external sources. However, many have suggested that we must be open to accepting donations and make an active effort to scout for them as we need to leave room for expansion in the future." Seenuvasan is also dealing with the drawback of students readily assuming that their earning capacity nullifies their need to study, but keeping to the trust's motto of employment with education, the trust collaborated with distance education institutions such as Prist University, Tamilnadu Open University, CMT, Alagappa and Vinayaka Mission University to make sure the point of education isn't lost. Regular or distance, mode doesn't matter to him. "As long as they don't abandon their education", he reiterates.

As for the female demographic, many women students take an active interest in activities like basket-weaving, lovebird-rearing, mat-weaving and making items that beautify a house. They are given the liberty of fixing their own rate and the products are then sold to residents and fellow students in the locality. A total of 17 women students are aided by the trust, and the number only seems to be growing by the day.

Relationships with family and friends assume dominance at this stage, and for many teenagers, the susceptibility of getting caught in a whirlwind of distractions increases. The likelihood of this throwing them off balance is countered with Seenuvasan's timely intervention. His constant motivation and unwavering attention to each student provides an impetus to work on oneself, realistically evaluate one's priorities and take responsibility for one's life.

"I place an immense amount of faith on my students. A couple of them have keys to the office and are welcome to work, rest or study here whenever they please. However, I make sure that they do not work during the time of examinations. Combining both work and exams can prove to be disastrous, as a student does justice to neither." Many youth are recruited from this trust to service computers and provide technical assistance, and are paid an amount for their services.

The option of donating a fraction of their earnings to the trust is never mandatory, but open. Not surprisingly, students choose to donate out of their own will. "I have never made it a necessity to donate money to our trust, if anything, I have only emphasised on the importance of donation by teaching a new skill or two to our students." But recently, students have been donating an amount towards the trust from their earnings. "It is not the monetary returns that give me satisfaction, but their loyalty and trust in me that I see as true gratitude." Ultimately, their gratitude and solidarity are the real returns, and as he illustrates, can never be too difficult to earn. A student with a playful personality is hardly a deterrent for Seenuvasan, as he treats his students like his own children and combines a good dose of patience, assertiveness and dedication to drive the importance of education home.

The importance of good old struggle and hard-earned money serve

as everyday reminders for these youth, along with bright posters brimming with positive one-liners plastered onto dull blue walls, quite a metaphor in its own right. Seenuvasan gives me a tour of the trust, and we enter a narrow, rectangular room that resembles a computer lab, where the hour-old memory of children huddled over a computer to learn a new programming language still lingers. He proudly explains that all the six CPUs in the computer lab have been built from scratch by his own students with scraps from at least 6-7 different systems. “I don’t believe in the word ‘waste’. Nothing is a waste. I make use of every resource available to prove that ‘waste’ can never exist.” He then leads me to the entrance of his office where on either side lies a small typewriter at the corner, generously bathed in sunlight streaming through a window netted with cobwebs. “We are soon going to start typing classes, once I order three more typewriters from Panruti. I am currently arranging the money for the purchases and 40 students are expected to attend our class”, he says. The gleam of zeal and enthusiasm in his eyes is a clear indicator that the road ahead for Ellorkum Ellam trust is that of a milestone filled one, and strong support is foreseeable for Seenuvasan’s passionate endeavour of reforming the youth.

— *Divya Karthikeyan*



On Troubled Waters

For most kids, playing with water is a source of delight. The very thought of rains, puddles or pools, river banks or beaches, the sound of water and the sheer joy of splashing, spraying, drenching or floating in it is enough to lift one's spirits off a nasty exam or a lengthy homework to do. Well, what happens when the childish craze of water turns into a deep love of one's life? We are about to find out from the story of I H Sekhar. A hereditary fisherman and one of the precious few water conservationists in Chennai city, Sekhar has dedicated his life towards the reversal of water exploitation in the ECR belt, starting southwards from his ancestral locality of Injambakkam.

At 56 years old, Sekhar's enthusiasm and cheer belies his age as he speaks of his love for water. "Since my childhood I have been in love with water. I have bathed in every pond in my locality and have spent the greater part of my childhood playing by the sea. In fact, when I was little and would often disappear for a long time

from home, my mother would send people out to search at the ponds in our area, almost sure that I must have drowned to death,” chuckles he, adding that “water is very important to me. I strongly believe that anybody who messes with water would have to deal with divine fury”, a tinge of seriousness taking over in his tone as he speaks so.

While doing odd jobs in his early youth and serving as a boatman on his father’s traditional ‘*maasila padagu*’, a massive boat laboriously manned by 25 men, Sekhar slowly groomed himself to be the typical son of the family, working towards paying for his sisters’ weddings and taking care of his parents when they took ill. Simultaneously, he started the Injambakkam Village Help Association as a reaction to the rising sand-smuggling and ground-water contamination in the area. With excessive sand removal from the once dune-laden beaches, the sea water soon seeped into the ground water table, making it unfit for agriculture (irrigation) in the surrounding areas. Sekhar says around 33 acres of arable land were lost due to this problem, back in the 1990’s. Unwarranted land occupancy was another issue that irked Sekhar and he appealed for an order from the government to restrict them. In the ensuing fight with the system and also with the anti-social elements that occupied prime lands on the sea-shores, Sekhar missed the bus to getting settled in a regular family-life. Although he had plans to go abroad and even get married there, his die-hard love for water kept him firmly bound to home and hearth.

In 2007 Sekhar joined the certificate course on social entrepreneurship at CSIM and from there his efforts got direction, focus and clarity. “CSIM helped me place my feet firmly in the work that I so loved, that I am forever indebted to them” he says cheerfully. He attributes his motivation to Mrs. Sudha

Ramalingam and says it was Mrs. Latha Suresh, CSIM Director that laid the foundation for Nature Trust, an organization that he founded in 2007 that works on garbage disposal, creating fish-habitats and on cleaning of water-bodies.

When he is not fighting against illegal occupancy and water contamination, he is coordinating sapling planting drives, pond-cleaning sprees, gardening and adding speed-breakers to the accident-prone ECR. Getting a little nostalgic, he recollects caring for his mother who in her later stages of life had suffered from critical ill health. “My mother always said that being born as a woman is too difficult. It moved me and I learnt how to cook and do every household chore so that my mother could get to relax a little. I was very fond of her,” says he nostalgically.

“As I was engaging in difficult fights with the system, my beliefs and actions were looked upon as taboo by my own relatives. They even today try to keep their children away from me for fear that I might have an ‘influence’ on them,” says Sekhar. “Of course, they do not know that their children in fact love their Uncle and often sneak a hearty chat with me and even offer to help me whenever I am in need,” he says adding that, “I do not need much. I earn and spend my earnings on my pet projects, such as the Gandhi statue that I had installed and inaugurated in our locality by former president of India Dr. Venkatraman.”

Sekhar says, “My fish habitats require very little money to invest in. I regularly interact with my neighbours and even with strangers and foreigners. These leisurely chats are the escapades into my distant dream of going to America.”

Dreams hardly take his eyes off the 25 tanks that he is presently aiming to conserve, out of which 10 have already been retrieved

from an almost irreparable state to a functioning state. His aim is also to save water bodies that lie in the stretch of Kottivaakkam to Mahabalipuram, a distance of about 40 kms. Sekhar lives in his own house, but spends a greater part of his time at a neighbour's, whose family and their lush green backyard provides enough care and company to this lone fighter.

Armed with historical knowledge of Injambakkam, of which his family is one of seven original settlers, Sekhar's pride and sense of belonging to his homestead is admirable. How can a conversation with this man of the sea be complete without a mention of the tsunami?

Pat comes the answer, "I am thankful for the tsunami!" Perplexed, one waits for his explanation and he says how difficult it was earlier to convince people of the bane of sand smuggling. It was later proven that those areas where the sand dunes remained untouched were left with very little damage, whereas water did break in and plunder into the areas where sand was disturbed. From the aftermath of Tsunami, my community started placing some faith in my words and have shown greater cooperation towards my initiatives."

"What are we doing to our beautiful land?" he laments, "Who can live without water? How can we be so foolish as to contaminate the very elixir of life on this planet?" He carries on fighting against squanderers and conmen, trying to build a new relationship between people and Mother Nature. His spirit undying, his previous records encouraging, there is hardly any doubt that he will reach his milestones with time. We salute!

— *Archanna.R*



On the winding road uphill

Spanning a width of 80 kilometers and a length of 32 kilometers, and covering major portions of three districts of the state of Tamil Nadu are the mighty Javvadu Hills. Pristine and blessed with nature's bounty, these hills are a source of rich vegetation and forestry. This region is home to one of the oldest tribal communities —the Malai Gounder or Malayaali tribe. This is a community that lives by the customs and traditions that are centuries old. Working with this community and those around the Javvadu hills is Senthil Kumar, a young entrepreneur cum social worker.

Senthil Kumar, along with five of his friends established Kalaimagal Rural People's Educational Development Trust (KRPED) in 1999, when he was barely 21 years old. This trust aimed to provide educational support for the children living in Chengam at Thiruvannamalai District. Soon after the trust started its operations, the trustees decided to expand its horizons and

work with the tribal communities as well.

“With the commission of the Kuppanatham Dam, about a thousand acres of land were taken away from the local people after giving them very little compensation. We decided that it was time for us to work with the hillside communities and so started a youth club and a women’s association. Through these, we facilitated the issuing of community certificates and other identity cards to enable these communities avail government facilities. We also set up a day-care centre for the elderly at Oorgavundanur Taluk, in response to the increasing abandonment of the elderly in the hills. After a two-year struggle, we enabled issue of 340 community certificates to the people here. This is a big success for us,” explains an enthusiastic Senthil.

It was in 2009 that Senthil and his friends came to know about CSIM. Senthil joined the Certificate programme in Social Entrepreneurship at CSIM and travelled the arduous six hour journey every weekend to attend classes. “Until I had joined CSIM, work would appear to be going on, but it was largely in a swirl. After joining CSIM, we were able to provide a better structure for our activities. Those were indeed a highly useful four months,” says Senthil.

Soon thereafter, KRPED’s activities became concentrated on three main thematic areas—Health, Agriculture and Education. On the health front, Senthil says, the KRPED works on the eradication of tuberculosis, and to provide greater and free access to general health care to the people of Chengam.

KRPED started the Mahatma Gandhi Uzhavar mandram (farmers’ association) to promote organic farming. Through this forum, drip irrigation set ups were purchased that were worth Rs. 42,000,

and in 2013, shortly after Pongal festival, an exposure visit was planned for the farmers.

On the education front, awareness programs on Right to Education Act, various adult literacy programs, and evening schools have been started.

One of the most significant contributions of Senthil and his team at KRPEd has been the introduction of income-generation programs (IGPs) for the tribal communities. After three years of laborious discussions and study of the local markets, KRPEd has introduced tamarind plucking and honey-extraction as IGPs to select groups of women. Senthil, who himself is a trained honey-collector works closely with the forest authorities and local people to achieve parity in income-generation programs. He says: “Ms. Beulah, a well-respected professional in Chennai encouraged and sponsored my training in honey-extraction.” Having already seen success in this endeavour through putting up stalls and catering to some local clients, this business is now gearing up for honey export to countries like Sri Lanka, where the demand for high medicinal value of honey (especially that of the rich Javvadhu Hills) is already at a pinnacle.

Conducting his business of bleaching powder distributorship by day and working with the hillside tribal people at night, Senthil juggles a very hectic routine. Certainly it would require a tremendous amount of support from family. Senthil answers in the affirmative, “It was my father, a retired government servant himself, who advised me to start this Trust. Today I have a son who is studying in the ninth standard and this Trust has become my life’s mission.”

In another strain he says, “Even my business serves as a kind of

social awareness and it helps me to maintain great relationships with the Panchayat Presidents of different Panchayats in this region.”

The KRPED office has five full time staff and five volunteers. The day care centre for the elderly engages the elders in some form of work to keep them out of boredom. The Trust ensures that the government hears out and answers their requests from time to time. It is not easy to be working in the hills among people whose practices are outdated, with no transport facilities, no electricity supply, and sometimes, no food either.

We ask Senthil what are his plans for the future and he says, “We are planning to garner more financial support for the elderly day care center; start more evening schools and promote honey-marketing in Chennai. We are evolving as the communities around us evolve. Communities are dynamic and we would be doing them a disservice if we stuck to a specific agenda. It is by example that we can liberate these communities from the shackles of their resistance to change.”

Plenty of fascinating stories, nostalgic recollections, and resolute plans later, we draw this conversation to a close. Senthil marches on, pushing himself further and further in his uphill tasks, only to prove to himself and others yet again that: ‘where there is a will, there sure is a way’.

— *Archanaa R.*



On A Journey To Inform

Motivated by an insatiable passion for teaching and an abundant love for children, A. Sethu Pathi aims to transform Villupuram district with his mission to educate. His brainchild, Cross Trust, works towards providing a holistic learning experience for drop-outs and children who are forced out of school to provide for the family. When his 25-year tryst with teaching at the RC Middle School ended, his desire to transform the state of receiving quality education in the quaint villages of his district began. “I saw the interest to learn rapidly dwindle amongst the children of parents I had taught at the school. They wanted their children to earn quick money, and providing education is clearly a long-term investment, an idea that is conveniently discarded without thought,” he shares.

Sethu Pathi also laments on the complete lack of concern for the futures of these children, with parents completely abhorring the idea of a life outside rearing the family’s livestock and settling

down to have children. “There’s so much ignorance. These children can grow up to become police officers, doctors, software engineers and teachers – the options are endless. But it seems like everything has been decided for them already and as a result, they think education is not going to change their present state.”

He recounts the first few days of his starting the trust as getting drop-outs and unemployed youths who’d failed their 10th standard board exams from their houses and driving them to school on his trusty bicycle. “I tell them time and again, that if they put their mind to something, they can truly achieve it. That they shouldn’t give up easily. The problem with some of the children, who fail their board exams, is that they think that their life or education abruptly ends. All they need to do is brush up on their knowledge of Science and Mathematics, and that’s it. They pass. That’s all there is to it.”

Is this lackadaisical attitude also generously coated with laziness? “Definitely, but I don’t think anyone is inherently lazy. Children who I dragged out of houses to study can work hard. Why not others?”

But what was the driving force behind taking up the issue as a social cause and setting up a trust? “One can sit there and endlessly complain about various issues while filling their pockets. But only few can take that money and concern and put it to good use by addressing that complaint they feel so dearly about. I wanted to be one of the few.”

Awarded the Ambedkar Fellowship in 2002, being a part of the relief teams that provided food and water to those stricken by the 2004 tsunami also spurred him to take on social work on a fulltime basis. The 2005 start-up has helped over 108 students

between 5-14 years realise their dreams and has also brought about a holistic environment of learning. Teachers at the trust's five centres are paid Rs.1,000 and their water, electricity and transport expenses are taken care of by the trust.

While the mornings of these children are jam-packed with school activities, Sethu decided to make their evenings fun yet educational by holding classes which instilled a sense of morals and values in them through games and enjoyable discussions.

“Apart from this, we also hold career counselling sessions for the brothers and sisters of the school children. We also encourage widows at the village to pursue further education and provide them an alternate means of employment on the side. We direct uniform orders to these women through the district collector from government schemes that provide school uniforms to children in Chennai.” Another unique initiative that is set to grow to a larger scale is their free AIDS Counselling for couples. “The idea actually came about when we first started sticking these notices on AIDS at Vanalur which detailed the amount of stigma that patients had to go through. A couple then came to me and I explained to them that there was nothing to be ashamed of. Helping them with their treatment and employment, we gradually integrated them into society and now, you look at them and you wouldn't even know they were affected by HIV.”

He counts CSIM to be of major help with his initiatives. “I had low confidence levels and questioned my abilities, but on studying at CSIM, I realised that anyone can help others if they have a selfless and good heart. Other valuable lessons like how an NGO should function and going about projects and proposals help me till date. One of my proudest moments was when I received my PG Diploma certificate.” Opening 5 more centres, working with

government schools and considering the idea of tuition centres, Sethu Pathi's cause to educate and empower is far from seeing its end.

“Until I see every child educated and employed and most of all, happy, I will not tire. And most of all, I will never give up on any child who wants to learn, no matter what his report card says.”

— *DivyaKarthikeyan*



Out Of The Box, But In The Best Shape

Of late, it is almost a trend to see graduates opting for a career that is completely unrelated to their subject of study. How good that is might be a topic for introspection. Yet, the motivating factor or concern behind this decision has introduced us to many a social entrepreneur, time and again surfacing the myriad issues that need attention.

Here is a commerce graduate from Delhi University, who went on to do three years of articleship training in Chartered Accountancy, in spite of realizing that accounts was not his forte. “It was my dad’s dream. I was never interested in accounts. It is too dry,” says Mr Shantnu Tandon, Founder, Oorja Foundation. “I somehow believed that Chartered Accountancy meant advising people about their money. Some of them might be advising unethical ways of doing so. Oh, it was so dreadful,” he quickly adds, his looks and voice convincing you of his dislike for the subject.

His repeated failures in clearing CA exams struck a chord with him. “This is not where I want to be,” he said to his father and started appearing for competitive examinations. On clearing the exam for General Insurance Corporation, he was, strangely, back to square one. “Yes, I was back to square one! Post six months of training in Chennai, I was posted with United India Assurance in Bhatinda, Punjab, as Accounts Head for Divisional Office. It was not a pleasing ambience at all,” says Shantnu.

“One year in a government department office was time enough to drive you insane, worse so when you dislike the job,” recalls Shantnu. Retired parents and being the eldest son, the pressure on him is apparent. Even after two years of unemployment, he was sure of doing something creative. “My best friend helped me enroll in a computer course at NIIT in 1991. I thoroughly enjoyed the two years here, and was amazed at the magical feeling creative thinking and arts inculcated.” After working for over two years as a Programmer with HCL, he moved to Canada. “This was time for me to have an experience of working abroad. I worked in Canada for over three years and later moved to USA and engaged in doing Consultancy for Software Development.”

“The experience in USA raised a volley of questions in my mind. I started reflecting on instances around me. On deputation for a project with GE Aircraft Engines, I was appalled at the discrimination meted out to non-Americans. I felt our people worked like sheep and goats only for a few dollars,” says he. Back in India in 1999, his job hunting landed him at Oracle University as Tech – Trainer. “I was pursuing my passion only now. I was going to do what was close to my heart— Teaching!” he adds.

Shantnu has surprises in the immediate statements after this. Extensive travelling in the four years with Oracle drained all his

energy in technology, but his interest in teaching multiplied. No, he did not quit this time, but decided to take an internal transfer to the managerial cadre. In 2003, he headed the Employee Training Division on software & soft skills, in Hyderabad and after eight years the ladder to head the Technical Training did not comfort him though.

All this while, his search for something went on without the knowledge on what it was. “Every time, the realization that this was not it, came haunting. I wanted something more meaningful. I started feeling that I’m wasting my energy trying to bring already overfed people to the dining table,” says Shantnu, who started thinking of leaving the corporate sector. His exploration began. His decision to teach in Zilla Parishad schools before office hours helped him understand the stark reality in the grassroots. Teaching children transformed his ideas.

“Teaching is so different, in that, it allowed me think differently in every class. I liked it, and soon, fell in love with this process. This was it, may be. I wanted to help people devoid of opportunities due to multiple reasons,” he is bang with energy recalling this part of his life. Shantnu understood that reality and the discussion in closed cabins were far apart, and decided to get into formal teaching in a full swing. Lack of experience made him apprehensive and his confidence levels were low.

“Thank God, CSIM happened to me at this point. It was bizarre to me at first. How can someone teach me passion? Questions and doubts arose within me. The SEOP programme in 2009 helped me tremendously. It put me along with likeminded people and this made a world of difference. I was no longer among a group that ridiculed social sector initiatives, but instead discussed it extensively, clearing even an iota of doubt. CSIM showed me the

direction that I was unable to identify,” says Shantnu.

For Shantnu, Social Entrepreneurship is his best lesson from the course. “It outwits charity based model and that excited me. I could find an immediate connect with this term,” he says.

The fact that a development initiative without eyeing on profit that can be administered as a professional enterprise, with its own ways and means of sustenance gave him all the confidence he needed. “Soon after I completed the CSIM course in September 2009, I registered OORJA FOUNDATION in Hyderabad. We are four years young now and I can proudly claim that the journey has moved on with no funds requested for,” he smiles.

Even before you ask how, he sputters his response. “Teaching is not capital intensive, so it worked.”

He did face a challenge in managing the inflow of volunteers, whose ad hoc teaching got the project’s purpose nowhere. At this juncture, he framed some basic rules for volunteers with Oorja. No casual visits were encouraged and a minimum commitment for two consecutive months was expected. Eventually, the foundation was able to host few, but very talented and passionate volunteers, who made a difference to the work in their own style. By and by, the team decided to work for providing ‘professional educational services for the children, who, for some reasons do not get access to quality education’.

“The idea behind all these efforts is to bring these kids on a level playing field, by making subjects interesting and comprehensible. The regular text books might not be adequate enough to reach the children from underprivileged communities. Our solutions are only an attempt to make sure that their love for learning is met with appropriately,” says a modest Shantnu. Their programmes

on offer are ‘**English Express**’ and ‘**Discovery Club**’ which aim at giving a strong foundation in Communicative English and analytical skills, using quizzing approach. This also provides for a smooth transition for students from local mediums. “Our investment in development of a course curriculum has now reached a stable state, from where it can be scaled up,” says he, who decided to quit Oracle in 2012 to step into full time teaching.

For Shantnu, this journey has not been easy, yet very satisfying. With no regrets for his decisions, he continues to be amazed by the difference passion and knowledge can make. While the present focus is to reach as many students as possible in the rural and urban fold through partnerships, Shantnu is very much clear about his future plan too. He wants Oorja to diversify – develop a curriculum to help illiterate people achieve functional literacy.

The word says it all – OORJA means energy. The energy of this small team is sure to make learning a much better experience for children deprived of quality education.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



New Face To The Age Old Work

Here is the story of someone who has once again proved that nurturing individuals in an atmosphere of concern for the poor and excluded can empower the society. Ms. Vanitha Chinnasamy, Founder Trustee, Aanand Charitable Trust, Chennai recalled all her observations of her parents and grandparents who were into charity for a long time. “Being in medical profession, they were able to adjudge the need for extra care and help for those who cannot afford or comprehend all the treatment procedures,” remarks Vanitha, who felt that her family’s work was largely adhoc, unorganized and could make a greater impact if implemented in a systematic manner. Here lies the foundation of this trust.

Hailing from Andhra Pradesh, her academic credentials are spread across three disciplines – Public Administration, Social Work, and Law. She completed her Master’s Degree in Public Administration in Andhra Pradesh. Her relocation to Chennai after marriage did affect her social interests in terms of getting started with a formal

set up. Nevertheless, she always kept her channels open for learning. She attended a number of Diploma courses, participated in various seminars and workshops, all of which sharpened her idea of starting her own non-profit organization. During the same time, her engagements in multiple initiatives earned her the membership with Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), Red Cross, Human Rights groups, Lions Club, Helpage India and many others.

Interestingly, Vanitha completed her masters in Social Work and the degree in Law only a few years back, after her children joined college and she does not regret the big gap post her wedding. “It gave me quality time to prepare myself to do what I have always wanted to do,” she says. With the support of her husband and family, she began with her family’s forte – organizing medical camps in rural areas. This gave her the confidence to start her own social enterprise and led to the establishment of the Trust in 2007. “All things fell into place just after I returned from my holy land,” she smiles.

Vanitha came to know about CSIM through a friend and underwent the four-month Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme. “I was encouraged and given opportunities to know more people in the social work sector. I participated in structured fundraising programmes like Battle of the Buffet and this helped me to raise funds for my organisation.” The idea of her own trust was strongly backed by her observations of people being exploited in the process of serving them, defeating the very purpose of such groups coming into existence. “Such scenes disturbed me and I decided to start something on my own to reach out to people who are in need,” she says. Her observations reveal a very intimidating scene. Some organizations that have earned a reputation for themselves and

are resource-rich were found to exploit the vulnerability of their beneficiaries. This is what Prof Robert Chambers, a development thinker and Father of participatory methods, went on to term as ‘programme and people biases’. Beneficiaries of a successful programme are repeatedly contacted to popularize the initiative, while those affected by any situation (like, drought in case of farmers, or failure of an initiative) are saturated with interviews on their struggles.

Vanitha seems to be extremely wary about institutions that just come around to take the stories from people here and walk away. “There is a lot of work going on at multiple levels. Yet, the change we all dream of seems to be distant. This calls for effective monitoring at the grassroot level,” she emphasizes. Every time she went for the camps or other programmes, she had insisted the people to participate in different programmes and gift themselves a new opportunity.

Aanand Charitable Trust, located in Padi at Chennai, focuses on women, children and the aged. Inspired by Vanitha’s work, many of her friends and onlookers have come forward to support the Trust. Children come to the centre for studying in the evening; they also attend the training programmes organized periodically – on personality development and other soft skills. Those found eligible for sponsorships are also helped with. The drop out students are counseled and encouraged to get back to school, with help if required.

Vanitha feels that the platform provided by CSIM is the main reason behind what Aanand Charitable Trust is today. “CSIM has given us that visibility which we ourselves might not have been able to create. Wherever we go, donors and other friends know about us and come forward to devise programmes for our

beneficiaries.” Presently, there are 60 children who are supported regularly by our centre. Their educational, medical and other expenses are maintained through contributions sourced from individuals. The Trust office maintains a record for every child, and updates details related to progress in education/ vaccinations/ medical treatment.

More than 400 women have benefitted from the medical camps organized by the trust. In the recent medical camp that reached out to 200 people, 13 cataract operations were administered free of cost and 45 pairs of spectacles have been distributed. The camps organized in collaboration with Dental Foundation were also a success, distributing kits to more than 150 people. “Besides contribution from friends and other donors what is more encouraging for us is to see people like you and me coming forward to celebrate birthdays, wedding anniversaries and other family occasions with us,” remarks Vanitha who makes it a point to celebrate birthdays of women and children at the centre, with special invitees on board, eventually turning out to contribute for the Trust’s work.

Simple and consistent efforts from her side are only complemented by her belief that genuine work will always find its way out. “It just has to go through the grind and the system,” says Vanitha.

Vanitha has a dream very close to her heart – establishing a home for the aged in Hyderabad, where her parents were running a clinic several years ago. She is also convinced about introducing the co-existence of paid and unpaid services model in this home so that the maintenance charges are met through internal sourcing of funds.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*

*This section features interviews with
inspiring personalities who are involved in
Social Work*

INSPIRING CONVERSATIONS



“If I am what I am, it is nothing unique. This is how a normal human being is supposed to be.”

Dr. Christodas Gandhi, IAS (Retd.) is a true follower of our Great Leader Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. During his tenure as an Administrator, he did an excellent awakening service in ameliorating the poor SC/ST's more particularly the entrepreneurial youths and budding youngsters.

He has held several portfolios, including that of Additional Chief Secretary/ Development Commissioner, Planning and Development Department; Collector of Erode District; and Chairman and Managing Director of Tamil Nadu Energy Development Agency.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Christodas Gandhi IAS tells Marie Banu about his passion for the scheduled caste communities.

A senior IAS officer, you have been known as a very honest and simple person. Who is your role model?

My father, Thiru. M. Ramdas (Retd. Superintendent of Police), Vallalar, Valluvar, and my wife Tmt. Qudsia Begum influenced my simplicity, while being majestic. For my father's stature, he could have admitted his children in any big convent. But, three of us studied in Trichy Seva Sangam School, an institution run for orphans. We had fantastic teachers and teaching was under thatched roof in the company of a peer group that consisted of all sections of people. My wife, Qudsia, gave me all practical lessons of Islamic equity. Humility in high stature is what I imbibed from these personalities.

My father taught me how to treat all people equal. He taught us what needed to be taught; not academics, but human values and human rights. My wife taught me how to treat servants as family members. My intense interaction with schedule caste communities and other deprived communities, and human rights NGOs might have also taught me how to be upright and establish people's rights. I owe my thanks to them.

If I am what I am, it is nothing unique. This is how a normal human being is supposed to be. Abnormalities only need special acculturation.

Can you please share a memorable incident during your tenure as Collector of Erode District with our readers?

During my tenure as Collector of Erode District, there was an issue related to land allocation for construction of 60 group houses

for the scheduled caste families in Chennimalai. When I visited the selected site, I found the land to be low-lying and situated near a lake, whereas 10 acres of *poromboake* land was available in an elevated area in the adjoining location. I realized that the local caste forces did not want the scheduled caste community members to be allocated a place that is of higher worth. I insisted that the elevated land be allocated for construction and returned to office.

The very next day, all the 60 beneficiaries visited my office and requested me to allow them construct their homes in the low-lying land.

I stood firm in my decision, and told the beneficiaries to go in confidence and construct the homes in the allocated piece of land. Now, they have constructed their homes and are living better lives here.

Being a socially conscious person, what are the issues that you are concerned of?

I am concerned about the schedule caste communities. I feel that the only social problem that hinders growth, creates discriminating attitude in the community, and leads to violence is—the discrimination shown against schedule castes. The others are only matters of differences, like for instance, between a man and a woman; disabled and normal; and elderly and young - for which there are sympathetic takers.

If our country learns to provision equity to SC/STs, then we will know how to deal with other social problems. Else, we will only be indulging in slurry of table-dressing for any other social issues.

Constitutionally, discrimination has been abolished. But,

bureaucracy needs to do more proactive deeds and enforce constitutional mandates. Even officers belonging to the scheduled caste are afraid of taking up this issue as they feel weak and fear of being victimized. This is a challenging subject for any bureaucrat.

The Tribal communities have been living a hard way of life over the years. When do you see their lives progressing?

Since 1996, I have been visiting remote tribal places in Tamil Nadu that were far away from civilization. They lived a self-contained and dignified life; a life of their own. What they lost was education, which was one of the reasons why they were pushed behind.

Tribals are peace loving and confident people. They are the most hospitable people and not hostile to anyone. The introduction of Forest Act and other forest regulations have totally alienated tribals from their homesteads and their free lifestyle. This forced bondage over them for over a century without caring for their livelihood had caused severe problems. 70,000 to 1 lakh acres of land need to be restored to tribals under the Scheduled Tribes Forest Rights Act 2006.

However, I am happy to find tremendous change and prosperity coming into their life in the last ten years or so. What they need more is self-determination and autonomy of growth. I am confident that tribals in Tamil Nadu will become the richest in the neighbourhoods in the near future. Irulars have a special place in my heart.



“If you are ready to donate food, then prepare fresh food and give it to them. This is charity!”

Dr. Chef Damodaran is the first Indian to have received a doctorate in hotel management and catering technology. He is also the holder of Guinness Record for Longest Cooking Marathon.

He has been drafted by the social welfare department to provide healthy, lip-smacking food to children in State Government and Corporation Schools. With the government introducing variety rice and dishes made of pulses and vegetables in the menu, Chef Damodaran provides training to noon meal cooks and helps them to add spice to the lunch served to the students.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Chef Damodaran shares with Marie Banu about his passion for cooking.

As an internationally acclaimed chef, when did you realize

that you had a passion for cooking?

I started cooking when I was seven years old. One day, when my mother went out, I cooked *uppuma*. It got stuck to the *kadai* and I got a good spanking from my mother when she returned. At that time, we only had kerosene pump stove and firewood stove, and used mud pots, bronze and aluminium vessels.

I used to wonder why my mother and my aunt spent over two hours in the kitchen just to cook *sambhar* and *potato masala*. They used to get tired after cooking just two dishes, which would not even be good. My inner mind always wanted to do something for this.

When I joined BSc Chemistry at Presidency College in Chennai, I told my father that I wanted to do Catering Management. My mother was against it as she wanted me to finish my graduation. I convinced her, and joined Institute of Hotel Management Catering Technology and Applied Nutrition at Taramani in Chennai.

Can you please share your learning experience in Institute of Hotel Management? Was your career path easy?

I had a lot of interest to bring about innovation in kitchen and had an opportunity to work part-time at Hotel Sudarshan International (now Ambassador Pallava). I started making mocktails and fruit salads and was also involved in outdoor catering. I observed a lot of things, learnt how to spread a buffet, and even tasted a few dishes without the knowledge of the hoteliers. We used to serve the Indian cricket team when Kapil Dev was Captain. I was thrilled to see VIPs while I was still studying, and felt happy to have the opportunity to serve them.

When I was pursuing my third year of Catering Management, Mr.

Aravind Saraswath, Executive Chef of Taj Coromandel was my examiner. He asked the recipe for a dish that I prepared and said that it was not the actual procedure that is usually adopted. He appreciated me and I scored 147/150.

After a year, I joined Taj in Chennai. The Executive Chef from Ashoka Hotel in Bangalore visited Taj and after tasting my food asked me to join his hotel. During this period, I earned maximum and also did my best. I was happy when customers called me from the kitchen to give me money as a token of appreciation for my food.

I joined Sangam Hotel in Trichy as Executive Chef cum F&B Manager. I did a lot of innovation here. In 1986 I got married and had to return to Chennai. I joined Asan Catering College as Vice-Principal. I always had the ambition to create a record and worked hard for six years to achieve my goal. I moved on to be the Principal of MGR Institute of Hotel Management and worked for over 17 years.

About your Guinness record?

I wanted to set a Guinness record and worked on it for over two years. For this, I required 24 lakh rupees, and could only source sponsorship of 18 lakhs from CavinKare and Jaya TV. I spent the rest of the money and sent about 500 recipes to Guinness World Records.

I was 52 years old then, and the Guinness team was worried if I would be able to stand continuously for 24 hours. I trusted in God, and with the help of my boys created the Guinness record.

It was a record for longest cooking marathon which lasted for 24 hours, 30 minutes, and 12 seconds; and preparing 617 dishes—

one dish every two minutes. My family was thrilled and my wife cried when I received the award. She was worried that I would faint as I have never stood for 24 hours at a stretch.

After winning the record, I underwent physiotherapy for three years to recoup my health.

About the change in food culture. What are your thoughts?

I will always blame the parents for the change in food culture, because both of them are mostly office goers. They have the choice of tasting a pizza or a burger instead of cooking *sambar* or *rasam* at home. If this trend continues, then in 20 years' time you will not find a kitchen in any of the houses. There will only be a micro oven and re-heatable food.

The youngsters today are getting lazy and it is the elderly, middle-aged people, and housewives who cook at home. Everyone is capable of cooking well; all we need is just one hour in the kitchen. I have written 26 cookery books so far. I am now writing a book based on millets based cooking. Millets has 14.5 percent fibre content and is healthy for people.

Talking about food, what can one do to eradicate starvation in our country?

Starvation is due to people not having access to food. People have got money, but do not know whom to donate it to. If ten percent of our population engages in charity, there would be no starvation. Nowadays, subsidized food is available for the general public and 10 rupees would suffice to feed a person.

You had recently trained noon meal scheme employees across the State of Tamil Nadu. Can you share more information about this?

I visited all the 32 districts and trained 125,000 employees in preparing different types of variety rice—*channa pulao*, lemon rice, curry leaf rice, *bisi bela bhath*, *sambar rice*, and different kinds of boiled eggs—masala egg, pepper egg, and tomato egg. All these are of good taste and have high protein content.

We sat with the children and ate the food along with them. They were very happy as they tasted it for the first time.

You have been engaging in a lot of charitable activities. Which of the social issues are you passionate about?

I do not like people giving away left over food to the poor. If you are ready to donate food, then prepare fresh food and give it to the needy. This is charity! When we have a domestic function and have food wasted, we donate it. This is not charity, but disposal of wastage.

My passion lies in supporting the elderly and special children. Every month, I visit an old age home at Pallavaram where 80 inmates belonging to the age of 70 to 90 live. I prepare food for them, and also entertain them. I also train spastic children in baking, and support a special school in Villupuram.



“I would say that we still need NGOs, in fact genuine ones!”

Shri D.N. Kar was born in the year 1964 in Odisha. After completing his Post Graduation in Political Science from Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, he completed his M.Phil Degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and obtained LLB Degree from Delhi University.

His professional career began as an officer in Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited. He then joined Indian Revenue Service in 1988. After probation, he was posted as Assistant Commissioner of Income Tax in Vishakapatnam. He has held several posts including that of Joint Commissioner of Income Tax, Additional Commissioner of Income Tax to Salary Range, Business Range, and Corporate Range. He also worked as a Departmental Representative in the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal. In 2009, he was promoted as Commissioner of Income Tax and presently is

the Director of Income Tax (Exemptions), Chennai.

Shri D.N. Kar has been invited as a speaker for many trainings and conferences organised within and outside the department. He is a recipient of several awards including ‘Distinguished Citizen Award’ from American Biographical Institute. He has also received cash award from Income Tax Department for conducting quality search and seizure operations and unearthing black money.

He is associated with various social, cultural, and sports bodies and is the Secretary General of Korfball Federation of India, a National Sports Federation.

In an exclusive interview, Shri D.N. Kar tells Marie Banu the need for more NGOs in our society today.

It has been estimated that there is 1 NGO for every 400 people in India. What are your thoughts on this?

Out of the applications that I have received for registration, I find that over 40 to 50 percent of them are religious Trusts, mostly Christian Trusts founded by Pastors and Reverends. They register a Trust even for the sake of erecting one church and do not engage in much charitable activities.

About Charitable Trusts, there aren’t too many! Out of that, many are in the education sector. People think that there is a lot of money in this sector as education is allowed under charitable activities.

I will not say that there are too many NGOs. I think that there are not many who are actually doing good work! Because, despite having several NGOs, we still have issues like poverty, disease, etc. I would say that we still need NGOs, in fact genuine ones!

How many NGOs get registered in Chennai Income Tax office

in a month?

I look after whole of Chennai city and five adjacent districts—Vellore, Kanchipuram, Chengalpet, Thiruvannamalai. Every month, on an average, I receive 100 applications for new registrations and about 50 applications for 80G approval.

Chennai has a large constitution of NGOs. Historically, Chennai has been a city where large number of people are inclined towards charity or religion. Also, due to the fact that most of the Founders / Authors of the Trust reside in Chennai. People who have migrated from villages 50 to 60 years ago, feel that it is time to give back something to the society/village where they hail from. They register a Trust in Chennai and engage in charitable activities in villages that are located far away.

How does a person choose between the 3 Non-Profit organisations—Trust, Society or Section 25 company— to register?

For convenience of registration and managing it, I would say that formation of a Trust is easiest in comparison to Society or Section 25 Company.

Registering a Society would be a better option if more people are involved and it is going to be run more democratically. Because, once you register as a Society, you will have to follow the rules and regulations of the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, 1975. This casts a lot of responsibilities on the members like periodical elections, proper maintenance of accounts, documents to be filed with Registration of Societies, etc. All this will lead to better governance.

Many people form Trusts as they want to make it more family oriented and managed only by their kith and kin. This is a kind of

scenario where not many outsiders are involved.

Section 25 Company is most regulated, as the compliance under Companies Act is heavier than Registration of Societies Act and have better governance norms.

About social enterprises. How best can they be registered?

A social enterprise whether registered as a Trust or Society or Section 25 Company gets similar benefits when it obtains exemption under section 80G of the IT Act.

But, if a Section 25 company obtains approval under Section 35 (1) (ii) or Section 35 AC of the I.T. Act, then the donors get more tax exemption benefits. In such a scenario, the success rate of the company would be higher. Donors will always look at institutions which have better governance norms and are better regulated.

How many of the NGOs comply with the norms outlined by the government? Do we have a regulatory body to monitor the NGOs?

We have a regular monitoring system to track defaulters. Our system generates a list of non-filers and we issue notices to those who have not filed their returns. We are also looking into Trusts and NGOs which are not complying with their objectives as outlined in their deeds.

Almost 2 to 3 percent of the NGOs are scrutinized every year. Their books of accounts and activity reports are scrutinized by the Assessing Officer. If it is found that they are violating their objects or giving direct or indirect benefit to their Founder/ Trustees/relatives, we deny them exemption.

About the Companies Act 2013 bill. Will this increase scope

for corporates to network with NGOs?

It is too early to forecast what changes this bill would bring in the behaviour of major corporate houses. Some may do it through registered and good NGOs, while some may choose to do it themselves as they might find the NGO administrative expenses high. A clear contour has not yet emerged. We have to wait and watch.



“I am very passionate about equality before law.”

Shri. Karuna Sagar is the Additional Commissioner of Police, Traffic, Chennai. He joined Indian Police Service in 1991 and presently heads the Traffic wing of Chennai police.

He has held several positions including that of DIG of Police, Crime Branch CID; Chennai, DIG of Police, Armed Police, Chennai; Commissioner of Police, Thirunelveli; and Commissioner of Police, Trichy.

In an exclusive interview with Marie Banu, Shri Karuna Sagar IPS talks about his passion towards social causes.

What motivated you to become a police officer?

Basically, I come from Bihar. We have seen what a good law and

order can do to a State and what a bad law and order can do. I was very interested since my early school days to join the Indian Police Service, since I thought that police has a big role in terms of being a social changer; creating a consumer atmosphere; and creating a society where there is equality of law.

We recently saw a discussion on whether Sanjay Dutt can be relieved from punishment. You can have sympathy for one person, but law has to be blind. If you are talking about one individual, what about the human rights of those who have been convicted earlier?

I think IPS gives you an excellent platform to transform your ideas into concrete action, and that is the reason why I wanted to join.

What did you study in College?

I did my Graduation as well as Post-graduation in History from Delhi University. History is a subject I am very passionate about. Because, it tells you everything that happens in society—all the changes, all the events, all the developments, and the progression in society is chronicled in History. I consider it as a holistic subject that gives you a perspective of many things – science, art, literature, social developments.

Which of the social issues are you passionate about?

I am very passionate about equality before law. Wherever I take charge, the first thing I tell my officers is that the weaker section of the society (whether they are minorities or SC or ST or women or elderly or disabled or those who are somehow disadvantaged in the social system), should be given due protection and we have to be very proactive.

I am very passionate about social issues. In fact, all my readings are books that deal with social issues. I am very alive about what is happening in society and I closely watch.

Police and Social work – Your thoughts?

I think that policing is a tool to do something good for the society as a whole. It is a very strong mechanism where you can deliver. You can make sure that a rape victim gets quick and correct justice; and we can interfere when an old man or old woman is badly treated by his or her children. The kind of interference powers that police have is phenomenal and we can do tremendous amount of social work by being in the police.

In case of any natural or man-made disaster, it is the policemen who are the first to engage in rescue operations. Is there any ongoing disaster preparedness programme that your department engages in?

We do coordinate disaster management programs for our department from time to time. But, the way we have been trained to work, we know how to respond to a disaster. For instance, if a flood or tsunami occurs, the policeman is going to be first person to respond. In case of a fire accident, even before the fire tender reaches the spot, the policeman arrives here. So, we know that we are the first responders. Being the first responders there are certain kind of actions which is expected of us, and those things we do.

There is a lot of talk about Disaster Management. The State and the Central Government have a Disaster Management committee and there is a National Disaster Management Force which is now operational all over our country. A structured force is always

welcome, but to cover one lakh police force in Tamil Nadu will take some time.

The city traffic is chaos during peak hours, and more during school hours. Do you think that like school uniform and common syllabus a compulsory school bus service could make the traffic scene better at least for the school going children?

Actually, that is a wonderful idea! The schools today are established in busy localities. They were established 20 or 30 years back. For example, Don Bosco at Egmore, there is no space for parking except on the road. So, when the parents come to drop and pick up their children there is traffic congestion.

If you take one car, you will be taking one student; whereas one bus can carry 50 to 60 students. It is to that extent we can reduce congestion and a bus may take the space of three cars. Therefore, it is a very logical idea. It makes all the sense in an urban living today. We are talking about car pools for gentlemen who are in services. So, for children to have a mass transportation system is absolutely the best thing to happen.

Unfortunately, the Traffic Police cannot enforce this rule as I do not have the powers. The decision has to be taken by the school management and the authorities.

About the health of the policemen, especially police women who serve on *bandobust* duty for several hours with no proper toilets nearby. What steps have been taken by your department to address this issue?

For women, the toilet access is definitely an issue. But, there are posted only for a short time. I don't have regular women manning

the traffic. It is only during major bandobust that we assign them. At the most, they would spend two to three hours a day. We arrange to pick them up and dropped them back to their place of duty.

More so, the women traffic police are aged between 21 to 25 years. They are young, smart, and physically fit. They are from the Tamil Nadu special police and have just joined the force.

For the other traffic police—we are providing them with buttermilk twice a day and giving them pith hats so that they do not suffer from heatstroke. I am also trying to revamp my traffic umbrellas so that they are better. The signal controls will be transferred to the umbrellas so that the policeman can sit and man the traffic.

Your advice for social workers?

One of my passions is Social Work. I think that the whole NGO system is extremely important. They should be above pettiness, above corruption, and deliver the goods. Because, they have been tasked to deliver the goods where the governments' reach does not transcend.

Right now, at my level, I do small things with the help of other NGOs. In the future, I plan to involve myself in Social Work in a big way.

I wish the NGOs all the luck and hope they continue doing a good job.



“Anyone who wants to become an IAS officer should believe in himself.”

Shri N. Mathivanan IAS is the Director of Social Defence department. He has held several portfolios, including that of Director of Sugar and Managing Director of the Tamil Nadu Sugar Corporation; Collector of Salem and Madurai Districts.

In an exclusive interview, Shri N. Mathivanan IAS shares with Marie Banu the reason for increase in crimes in our society today.

What you think are important social issues today?

Perception varies from person to person. For me, the basic social issues are yet to be addressed and solved. Basic requirements like safe drinking water, good roads, and food for all; so called *roti*,

kapada aur makaan; though we claim to be super power in 2020, there is still a lot to be done. Unless and otherwise we solve the basic necessities of our citizens, whatever we do will not sustain. These are the basic social issues as far as I am concerned.

Increase in crimes in our society today. Your thoughts?

Predominantly, it is the IT revolution which is the cause for increase in crimes today. Ten years ago, you will not find murders related to illicit relationships.

You would have heard about a married woman Rubini in Cuddalore whose husband Sampath worked as Assistant Professor at Annamalai University. Rubini got in touch with Rajesh through a missed call. They started living together, and planned to end the life of Sampath who was in their way. Both of them are now in Cuddalore prison for charge of murder. It all started with a “missed call”.

About the vocational training programs that are coordinated at Juvenile home?

Children are imparted with vocational training such as plumbing and electrical; videography and photography; dress making and tailoring; fabric painting; book binding, handicraft; embroidery; computer; and baking.

We have skilled trainers for each of the programmes. Winners Bakery at Alwarpet provides training for our boys in baking. The boys are offered a stipend and they have offered to provide them with placement once they leave the juvenile home.

A touching incident at the Juvenile home which you wish to share?

During my routine visits to the Juvenile home for girls, I saw

a 14-year-old mother. This girl had eloped with a boy who had promised to take care of her. Both her parents as well as the boy have deserted her. It was painful to see her.

Most of the juveniles have been cheated and poverty is the basic reason.

What do you think can be done to reduce repeated offenders at Juvenile Home?

Once they come to the juvenile home, they are counseled. The aim of the government is less or no institutionalization. They should remain with their family and community. In many cases, lack of supervision, family quarrels, alcoholism, and drug abuse are the reasons for the juveniles to relapse. It is up to the parents to take care of their children.

During the trial period, when the trafficking victims are taken to the court, the pimps try to change their mind and influence them to return to sex trade. Now, the government has sanctioned 20 lakh rupees to facilitate video conferencing facility, so that the girl need not have to commute from prison to court. This effort will go a long way to reduce relapse.

You have held several portfolios. Which of them do you cherish most?

As you know, I served in Raj Bhavan for 10 years. I joined in 1995 when Dr. M. Channa Reddy was the Governor of Tamil Nadu. Unless and until you have an unblemished record in service, it is difficult to serve in such highly sensitive positions. I served seven Governors, and worked here until Shri Surjit Singh Barnala's period.

This part of my career was most enriching to me. Although, work

per se was comparatively less, the stress was high. Anything may happen any moment, and I had to keep my television always on. I was the first to inform the Governor about any sensitive information happening in our country/state.

A lot of interesting things have also happened during my time at Raj Bhavan. Personally, I feel that Dr. Channa Reddy was the greatest personality I had ever seen. He had an amazing memory and it was a wonderful experience working with him.

What is your advice for IAS aspirants?

Sincere hard work is IAS. Anyone who wants to become an IAS officer should believe in himself. Nowadays, the efficiency of the aspirants is far better than yesteryears. There is a lot of IAS coaching centres and publications which is very helpful for IAS aspirants today.



“I always wanted to combine firmness with compassion.”

Dr Prateep V Philip IPS currently holds the position of Additional Director General of Police (Economic Offences Wing) in Chennai. He holds a doctorate in management studies on the Friends of Police Movement that he pioneered in Tamil Nadu.

Dr Philip also developed an innovative concept ‘Equilibrium Thinking’ to bridge the gap between universal values and modern living with relevant application and explanation. He recently

caught the eye of global management experts with his theory of 'Excenomics', a new global discipline that focuses on studying excellence in all its dimensions.

He has won prestigious awards for professional excellence and outstanding contribution in India and abroad. Some of his awards include: Queen's Award for Police Training and Development out of all commonwealth nations in 2002, Rashtriya Suraksha Award at Global Security Conference, New Delhi, Communal Harmony Award, and Rotary award of Excellence. Dr.Philip has also been nominated for Roman Magsaysay Award and International innovator's Award at Harvard University

In an exclusive interview, Dr Prateep V Philip IPS talks to Marie Banu about the Friends of Police movement and its impact in our society.

About your childhood, family, work at SBI?

I grew up in Bangalore and studied in St Joseph's school, the same school that produced Rahul Dravid and Sabeer Bhatia of hotmail fame. I did my graduation at St Joseph's College and my Masters in Political Science and International Relations at Bangalore University. During school days, I was a mediocre student. Without too much of effort, and studying just before examinations, I used to get a first class.

As a student, my passion lay in studying about great lives. I was always looking for inspiration. I used to read a lot of biographies. I participated in debates and extempore speech. I also had a passion for writing since childhood. Some of my writings were liked by my teachers and they read it out in class. This encouraged me, and I wrote a novelette titled 'Red Sun' when I was studying in the sixth standard. It was about a family in Thailand. I also wrote a lot

of middle articles for the newspaper, mostly humorous.

In my Pre-University, I took humanities deliberately, although I had scored high marks in Science. I always chose to go by my passion and so took arts subjects.

While pursuing my first year of Master's degree, I got the opportunity to work as a probationary officer in SBI. I was with the bank from 1984 to 1987 and resigned in order to join the Indian Police Service.

My older brother is a doctor in Australia and my parents are no more. My mother was serving in the health sector and my father was a businessman.

From being an ASP to ADGP. What has been your most difficult moment?

As ASP trainee, I used to take interest in petitioners. I worked with a Superintendent of Police, who is now a DGP. He was very humane and used to say that 'Life is larger than law'. I started looking at dimensions beyond law.

There was once a petitioner who did not have support from his family to sustain himself. I visited his home along with the Inspector and requested his family members to support the petitioner. In another incident, there was an encroachment and the police were physically uprooting houses. My heart went out to an elderly man who was trying to protect his home from being demolished. I quickly sent a hat out to mobilise funds to support this person. These are scenes that come back from my training days.

I always wanted to combine firmness with compassion. One of

the reasons is my sense of biblical values. I began to believe in Jesus since the age of 17, though I was born a Christian. The values I picked up made me think different.

I have been through several difficult situations, which no SP has solved before me. Soon after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, I was posted at Ramanathapuram in 1994. There were caste clashes in Rajapalayam that threatened to spread across the state and I handled the situation effectively by ordering 'shoot at sight'. It appeared in the national news and psychologically deterred the people from indulging in violence. With just two casualties we were able to bring the situation under control.

Managing a million people with just 1000 men is a big challenge for an IPS officer, because only 50 percent would be effectively available at a given point in time. It is only by virtue of your wit, wisdom, and deployment of manpower, you will have to solve a problem cost-effectively. I learnt the basics of man management, police management, law and order management, and solved some major crimes and challenging law and order situations.

Can you tell us about the 'Friends of Police' movement?

One morning, when I was sitting in my portico, the idea of Friends of Police or FOP flashed in my mind. I spoke about this in many forums, and it was well received.

When I was shifted to Ramanathapuram, I moved out of my comfort zone. I therefore wanted to do something out of the way. So, without seeking any formal sanction, I decided to start the 'Friends of the Police' movement.

I wanted it to be a mass movement in community policing and aimed to enrol 20,000 FOPs to support the 1000 policemen of the

district. I said that it should be a mass movement in community policing, and like the freedom movement it should involve the people.

I kept contemplating why God preserved my life and saved me from a major international disaster. *I call it creative questioning. When you keep asking yourself questions, at some point you get a creative answer.* After a long while, I got the answer: “It is to humanise the police.”

People were encouraged to enrol in FOP and serve the State by partnering with the police. With the media attention it got, I realized that the idea could spread across the state, country and have a trans-local significance.

Police is hated by people, for one reason or the other. I call it police isolation and public antagonism or the “power syndrome”. If you share power, people will like you. If you don’t, they will hate you.

I requested the Hon’ble Chief Minister Dr J. Jayalalithaa to extend this concept to the whole state, and in one government order she gave the approval. Then, it took ten years to be recognized. In 2002 it won the British Queen’s award for Innovation in Police Training and Development. We used the 15000 £ to set up a state-of-the-art training centre in Chennai. That has trained 150,000 people with just 20 lakh rupees as funds per year again sanctioned by the Hon’ble Chief Minister in response to my appeal.

FOP is a force multiplier. One policeman along with a FOP doubles his power and influence. FOP will therefore be a bridge to the wider community to which he belongs. There are FOPs in every police station today. They register with the local police station and are monitored by the Superintendent of the Police. In a year,

five workshops are held in every district and commissionerate. 40 police personnel, from the rank of Police Constable to the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police; and 40 FOP, from students to retired persons, participate in these workshops.

Many cases, FOP has come to the rescue of policemen who were about to be assaulted as it happened in a tea estate in Ooty. Once I received information from a FOP, who belonged to a minority community in Kilakarai, about some explosives being planned to be used against a procession. We could arrest and seize the explosives with this timely information.

The information that I did not receive from professional intelligence agencies, I received from an ordinary fisherman who was a FOP.



“Not finding time is a myth; finding time is reality!”

Smt. Qudsia Gandhi is a senior IAS officer in Chennai. She has held several portfolios including that of being Additional Chief Secretary / Chairperson and Managing Director, TN Power Finance Corporation Ltd. She has also served as District Collector of Sivagangai and Managing Director of SIPCOT.

In an exclusive interview, Smt. Qudsia Gandhi IAS shares with Marie Banu her thoughts about Women—yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

About your association with REEDA NGO?

When I served as the District Collector of Sivaganga District in 1990, I found many villages bereft of able bodied people. Owing to drought they used to migrate to places like Thanjavur, Chennai, etc., in search of jobs. I wanted to do something for them. I learnt

about REEDA, an NGO that provided vocational training for underprivileged children and health interventions to women and children.

I brought Reeda to Chennai in 1991, and we worked together in providing the migrant educated youth who were above the age of 18 years of age with training in computers, and gem cutting and polishing. Most of the migrant boys in Chennai worked in *kothavalchavadi* vegetable market, while the girls were employed in brick kilns and as domestic servants.

It was in the early 90s and the computer era was just starting. I requested Government of India for support in training 100 youth, belonging to SC and ST category. Computer training, of course, caught on, but, as gem cutting required precision work, it was not quite successful in Chennai. With the permission of the Government, we shifted this programme to Trichy, being the hub for cubic zirconia (American diamond).

Students attended the training in the mornings, and work in the evenings. All of our trainees have sought placement, and some work in the Intellectual Property Department in Chennai, Income Tax Department, Excise and Custom Department, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and many such State and Central Government Departments. Some of them have sought jobs abroad too. Yet, some became self-employed.

Besides this, we also offered sessions on leadership qualities, career guidance, and right to information. We coordinate self-help groups in Chennai and Sivaganga Districts and conduct medical camps and awareness camps on alternate months. We also provide HIV/AIDS interventions to MSM/FSWs and transgenders in Perambalur, Sivaganga and Ramanathapuram Districts.

Being a senior bureaucrat officer in our country today, how do you find time for social work?

Not finding time is a myth; finding time is reality! Even while working in the Health and Planning and Development departments, where I was in charge of the budget, I used to be in office until 2 in the morning. I used to go home to feed my children and return for work.

What does one do in their spare time? Watch movies or television serials? I don't do that; instead I choose social work. I do not have time for high-profile parties, but always find time for my family.

Women—yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Your thoughts? What is the balance you can bring in while talking in terms of empowerment/ tolerance/equity/equality?

As far as India is concerned, I think women are better off here, in education at least. We went for a one-year course in Manchester in 1989, and in the whole University found only one woman Lecturer who had completed her PhD. But, during the same time, we would have had at least 20 to 30 students pursuing their doctorate in a single college at Erode district.

By and large, I feel that the women are empowered. At least, in the households, women have a say and are able to decide on their children's education. But, there are cases where women are kept totally in the dark about what is happening in their man's life. I have known of several men who have died and not letting their wife know where he has kept the money, whether he had any money at all, or to whom he had given his money to.

We cannot generalize the issue of women empowerment in our county, as the situation is different in the North when compared to the South. Both are diverse in values and attitudes. I feel the

southern part to be much better. Love has become now skin deep and this is because we have a wrong concept of empowerment, freedom, and rights.

About equity and equality—boys are still given more importance in the family. We are equally to be blamed for making a male dominant society. We should give equal responsibilities to both our sons and daughters. We should teach our children tolerance and good values. Some are not successful in marriage due to lack of tolerance. Men and women should have understanding between them. Ego does not work in relationships—whether family or friends; marital or non-marital.

Can you tell us about your childhood and education? What motivated you to pursue IAS?

In the early days, I studied in different schools, as I followed my siblings. When my mother took ill, I was admitted at St. William Anglo Indian High School at Royapettah in Chennai. My mother passed away when I was five-years-old, and after that my father re-married. As my stepmother was teaching at Government Hobart's High school, I was asked to study here. Being Urdu medium school, I found it difficult to comprehend. But, my father took extra care in teaching me and by the time I reached the fifth standard, Urdu became my passion.

I studied Geography at Presidency College and won the gold medal. I went to Aligarh University to pursue medicine, but had to discontinue due to communal riots. I studied psychology at SIET College and did my Masters in Psychology at Presidency College and obtained the University second rank. While teaching psychology for the post-graduate students at SIET, I wanted to pursue research. My brother advised me to appear for the IAS examination, as Mrs. Yasmin Ahmed, who used to teach me

English, became an IAS officer.

My subjects were psychology and sociology. As I was teaching these subjects for the post graduate students, I did not have to learn much. I had to only prepare for General Knowledge, but as I used to read the Illustrated Weekly magazine regularly I was confident of writing this paper too. I availed just 15 days leave and cleared the IAS examination in the first attempt. I ranked 60th all India!

Frankly, I did not study hard to clear the IAS examination. I always tell people not to take me as a role model to prepare for the examination.

Which of your portfolios in the government has been memorable?

Collectorship is always memorable, because you are the authority there and the government has vested a lot of powers. It is the time when one can personally help somebody. While serving as the District Collector of Sivagangai from 1990 to 1992, I ensured that I was accessible. I used to visit all the villages and even the children knew my name. The villagers had my phone numbers and gave me information on rice smuggling, and illicit liquor. I did receive death threats too, but that did not deter me. I had good support and cooperation from the police. Madam Jayalalitha, who was the Chief Minister also then, appreciated my work and asked for a standing ovation at the time of the Collector's conference for having eradicated illicit liquor at Sivagangai district.

During this period, I pioneered the literacy mission—Arivoli Iyakkam—across the country. Sivagangai district was the first to achieve 100 percent literacy amongst people belonging to 15 to 45 years of age.



“I did not have surplus money when I made my first contribution. But, God gave me much more.”

Rtn V Raja Seenivasan is a Leather technologist from the First Batch of Anna University. He started his own Leather business in 1987, which has now transformed into a leading company—VRS Leathers Private Limited— that manufactures and exports finished leather around the globe.

Rtn. Raja joined the Rotary Club of Madras West in 1997 and served as its President in 2002-03 when he won “The Silver Rotary Action Trophy’ for best overall performance. From 2003-04, he held various District Positions and assignments including Assistant Governor. He initiated many projects of which the ‘Care for tender feet’—providing footwear to children —is still ongoing.

Rtn. Raja and his spouse Mrs Jayanthi are well known for their philanthropic nature both in and out of Rotary. Rtn. Raja was unanimously elected as the District Governor in 2012-13.

In an exclusive interview, Rtn V Raja Seenivasan tells Marie Banu what inspired him to venture into philanthropy.

Who has been your inspiration to venture into philanthropy?

I can say that it was my mother. She used to say: “You give, and God will give you more.” This has been my philosophy right from my college days. I used to help my fellow students who could not afford to pay their college fees. Later on, after getting into business, I wanted to do something more for my society. Once I joined Rotary and started meeting amazing people here, I was motivated to contribute more. In Rotary, Past District Governor J B Kamdar (who has given more than 250000 USD and still keeps giving) is my inspiration.

You have been offering awards to outstanding students in academics? Does your passion lie in education?

I strongly believe that education is the key for our country. Rotary or the government need not have to give anything free to our society, if we empower them with education. Once educated, people become will get jobs and be on their own.

Besides instituting awards in my parent’s name, I also support children who need financial assistance to study, either through Rotary or directly.

With Rotary Club having several school projects, what efforts has the club taken to sensitize girl children on prevention of abuse?

School is one of the key focus areas of Rotary. When Rotary celebrated its 100th year in 2004-2005 under a project called 'Schools into smiles', we surveyed about 1000 schools that needed attention. On need basis, we renovated 100 schools and provided many schools with toilets as well.

Educating children on awareness and prevention of abuse who are in the age-group of 12 to 15 is difficult as it is a sensitive topic. We therefore conducted several sensitization programs for school teachers on how they can educate children to be careful and prevent abuse.

One of the key achievements of Rotary Club in India is the 'Pulse Polio Campaign'. Can you tell us more about this?

Pulse polio program is a global program. During the 1980s, the whole world had around 400,000 polio cases every year. It was at this point in time, Rotary wanted to take up the polio eradication program. We were already successful with the red measles program in Tamil Nadu.

The polio vaccine was invented by a Rotarian. When Rotary celebrated its centenary, we initiated the 20-year program (1985 – 2005) with the objective of eradicating polio in the entire world. We first launched a pilot project in Philippines, and after its success took it to a global level. We convinced the government one by one, and launched the program in many countries.

Many governments joined Rotary in its efforts, but funds were an issue. Rotarians mobilized funds and even gave Rs. 2.5 crores to

the Government of Tamil Nadu to buy the polio vaccine.

Three years ago, Bill Gates, a philanthropist donated 100 million USD as a challenge grant to the Rotary. Once Rotary raised this amount, he offered another 255 million USD. This time, he asked us to raise only another 100 million USD. We succeeded in this as well. He was impressed with the way in which Rotarians raised funds and conducted the programs, and offered a third grant of 100 million USD.

People asked Bill gates why he chose to contribute to Rotary, and not to WHO directly. He said, “I have worked with the Rotary in Africa and in other places. I am confident that whatever money I give Rotary, it reaches the beneficiaries fully.”

In 2012, we had only 200 cases reported in all the three countries put together—Pakistan, Nigeria, and Afghanistan. India has become polio free for the last two years. In another year, we will be certified by WHO as ‘Polio Free Nation.’”

What are the programs that you envision during your tenure as District Governor for the Rotary?

In 1995, globalisation and liberalization of economy began in India and our growth has been terrific since then. I asked myself: “Has this growth reached all the people?” The answer was “Not yet.”

Today, around 70 percent of the people in our country still live in villages and lack access to education, health care, and basic facilities.

Having visited several villages, I believe that if we improve access to education and health care facilities, the average Indian life expectancy, which is 63 years now, would increase considerably.

There are 118 clubs in Rotary which comes under 5 revenue districts—Chennai, Kanchipuram, Thiruvannamalai, Vellore, and Thiruvallur. We wanted to make an attempt along with the government and corporate houses to create 100 model villages in these districts and provide them with education, vocational training, water and sanitation facilities, and social support.

Rotary termed this project as ‘Happy Village’ as we believe that only happy villages can create a happy India. We involved the community in each of the villages in our sanitation awareness program that was conducted by experts.

The villagers were made to draw their social map in an open space of land. Different colors were used to denote houses, temples, roads, water facilities, and places they used for open defecation. Once this was outlined, they were made to realize the need for proper sanitation. With funds from Rotary Foundation, we have now constructed several toilets in villages and this project is a huge success.

How do you find time for social work?

After I got involved in the Rotary, there was no looking back. It became my passion. It is because of my family involvement that I am able to spend more time for Rotary than anything else.

Being the District Governor is demanding and like a full-time job. I feel that it is a great opportunity that has been given to me to change hundreds of lives. While giving, you feel happy. I did not have surplus money when I made my first contribution. But, God gave me much more. I remembered what my mother told me: “You give, and God will give you more.”



“Unless the nation regains its cultural identity, it has no identity.”

Shri. V. Shankar is an iconoclastic business leader and entrepreneur. He has made his mark in the field of education and fine arts too. A visionary in his own right and a silent philanthropist, Shri. Shankar has embarked on his dream project through the Shri Kanchi Mahaswami Vidya Mandir wherein he has introduced a dual education system.

Shri. V Shankar is the President of Shri. Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha Mumbai, a premier cultural institution in India. He is also the President of the South Indian Education Society (SIES), one of the foremost educational institutions in Mumbai.

In an interview Shri V. Shankar tells Marie Banu the need for our children to imbibe culture.

What inspired you to launch the school?

Kanchi Paramacharya once lamented to me “The world is at my feet. My devotees will do anything for me. The biggest of Ambanis are so anxious and eager to meet me and spend a few seconds with me that they would put the world at my feet, if I so choose. But, if I ask somebody to send their child to learn Veda, they vanish the next moment. I had to find where the man has gone as he is nowhere to be seen. Why do they have such an attitude? If they have so much confidence in me as their spiritual messiah, why then when I touch on this subject, they run away from me? Then I realized that the system of education that has penetrated in our country, which the British foisted 200 years ago, has carefully ensured that it is employment centric.

Ultimately, the process of education is linked to employability of people. That is why employability relation came through the qualification that you require. So the moment you have ensured that the education system caters to the long span of your livelihood, then anything exterior to that does not find its place. I was absolutely naïve to believe that anyone would give me a child without assuring employability.

What would Vedic education have done? Made them priests? Why would I give my child to become a priest, even if I consider it to be a job? It has no acceptance in society. There is respect because whenever there is a function you call the Priest and that day you think that he is a learned person who knows the scriptures. It dawned too late in the day about dual system of education. Then possibly, if I would have asked for one child to

go into dual system of education, the son could be ensured to become an engineer or a doctor and be conversant in the Vedas as well. I too love that Vedic education be given to children, but the question is how to do so without disturbing the school studies. If wisdom had dawned on me earlier, I could have possibly seen during my living time how one such model works.” It was this thought of Maha Swami that led me to start this school.

How did you strategize your launch of the school?

After Maha Swami’s lifetime, I pondered over his thoughts on dual education and realized the truth behind it. Every morning, from a beggar in the street to the President of our country —they all complain that the culture of our country has become debased and we have lost our identity. But, nobody seems to be thinking about what could be done. This means that there is something seriously wrong in all of us! We believe that we should knock out the system. If we were so conscious and we considered our system to be more valuable, we should have preserved it. If we had afforded to lose it and still believe that we can survive and maintain our identity, it is fool hardy. The world has shown us that people who believed in their culture and identity survive. For example, the Japanese, Americans, and Chinese.

Anything compulsive loses its value; anything voluntary arising out of conviction of love and affection will add value. Then I thought that this model, if made voluntary will succeed.

You take a SWOT analysis of the Vedic school. You will find that the threats are far more than the positives. The threats –one of the last resorts for a person - a parent would choose to educate his son in a vedic school as two square meals are assured here. We don’t take them by the attitude or IQ but rather because they

are provided with two square meals a day. The vedic system was not based on documented evidence, but on oral rendition. The teacher therefore did not compel the child to learn. There were no standards for evaluation, or progressive and continuous assessment of the children.

Because the country did not accept this, there was no lifeline support for this system. The characteristic of a Vedic school was a dingy dark place, it would be the house of a teacher, the teacher would take more of the household work done rather than teaching.

I conceived that the dual concept of Paramacharya was subject to several conditions. If we were to set up an English school inside a dingy house, still people will not come. Because, they will believe that English will not be taught in a dark place. That is the mindset! But, if you give a fabulous school environment and also teach Vedic, there is a fair chance that people will send their children here.

The first thought that I laid down was: A dual education system should be one where there is no reminiscence of the Vedic school system. It should also be run by the school. It should not be run by a teacher who is part of the Vedic system—Guru-shishya parampara. There would be a structured syllabus, scheduled into classes, and annual progress that will take the student to the next stage. So, standardization of the Vedic education system is a must for acceptance in the combination education. Because, if one is standardized, systematized, streamlined and the other is in an archaic form – it will not combine well. Vedic school will therefore be run like a school. There would be full-time teachers and it would be residential school as we believe that the children should not be sent out to absorb the vices of the world.

How do you group the students in the school?

This school does not categorize residential or non-residential. The students are day scholars in the CBSE school and return to the Vedic school, where they also reside. The timings for Vedic schools are before and after CBSE school hours. They wear a school uniform when they go to the CBSE school and wear a *dhoti* when they study at Vedic School. There is no physical separation but only a mental separation which divides the schools for these children.

The difference among the children will arise when the children who are part of the dual education showcase their skills by reciting *slokas* or *nama sangeetham* during a school event. This will make the other children yearn to learn a whole range of Indian traditions like yoga, or bharatanatyam, or veena. It will have a multiplier effect and be profound. The sweep of influence and the territory that will be covered will be far higher and the day when it branches out and others replicate this model, you will find that the country will have a wave for this type of education.

Do you think this model can be replicated to other states?

Each one will customize to what they need. In Haryana and UP theatre is dominant. They can combine theatre and education; teach children how to stage plays. Any art form should be preserved. Out of great difficulty our forefathers have preserved it for centuries together. For example, the tribal lore has a lot of value ingrained in it. We never understood it to appreciate it. When children pursuing dual education grow up to become doctors or engineers, they will be identified for their values, humility, and attitude. Culture is not region centric nor territorially confined to one place. Culture is wrongly connoted to religion. If Vedas

is religious, how can Sufi Sangeet or Bharatnatyam be accepted as culture? We define our own norms to define culture. A few students should pass out from this school and prove to be unique in their profession. Wisdom will be built on and others will want to follow this model. The government will realize the value of this system.

What is your message to the youth of India?

My message is: “Unless the nation regains its cultural identity, it has no identity.” Today, after so many years of freedom, we have started wondering about what freedom has done to us. A misused freedom, a disused freedom is no freedom. We are suffering a choice of an elective system that is destroying freedom. So, the solution is not to remove the freedom, but to cure the system, and the system can be cured only when culture is regained. I have just made the beginning!



Shri R.V. Shekar

“The first thing that the senior citizens want is to be part of a community.”

Lancor Holdings Limited, a Public Limited company listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange, has been creating landmarks in Chennai for over 25 years. Lancor has constantly sought to establish new benchmarks in property development, by offering its customers world-class facilities and finishes.

Its reputation has been built on the cornerstones of transparency and professionalism. Lancor was given ‘The Highest Transparency Award’ at The CNBC CredaiAwaaz Real Estate Awards 2009.

In an exclusive interview, R.V. Shekar, Managing Director of Lancor Holdings Limited shares with Marie Banu about his new project that focuses on providing homes for Senior Citizens.

Being a leading builder, what makes your construction quality and services different?

What we have always attempted is to shift our goal post—in terms of quality, specifications, style. This is not only for the affluent section. Lancor has always been building for the less affluent too. Today's newspaper we released an advertisement stating 'be wise by spending your money this year' as we offer apartments for 22 lakh rupees.

People who are less affluent should also get an offering from our company with the same level of comfort. We price our property affordable, and do not reduce the structural quality. Our buildings are capable of standing for over 100 years. Giving good quality at an affordable price is a challenge.

Do you use environmentally friendly practices in your construction?

Although we are a small company when compared to others in terms of size, we have always tried to be innovative and give our customers an extra specification. Our latest offering is to provide pre-fitted air-conditioners in every building. The reason is because people anyway buy air-conditioners.

One may consider this as being anti-green. The question is how we can use it in an energy efficient manner, while not damaging the other sections of the building like paints, dripping water, positioning, servicing, etc.

When we put the air-conditioners along with the construction

process, we know where to place it, service it, and maintain it. As the purchases are made in bulk, we are able to get a price advantage. We buy energy efficient air conditioners, and create an environment where the cooling requirement is low. We provide double glass so that it will have a twin effect—sound proof and heat proof. This is not something that everybody practices as it involves a lot of money.

It is learnt that you are constructing senior citizen friendly apartments. Can you tell more about this?

I am a senior citizen aged 64. My wife is the principal of Padma Seshadri School. After a long day at work, often times, she says that she is tired. There is a stage when we get a little frustrated with routine. In our country, women by the age of 45 have already put in over 25 years of their lifetime looking after their spouse, children, and grandchildren. It is at this time they want someone to look after them. If food, health care, local transport, limited entertainment, and company is provided then their lives become wholesome.

When several families live together, say 700 to 800 families, we will have to create an environment where they can play, worship, and mingle with each other. Ultimately, the happiness comes only from people. You will not get happiness from having a fantastic apartment which is done with all sorts of gizmos. The happiness is when you neighbor comes and says, ‘how beautiful you have done your apartment’.

We need to create a social infrastructure that allows people to congregate. We have already put our leg into the senior citizen home section which will hopefully be launched in June 2013. It is called ‘Harmonia’ and would function as an independent division, and not as our other property development projects.

During the initial stages we will be more personally involved, because it involves senior citizens. It involves understanding of senior citizens and their wants, and we need to tweak ourselves based on what the public and customer perception is. There is a need to create places for food, storage, cold store, entertainment, transportation, medical facilities, etc.

The first concept is that we will not have segregated senior citizen apartments. They will be part of a community. My father is 92 years old and is visually challenged, and my mother was 80 years old when she passed away three years ago. I have been with them for quite some time and therefore understand the feelings of senior citizens very well. The first thing that the senior citizens want is to be part of a community. They do not want to live in segregation.

To start with, we are constructing 800 apartments in Guduvanchery out of which 300 will be allocated for senior citizens. These will be available on sale as well as for lease.

The rules are the same for everybody. Sporting and club facilities, food service, transport, and medical system will be made available for about 5,000 people and will include in-patient and out-patient medical facilities. Nursing quarters and accommodation for drivers will also be provided.

Similar projects would be established at Sholinganallur and Sriperumbadur that will house more than 1000 senior citizen families.

Given the recent social scenario in our country, as a senior citizen what is your advice for the youth?

We have not managed youth aspirations in the way they expect of us. We have chided them on many issues. In my view, they have a right to ask for safety on streets, to go out whenever and wherever

they want. The rest of the community will have to accept that these are constitutional rights and are inherent.

Both women and men are equally vulnerable. What we see in North India is a form of rebellion by a certain class of people who have been oppressed. This might be a different view or argument that I might give and you might think that I am supporting the wrong doers. But, I am not!

There is a class and caste issue here. The class is classified into some grades, where the higher grade is oppressive of the lower grade by doing these things. The higher grade people are throwing an open challenge to the people at the next grade. To me, many of these things which you see are happening all over the country are all form of continued domination by a higher caste of the lower caste.

This can't be corrected by legislation and death sentence is not a solution. We need to bring in education and tolerance. We need to create a society where we have to agree that there is another way of doing things.



Shri T.N. Venkatesh IAS

“I feel that two things are very important for success—hard work and determination.”

Shri T.N. Venkatesh IAS, is the Joint Commissioner (Education), Corporation of Chennai. He joined the IAS in 2001 and served as Joint Commissioner, Commercial Taxes and as District Collector of Karur. During his tenure in 2007, Karur was adjudged the Best District for working towards the rehabilitation of the Differently Abled.

Shri. Venkatesh is a fan of Carnatic music and attends concerts

regularly.

In an exclusive interview, Shri T N Venkatesh IAS shares with Marie Banu the education initiatives of Chennai Corporation.

Who has been your inspiration? Was it tough for you to clear the Civil Services Examination?

My uncle Mr. Santhanam, an IAS officer himself, has been my inspiration. I made up my mind when I was around ten years old that I would become an IAS officer. Early seeds were sown into my thoughts regarding joining Civil Services.

I cleared the Civil Services Examination in 2001. The competition was very tough as only 53 were selected for IAS compared to 180 in recent years. One has to score very high in order to get a posting in their own home state. I stood 18th at the All India level.

What is your advice for youth who aspire to join the civil services?

One should have a clear vision without any ambiguity as to what they want to become in life. If you have an ambition to become an IAS officer, you will have to start preparing early in life.

I feel that two things are very important for success—hard work and determination. There is no recipe for success without these two. The youth need to be clear that there are no short cuts to reach Civil Services. Ever since I joined the Civil Services and until today, I work really hard with the commitment and determination that I should make some difference in the department that I work for. Systematic planning and perseverance will you take you nearer to your goal.

Can you share your achievements as the District Collector of Karur?

As the Collector of Karur, I won the 'Best District Award' in 2007 for working for the welfare of differently abled persons. It was a National Award given by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to District Collectors.

A District Collector will have to work with different departments, each of them having specific schemes for the differently abled, but all working in isolation. Through an integrated approach, I ensured that the family which had a differently abled member received maximum help from every department.

Today, I am very happy to say that around 250 families in Karur district are having their own livelihoods. Some have started their own restaurants, small scale units, and one visually challenged couple even started an orchestra.

What are the schemes launched by the Chennai Corporation to encourage education, especially among girl children?

We ensure that the children who enroll in our Chennai schools are offered the best in terms of quality education. One aspect that is missed out often when you talk about schooling or children is that people focus only on academic pursuits. But, we also focus on the non-academic pursuits like drawing, music, dance, public speaking, and spoken English classes. The Chennai Corporation has launched a lot of initiatives in the recent past, especially keeping the extra-curricular activities in mind.

We have also introduced more English medium sections. This is because there is a great parental aspiration for children to speak in English. Last year, we started separate English Medium sections

in 30 schools.

With regard to girl children, we provide sanitary napkins for those studying in the middle and higher secondary schools. Also, gynaecologists visit our schools twice or thrice a month to conduct regular health check-ups.

We have also tied up with NGOs like Ashraya, Ekam Foundation, and Eco Kitchen (a project of YRG Care). These organisations provide counseling for adolescent girls on health, their overall well-being, goal setting, aspirations, and self-esteem.

We have started music rooms in 30 of our Chennai schools and have appointed 30 part-time music teachers who conduct classes thrice a week. Specialized music training is offered to children who are studying in 6th to 8th standard.

I would like to make a mention about ‘Aanma Jothi’, an organization that is keen in spreading awareness about our classical music and dance amongst the Chennai school students. Normally, children in private schools have constant exposure in the form of field visits or celebrity talks. But, the Chennai school children miss out on this. Organisations like Nalandaway and Samudhaaya Foundation have in the recent past done a lot of programmes for our children to bridge this gap. We are also regularly sending our students to Dakshin Chitra to participate in traditional festivals and know about the rich heritage of South India.

There are a lot of challenges that our teacher’s face today. What are your views about the change in teacher-student relationship?

Absolutely! The role of the teacher has changed a lot, especially

due to technology. The teacher's role when you or I were a student was totally different. We relied entirely on her or him for information.

Now, there are many other ways the children can get information from. Therefore, if you are going to be just passing on information, you may not be able to connect. You need to walk that extra mile to strike a chord with your students. I really feel that the teachers of today should be good mentors, and need to set examples themselves. They should make their mark by their good conduct, attire, and attitude towards work. They need to take the effort to nurture the potential that lies in each child.

I am happy that our teachers pay special attention towards the slow learners. When you compare the government and private schools, the proportion of slow learners are much higher in Chennai schools. Most of the children studying in Chennai schools are first generation learners. So, there are a lot of challenges for our teachers as there is minimal parental support.

How can NGOs help the government in addressing the issue of quality of education in Chennai schools?

I would like to mention about an organization called 'Teach for India' who have partnered with seven of our Chennai schools. Young Teach for India Fellows handle English Medium sections in these schools and teach children subjects of English, science, mathematics, and social studies.

They have built up the confidence of the children and have brought a visible change in these classrooms. Classroom is a very important place where the child spends a lot of time, especially at the primary level. So, the kind of influence that the teacher has during the school hours makes a lot of difference.

Our ultimate aim is to encourage a child to come to school and enjoy the learning process. The challenge is to not only make the classrooms attractive physically, but also engage the children in joyful learning.

I would like to encourage NGOs to partner with us and make our classrooms brighter, lively, meaningful, and effective. There is a lot of synergy by doing this work together. Ultimately, we need to come together to make a difference.



Dr. Vijay Shankar

“Till today, I have a lot of people coming to me for cataract surgery just because I am Jai Shankar’s son.”

Dr. Vijay Shankar is a well-known and popular Ophthalmologist having conducted Thousands of eye surgeries. Dr. Vijay Shankar became an eye surgeon to fulfill his father’s long cherished dream of becoming a successful eye practitioner.

Dr. Vijay Shankar has completed his MS in Ophthalmology from Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore. He has done his fellow ship and has been trained under various sub-specialties in Ophthalmology at Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai. He also carries out his father’s philanthropic activities.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Vijay Shankar tells Marie Banu what motivated him to become an Ophthalmologist.

Being the son of a leading yesteryear actor, what motivated you to become an Ophthalmologist?

I was motivated by my father to be an eye surgeon. My father is the famous Tamil actor, Late Jai Shankar, who is also known as the James Bond of Tamil cinema. He did a film titled '*Idhayam parakiradhu*'; *this was his hundredth film in which he played a blind man.*

While acting in the film '*Idhayam parakiradhu*' he had the opportunity to interact with a lot of blind persons and wanted to make one of his children an eye surgeon. He thought that I would be the best as I was good in academics. I complied for my father's sake, in spite of receiving a lot of movie offers.

When I cleared the MS, he was the happiest person in the world. He said to me: "You should do a thousand surgeries, Vijay. That is what I want."

I have done many thousands of surgeries now, and thanks to him. It was his wish!

About your celebrity clients?

About 70 to 75 percent of my clients are from the film industry. Thanks to my illustrious father. Till today, I have a lot of people coming to me for cataract surgery just because I am Jai Shankar's son. They say, "Your dad has helped me so much. When I was a producer, I could not pay your father. Now, I have come to you for a surgery."

My practice began galloping since I was 27. He has helped the film industry so much, that they thought they are repaying him by coming to me.

I trust in quality and I believe that my patients should get the best. So, whatever best I can do in eye care, I will do. I do have a lot of celebrities and film personalities as patients and I am grateful to them for trusting me.

Where did you study? Were you allowed to interact with the film fraternity while young?

I did my schooling at Don Bosco, Egmore and went to Kasturba Medical College at Manipal and even completed my MS degree here. I underwent two-year fellowship at SankaraNetralaya and graduated as an eye surgeon. Now, I serve as a senior consultant at Apollo Hospitals and I do my private practice too.

While young, we were never allowed to visit a shooting spot. Parties used to happen at home, but we were not allowed to leave our rooms. In our home, education was of paramount importance. Thanks to my mother! My sister is a doctor in Apollo hospital and my brother is an engineer.

My father wanted to be a doctor, but he could not gain a seat in a medical college. Ultimately, he ended up in cinema.

Which of the social issues are you passionate about?

One thing I am passionate about is eye donation. In India there is a lot of need for eyes; children especially adolescents are in need for eyesight. This can be possible only if people can come forward to donate their eyes after their lifetime. So, I try my best to pitch in for the eye donation campaign.

In fact, I conduct eye camps for the poor section of the film industry every year. We have completed four such camps for the Producers' council; Directors' Union; Actors' Union; Stunts' Union, where we conduct free surgeries and provide free medicines. We make

sure that we do the best of whatever we could do.

Can you tell us about the charitable activities that you coordinate?

My father is philanthropist and he has done a lot of social work. In fact, there was an organization called ‘Mercy Home’ at Kilpauk in Chennai which he took over and supported in a big way. He used to make sure that his co-stars celebrate their birthdays with the destitute people at Mercy home.

I run a charitable trust ‘Jai Shankar Medical and Charitable Trust.’ My wife is an ENT surgeon, and we mainly coordinate health camps related to eye care and ENT for the needy.

There are so many social responsibilities around us. Each of us has a role to play in our society. Don Bosco school’s former Principal and Rector Fr. Sahayaraj requested me to conduct an eye camp for the poor students who study in the night school, and I readily agreed. We conducted a huge eye camp and also gave away free spectacles to the boys. Even today, we are there for the Don Bosco students, whenever called.

Your advice for those who aspire to be ophthalmologists?

We have a lot of eye related problems in our country and we require more ophthalmologists. Even though there are many eye care centres coming up, it is still not enough. The number of eye diseases is increasing, thanks to the technology, media, television, iPad, laptops, and everything. More and more doctors are welcome and we require people who can do quality work.

I welcome ophthalmologists. Do your job sincerely! It is extremely important that you are focused and be the perfect ophthalmologist.

*Inspirational stories of uncelebrated
people whose organisations strive to make a
difference in the lives of the deprived*

CHANGEMAKERS



SCAVENGING THROUGH AN UNDERMINED GOLDMINE

The war against caste in the diversity-rich country that is India, is silently annihilating the livelihoods of many hardworking and perseverant men, women and their children. This war makes national news almost every day, however, the little-known battles that are quietly being fought in small towns and villages go unrecognised. The usual order of the day involves sifting through occurrences that make it to the speeches of deafening political rallies. But Rajamanickam, a man who aims to bridge the chasm of caste division, with innocence that guilts, asks me, “Why doesn’t the media want to cover important issues like these? Aren’t they as important as any other national problem? Just because we belong to a small district, does that mean our struggles are any lesser?” Rajamanickam is referring to the issue of manual scavenging which plagues the Arunthathiyar community, and despite a law

being passed in Parliament, still continues.

ARUL, an acronym for Action for Rural Upliftment and Leadership, was founded by Mr. K Rajamanickam in Soorankottai, Ramanathapuram along with 7 trustees in 2008. The organisation focuses on rehabilitating manual scavengers in villages of Ramanathapuram district by providing alternative employment and education for their children. On asking them about their work, a plethora of experiences flood the discussion. Most of these experiences reflect the sheer discrimination faced by and the dehumanisation of the community.

“The occupation itself is a huge disrespect to human life. Manual scavengers are reduced to mechanical beings with no integrity by both the higher caste communities and the government. There are rising cases of suicide due to low pay, lack of medical treatment and drinking problems.” Many health problems are involved due of the risk of contracting skin diseases when working in septic tanks. The government hospitals which are supposedly free for all, ask for a fee when they treat manual scavengers. Rajamanickam agrees that lack of mechanisation is what drives the business of manual scavenging but doesn’t whole-heartedly concur.

“Mechanisation is possible, but the amount of money allocated for sanitation by the government is so little, that it doesn’t even suffice for basic sanitation facilities. People of higher communities make sure that the generations of manual scavengers are ‘put in their place’ and never take any other occupation up.” So it a legal problem or a money problem? “A caste problem is what it is and we must see it as that. The government is intentionally holding back funding and modern machinery to feed their oppressive mindsets.” Despite the existing Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 law which

punishes the act of employing manual scavengers with a fine of Rs.2,000, the police fail to enforce the law and no FIRs have been filed against those who employ manual scavengers. The other angle of monetary issues is also instrumental but not the main reason behind the existence of the occupation. “So much is put aside for an upcoming wine shop, but the government doesn’t care about the issue of manual scavenging. In fact, they prefer it were there. To pay them a menial Rs.50-70 for several hours of work benefits them more than having to pay Rs.2000 of electricity charges for using machines to clean the sewer. In other developed countries, work determines wages. In our country, caste determines wages.” The vortex of selfishness doesn’t seem to end.

Rajamanickam further expands on how future generations of these scavengers are gradually trapped in this vortex, leaving them with no other option but to camouflage themselves in this caste-shaming society by taking to their fathers’ professions. “Children of manual scavengers are discouraged from pursuing a good education and their path towards this inhumane occupation is pre-planned. The idea that children from this particular community are only deserving of menial work and meagre pay and not a proper education is damaging to both them and the country’s future.”

So where does ARUL come in? “We’ve observed that children who get a 10th Standard education are least likely to go back to the profession than other children with lower education. So we have put to use a Central Government scheme for economically backward children that provides them scholarships to study in schools. Many headmasters ward us away, but on showing them a copy of the Government Order, they admit the children into their institutions.”

ARUL has helped 500 children study at schools and colleges of their

choice. The children also receive encouragement from their own parents to study. But when it comes to doubts and clarifications in their homework or even career path confusion, they cannot turn to their parents for the right guidance. For this reason, ARUL runs a tuition centre where they provide free guidance and encourage the spirit of inquiry. They also provide career counselling and advice for those on the crossroads. Rajamanickam recollects an incident. “A young boy who has a Bachelors in Chemistry was interested in Sanitation, so we helped him get a diploma and sanitation and is currently trying to get a job as a sanitation inspector.” But Rajamanickam intends for the boy to get promoted as a district officer to prove the point that even a manual scavenger’s son can make it to the top.

“Generations have been subject to such dehumanisation, but we want to help uplift the current and future generations so this does not continue.” With regard to rehabilitation by employment, ARUL has helped scavengers get promotions to posts of. Some hold jobs as drivers. Women scavengers work as housemaids and typists. Currently 320 people are members of the association and 500 scavengers have been successfully rehabilitated through ARUL. Future plans involve starting a co-operative bank of their own in order to provide hassle-free loans that no scavenger has to bribe his way through. Rajamanickam keeps a triumphant face on and concludes, “We will get through this. With the support and strength of the community, we will eradicate this inhuman practice. Because every life matters, and no one has the right to devalue a fellow human being on any basis.”

— *Divya Karthikeyan*



THE FIGHT FOR INCLUSION

The United Nations commemorates December 3 every year, as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. The relevance of this day becomes all the more important with every passing year, simply because the differently-abled continue to remain bereft of acceptance from within society. This year, Aim for Seva's Krupa Home worked towards correcting just that. "It's perhaps the biggest challenge that we face today: the fact that those with developmental disabilities are subconsciously not looked at as belonging to the community we live in, and represent," says Dr Radhika Soundararajan, Director of Aim for Seva Krupa Home. She continues: "Those who have developmental problems are like other human beings, but often miss out on being treated like other people. Our aim, this year, was to change that."

It was with this mission that the Krupa Home worked towards a sensitization drive on World Disability Day, this year. "We visited

schools and colleges and got the residents of our homes to talk to students of these institutions, and show them how they were also part of the world they lived in,” explains Dr Radhika, “This, we hoped, would encourage these students to change their attitudes towards such children with developmental challenges.” But by her own admission, Radhika feels that the real victory is only when acceptance turns into action: “You see a movie that you appreciate, go home and forget about it all,” she says, “Similarly, the big concern is that a similar occurrence might arise here as well. We have done our best in spreading awareness and sensitizing children about what it’s like to be a child with developmental disabilities. But how far will it remain? How much action can be expected from such awareness? I believe that is the question we need to ask ourselves.” What she does believe needs to be done, is nothing short of more sensitisation and awareness, in the hope that someday those with developmental disabilities may be treated without discrimination.

According to Radhika, there are three categories of developmental disabilities that exist: mental retardation, autism and cerebral palsy. “At Krupa, we do our best to be care-givers to our residents who suffer from all of these conditions,” says Radhika, “Our residents’ ages start from 21 and go up to 58, and our staff is a team of 20.” But one of the more heart-warming aspects of Krupa’s work in the area has been the manner in which the home encourages residents to care for each other. “The extent of one’s condition may not be as significant as a fellow resident. What we do in these cases, is encourage this person to care for someone who may be able to care for themselves, or may suffer from a worse condition,” she says. Not surprisingly, the results are for all to see. The Krupa Home has successfully managed to do its bit in inclusive care and attention for all its residents. But Radhika still

maintains that attitudes need to change for the better, and change quickly at that. “Take physical disabilities for example. If you take a look around you, there is no supportive infrastructure for people who are physically challenged,” she says, “Right from our ATMs to the steps on our buses, our infrastructure isn’t disabled-friendly. There is an urgent need for ramps at such facilities.”

Caring for residents at Krupa Home is no doubt, a mighty challenge. However, Radhika believes that the key to making it work is to allow individual growth and decision-making. “We desist from telling our residents what to do or imposing a set of strict regulations for them to follow. However, we do encourage discipline by way of hygiene; there is also a time for prayer and visiting temples. It has worked.”

The future certainly looks bright for the NGO that has its plans laid out and hopes to achieve its goals in due course. One of these, of course, is to bring about greater participation in vocational activities. “This includes weaving, paper mache; and we even recently got into a partnership with Nizhal to encourage the planting of trees and thus bringing about environmental sensitivity. We also hope to expand and take on more residents in the future,” says Radhika. One of the major goals that the home plans on achieving in the near future is early intervention – caring for young children with developmental issues. “So far, our youngest resident is just 21. We hope to care for younger people and thus help them cope with their condition. The earlier we start caring for them, the easier it probably gets.”

No doubt, the biggest challenge to inclusion and caring is sensitization. “Such a condition means that there is little chance of such people living normal lives. However, it is important that we allow them to live as close to normalcy,” concludes Radhika,

“We have jobs based on our individual ability. If we could figure out a way by which those with developmental challenges also find jobs according to their individual ability, it will certainly go a long way.” It is in this respect that the Krupa Home has gone about furthering its mission – a mission that it hopes will see its accomplishment sooner than later, in the interest of the society we live in today.





GIVING BACK TO THE SOCIETY

Social Work is probably the only realm where handling multiple roles is not equated to being a ‘Jack of all trades’. We all come across individuals who suddenly change their fields of study or work. Rarely do we come across people who change fields to ‘give back to the society’.

This is the story of one such man—Gopalan, Founder, Akshaya Trust. After selling his company *Aqua Chemicals & Systems* to the US in 1999, he made a very conscious decision before hopping into the second innings of business.

“I wanted to give back to the society. And the non-compete agreement of three years with the acquiring party gave me the space to do so,” says Gopalan, who started the Akshaya Trust in 2001. The trust identified the students who were most in need of resources to continue their education. Besides financial support, the trust also conducted once in every two months Personality

Development classes, Public Speaking workshops, and regularly monitored their performance. Eventually, these extra classes were made compulsory so that all the students reaped its benefits.

Gopalan tried to imbibe the ‘chain of giving’ in these students, wherein they would give back to this initiative after they gain employment. Of the 300 students who had been supported by the Trust, 50 are employed; 40 are contributing towards this initiative. Today, children of street vendors, *dhobis*, and auto drivers are all educated and employed in enterprises such as TCS, and earn a minimum of 20,000 rupees a month.

Giving back to society knows no limits, at least in our country where wealth and poverty co-exist. Gopalan seems to have gotten to the root of this principle. In 2002, the Trust established a home for the aged at Mudichur, near Tambaram in Chennai, for destitute senior citizens. The home provides the inmates with food, clothing, shelter, medicines, as well as recreation. On admission, the inmates are all categorized so that the healthy senior citizens can take up simple responsibilities at the home on rotation basis, and those who are terminally ill or bed ridden can be taken care of by the staff.

With regular recreation programmes, *bhajans* and a local tie up with an auto man, taxi driver, and hospitals, the home has evolved a culture of management where every inmate and staff know all the requisite numbers that would come handy in any emergency situation.

Now, ten years after its establishment, the home is managed without Gopalan’s presence. “They do not need me anymore. Right from acquiring provisions to medical care, responsibilities are shared by the inmates and the staff,” he says excitedly.

The man who donated his first property to the trust for constructing the home, is today happy in being no more than a well-wisher. Mr. Gopalan's enthusiasm to work in the field of education received fresh energy when he came across an 83 year old school—Sri Karpakavalli Balika Middle School—in Mylapore at Chennai. This school was apparently at the verge of closure in 2008. Little did any onlooker know that his entry marked a whole new beginning for this aided school? Gopalan believes that education is the only means to bring about a constructive change in any society.

“There was no discipline or system and to make things worse, punctuality was the worst hit casualty here. Half the students would not come in uniforms,” recalls Gopalan, who had tried numerous methods to reverse this situation.

He introduced the penalty system where every late comer would walk into his room, take one rupee and drop it in the box that was placed in every classroom. His intention was to admit his inability to change these children. The students began to feel embarrassed about this practice and within two months, late coming reduced drastically. After four months, this system was stalled as there was no need for it anymore.

Gopalan's excitement helped him recognise ways of motivating the children to follow good habits. He formed a group of volunteers amongst the students, who would assess the best student and best class in the school. And the prize was what the children of the winning class wanted. “Asking my students what they wanted marked a massive difference in our relationship, we became closer. The children became confident of voicing their difficulties and needs. The communication between the management and the students was alive, like never before,” he remarks exuberantly.

The team under Gopalan concentrated on providing all the necessary amenities in the first three years of taking over. Reverse osmosis plant for drinking water, additional toilets, and an auditorium were built.

The focus was then turned to the quality of education. He says, “Education cannot and must not stop with textbooks and subjects. Imbibing the right values is also the responsibility of this system. Voluntary attitude must be inculcated at a very young age, else it would be too late to imbibe them.”

Socially responsible children (SRC) cell was introduced to encourage students to contribute to their school and the nearby locality. “The sense of giving back to society must come in only now. Because at this age, school is society to them and all the little changes they contribute to will inculcate a positive attitude towards individual’s commitment to societal development,” he asserts.

The concentration on subjects and values was well balanced here. On observing that the children were not good at the fundamental concepts of math, the management decided to find out the best possible way of attending to every child, considering their ability to grasp concepts. The search culminated at www.khanacademy.org, a website that provides free education anytime, anywhere. The adaptive assessment and the feature of breaking down every problem into simple steps makes it user friendly.

E-learning of math concepts was introduced for classes 6 and 7. The one-on-one learning helped students to progress at their respective pace and take up any number of practical tests. Soon, regular mathematic classes were discontinued and computerization was taken up on a large scale. “The children no longer have to

feel bad or think before asking any doubts. All they have to do is replay the video and look at the examples. Self-learning is encouraging for students. From Mathematics, to English is the aim in the coming years.”

Instead of giving scholarships to top three scorers, the management decided to recognize and support those students who showed improvement, be it even from 40 to 50 percent. These targets were fixed by the students themselves and once they achieved they were awarded. This made the children compete with themselves, and not with the top scorers.

One of Gopalan’s dreams has been to develop a self-reliant village, which found no directions until 2012 Diwali. The trust provided houses and household articles to all the six houses that were damaged in the fire accident in the slum located near the school. With fresh rapport built in the region, Gopalan is all set to embark on the journey of developing a self-reliant slum.

Assistance for education, health, vocational training, and interest free loans are on the cards and 150 slums around Mangolai will be covered under this initiative. From business to slums, the Trust has come a long way under Gopalan’s aegis.

Was all this planned?

“Way back in 1980, I had no such ideas. I entered business, and sold the company at the right opportunity. I realized that money was not everything in life and I must give back to the society. The urge was very strong and still keeps me going,” he signs off.

— *Shanmuga Priya. T*



GOD'S OWN HOME

There are lots of experiences and special days in one's life. I would like to share with you one such experience that I shall never forget—my visit to Anandam, a home for the destitute elderly in Ambattur, Chennai. The few hours I spent here taught me life's lessons in a subtle way.

Although it was raining heavily, I was determined not to re-schedule my plans as I had already informed Bhageerathy that I would be visiting them.

When I reached the home around 11:30 AM, I was led straight to the dining hall where all the elders were seated. Bhageerathy introduced me to Natarajan and Saraswathi who were busy serving food for the elders. She addressed them as *Appa* and *Amma*, meaning father and mother. She said that they were as loving and caring as a parent would be, and it is not just her but everyone in the home who address them so.

“Have you had your lunch?” was the instant question posed by Natarajan.

“I had my breakfast just before I arrived here. But, I would not mind coffee though,” I responded politely.

“Sure! After I have finished serving food,” he said.

I requested Natarajan and Saraswathi to continue their work and stepped aside to click pictures.

I overheard Natarajan speak to the elders as he served rice and felt as though I was witnessing a domestic function.

“Do you want an extra serving of rice?” “Please take some more *sambhar*?”

“Shall I pour some more butter milk?” “Is the *payasam* tasty?”

The conversations seemed endless.

I noticed a few who sat without expressions, while there were more who were happy when I clicked their pictures.

One of the grandmothers—Kalavathi— pulled me by my hand and asked me to sit beside her. I was touched by her kindness and told her that I shall wait for her outside the dining hall.

I entered the kitchen and found a lady making hot *vadas*. “Today’s food is being sponsored by a donor. Hence, *vada* and *payasam* is being served along with lunch. It is almost every day our elders get to eat such good food, as we have donors supporting us regularly,” said Bhageerathy.

The kitchen was fully equipped and the store room had enough stock. There were grinders and also a flour mill machine in the

service area. “It is our elders who maintain the kitchen. That is why it is so clean,” said Bhageerathy proudly.

I remembered my promise to Kalavathi and rushed outside the hall. I found her waiting for me along with her spouse Radhakrishnan. We sat on a bench in the verandah and began to chatter.

“I worked in HAL, Bangalore as a draughtsman for 35 years. My elder son Ravichandra died of blood cancer when he was 20. My younger son Satya Babu is a software engineer and has won accolades in Chicago for his own concept in Oracle programming. He returned to India mentally disturbed as he was deceived by his friend. Despite counseling, he refused to go to Nimhans for treatment. One day he suddenly disappeared. We tried our best to find him, but failed,” said Radhakrishnan sorrowfully.

“Our daughter is married and lives in Chittoor. We did not want to be a burden, hence decided to live in an old age home. We sold all our property and came here,” he added.

“How did you know about Anandam?” I enquired.

“At first, we settled in an ashram at Thirupati. We did not like staying here as it was not hygienic. There was a portion allocated for leprosy affected people in the same premise. One of the residents suggested Anandam, and gave us this address. I think that it is God who sent us here. We feel as if we are living in God’s own home,” said Radhakrishnan with tear-filled eyes.

Comforting the couple that they will soon find their lost son, I bid adieu to them.

I then traced my way to Bhageerathy’s office and spent some time with her to know more about Anandam and how it was started.

“I was working for the Indian Bank at Villivakkam and used to manage the pension section. I knew many elders who used to wait in front of the bank since four in the morning to claim their monthly pension. Several of them have complained to me about their children ill-treating them and taking away the little pension money they had. I used to wonder about those elders who did not have any source of income and wanted to do something for them,” said Bhageerathy.

“I shared my idea of starting an old age home with few of my friends, and we decided to focus on the deserted elderly. We went looking out for a rented house, and it was then one of my bank contacts offered to give her house free of rent to run the old age home. We started with three inmates, and slowly expanded to two more rented homes in the vicinity as the number stretched to 10. After a few years, we decided to build our own home and mobilized funds from our contacts to purchase this 15-ground plot at Ambattur. Now, we are able to house 100 senior citizens who have been abandoned by their families. For me, each of them is my parent/grandparent; and I too feel treated like a child here,” she added.

Natarajan entered the room with a steaming filter coffee and a bowlful of *sundal*. He waited until I finished the coffee and asked if I liked it.

“It tastes extraordinary because it is prepared with love and affection,” I said smilingly.

While Anandam is entirely managed by elders who are housed here, two caretakers are employed to take care of those who are bedridden. All the elders go through a master health checkup at Sundaram Medical Hospital before they are admitted, and they are given six sets of new clothes every year.

“We call them our parents. Therefore, we don’t want to give them old clothes to wear. The children in the neighbourhood visit the home during evenings and the grandparents enjoy teaching them. Students who had scored below 30 marks are now class toppers,” said Bhageerathy with pride.

There is so much potential in these elders. All they need is love, care and affection. We don’t need any special day to make our parents or grandparents make them feel their worth. If you have never told them how much you care for them, do say it before it is too late!

— *Marie Banu*





BEFORE AND AFTER

Gemini fly over, an iconic landmark in Chennai City, has been the bridge for several abandoned mentally ill persons to reach Rafi home.

When Rafi was returning after work one day, he noticed a man in soiled clothes taking food from a trash bin. This happened the next day, and even the day after.” I first thought that he was poor and abandoned. It was only after a few days did I realize that he was also mentally ill. I then took him to Karunaiillam, an orphanage,” said Rafi.

Rafi began referring people whom he found on the streets to orphanages and homes for the mentally ill, and was happy to see most of them recover and reunite with their families. When one of the orphanage coordinators asked him to establish a home of his own, Rafi decided to set forth this idea.

“I started looking around for rented premises, but none were willing to offer me space as I told them that it was meant for the ‘mentally ill’. I was living at PeriannaMudali Street near Stanley Medical College, and had two guest rooms in the first floor that was vacant. I convinced my wife; shifted my family to the first floor; and set up a home for the mentally ill in the ground floor,” said Rafi.

From 5 the number of inmates grew to 20, and it was getting difficult for Rafi and his spouse to manage their neighbours who complained of noise. He therefore moved his family to Kerala and started to manage the home on his own.

“One of my donors, the Managing Director of The Chennai Silks, visited my home to share a festive gift with the inmates. Sensing my difficulties, he offered to buy land to construct a home. This is how we purchased the 1.69 acre plot at Thirunilai, a Village in Ponneri Taluk in Thiruvallur District in Tamil Nadu,” said Rafi.

In 2000, Rafi established Anbagam Rehabilitation Centre at Thirunilai, and housed 30 inmates to start with. Today, this home provides care and shelter for 100persons (74 men and 26 women) who suffer from mental illness. Till date, 950 persons have been rescue from street’s and highway’s, and 750 have been reunited with their families. The Ten Trustee members of Anbagam hail from seven different states of India and represent all religions in our country.

“We do our best in reuniting the inmates with their families,” said Rafi sharing an album with pictures of the inmates before they arrived at Anbagam, and after they have been reunited with their families. Some of the pictures were a striking contrast though.

The block for women inmates was inaugurated on April 28that

Anbagam. “We now have room for 24 more women here,” said Rafiya, Rafi’s daughter who now manages the women’s block.

“Housing 100 inmates in the home does involve a lot of costs. So, how do you manage these expenses,” I asked.

“We have several donors who support us. For instance, Mr. Mahadevan of Hot Breads provide us with medicines; and Chennai Silks regularly provide us 10,000 a month,” explains Rafi.

Walking around the premise, I noticed a few men relaxing in the tiffin shed. Bobby was *over whelming excited when he saw me click pictures*, but the others seemed least disturbed by my presence.

The cows and bulls were grazing in the front yard, and few men were drawing water from the hand pump. The kitchen was in action as the lunch time neared, and few inmates, both men and women, were assisting the cook. The store room was stocked with provisions and there was a repetition of *Ramnam* in the background.

The few hours that I spent at Anbagam, felt like being in paradise as I sensed only love and care here.

— *Marie Banu*



TALE OF TWIN SISTERS

As I entered Apollo MedSKills at Annanagar in Chennai, I noticed Kanmani and Karthika connecting a handsfree to their mobile phone. They plugged one earpiece in each of their ears and began to chat quietly. I was curious to know if they were listening to music, or speaking to someone else over phone. Sensing my presence, they came towards me and enquired. “Hello Ma’am! Whom would you like to meet?”

“I have come to write a story about Apollo MedSKills. Can I please meet your coordinator?” I asked.

“Story?” reiterated the twin sisters and went to call Murthy, the Centre Incharge.

Murthy received me warmly and introduced me to his staff and students. I asked if I can converse with Kanmani and Karthika, who caught my eye, and he agreed.

“It is always amazing to see twins. And you both are lovely,” I initiated the conversation.

Kanmani and Karthika exchanged a shy smile.

To put them at ease, I started clicking their pictures. “Can you show it to me?” “Can we get a copy of the pictures?” asked the twins spontaneously.

“I will, if you spend some time talking to me about yourselves,” I bartered politely.

They willingly agreed and we sat together to chatter.

Kanmani and Karthika’s parents Karuppasamy and Natchiyar are weavers at Virudhunagar. With the power cuts predominant in the rural areas, their power loom did not fetch them enough money. Last June, Kanmani gained admission in BSc Mathematics, while Karthika awaited her admission in a Medical college. Karuppasamy tried to persuade Karthika to join the weaving trade, but she was determined to pursue her education. It was at this time they saw the advertisement about Apollo MedSkills courses in a regional paper. Both moved into a hostel in Chennai and are now undergoing the specialized course in Radiology & Imaging Technology at Apollo MedSkills.

“We both wanted to stay together wherever we were. This is why we joined the Paramedical course at Apollo last year,” said Kanmani adding that, “My parents were happy to know that in a year’s time we would be provided an employment at Apollo Hospital. Given my family’s financial situation this was the best option we could choose.”

Apollo MedSkills is a national skilling and social initiative vertical

of Apollo Hospital. They offer one-year diploma courses for Paramedicals and encourage students from rural and economically poor backgrounds to enroll. Students who have secured 50 percent marks or above in their twelfth standard examination are eligible to join the Paramedical course. Specialisation is offered in Medical Lab Technology, Radiology & Imaging Technology, Cardiac Non Invasive Technology, Operation Theatre Technology, and Dialysis Technology; and a six-month internship at Apollo Hospital is provided. Once the students successfully complete their internship programme, they are offered placement at Apollo Hospital and other hospitals of repute.

“Do you miss living with your parents? How often do you visit them?” I asked concernedly.

“This is the first time we have been separated from our parents. But, we have got used living in a hostel now. When we miss our parents we give them a missed call. They would call back and speak with us. We are able to visit them only once in six months,” said Karthika heaving a sigh.

“So, were you speaking to your parents when I first came in?” I asked.

“Yes!” they replied in chorus.

I reckoned that this was why they had one handsfree connected to their mobile so that they both can listen and speak to their parents at the same time.

Kanmani and Karthika though best friends confess that they do share fights in common. Their only recreation is talking a walk down the neighbourhood. “We receive a monthly pocket money of five hundred rupees each, and we hardly spend that money,”

said Kanmani responsibly.

The twins took me around the campus and led me to their classroom where over 22 students undergoing the Paramedical course were seated.

The boys and girls were competing to draw my attention and I enjoyed every moment interacting with them. 16 of them came from Kancheepuram, Vellore, and Virudhunagar districts, while the rest were from Chennai.

“Are you happy to pursue this course? Why did you not choose to study BA or BSc?” I asked.

“The Paramedical course is much better than BA or BSc. In a year’s time we get qualified to work in a hospital and we are assured of placement through Apollo MedSkills. We can start earning sooner,” said a proud Vicky.

“My family can’t wait for three or four years for me to contribute to the household income. My father is being treated for cancer and I need to support him,” said Latha.

“Studying at Apollo MedSkills gives me a lot of pride. We have the best faculty and we are also taught spoken English and computer skills,” said Karthik.

After listening to their prompt responses and exchanging jokes, I bid adieu to the young buds that were waiting for their turn to blossom.

— *Marie Banu*



DHARMA SANS / WITHOUT DHARMA

Today, an unattached world is a laughable and preposterous concept, and time and time again the corporate world reiterates for us the ease and comforts of complying with market forces. The recent catastrophe of the Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka has prompted a global discussion on working conditions and wage payments of and to sweatshop workers around the world, and the once simple idea of mass production and consumption faces ethical hurdles today.

A former educator by profession and a teacher at heart, Dr. VR Devika formed the Aseema Trust in 1998 to bring together art and education through puppetry, dance, theatre and music, and the Trust has evolved to accommodate Gandhian values through various activities. Lectures aside, Dr. Devika has worked towards emphasising the spirit of self-reliance free from market forces as evident in Gandhi's teachings. "Driven by Gandhi's

idea of education and economics, I decided to propagate the activity that would demonstrate independent, dharmic way of production and imbibe knowledge in charkha spinning. The activity makes you re-examine dignity of labour and respect for your country's culture.”

Of the many awards and accolades in her kitty, her most significant are a honorary citizenship from the Governor of Maryland during her participation in US State Department's International Visitor Leadership programme in the US; British Council's Charles Wallace Award for Arts in Education in UK; Kalasevabharathi award from Bharath Kalachar for contributions to arts and education; a lifetime achievement award from the Amir Khusro music academy; and Vocational Excellence Awards from Rotary clubs. Her work has taken her to interact and deliver lectures to students of various schools in the city. She has also extensively travelled for conferences and lectures in Cambodia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and Sri Lanka.

Dr. Devika's views on consumerism strike strong, with the current economic scenario of our country often a theme. “Today, we spend money on something that gratifies us for a few minutes. But, do we know what we're spending our money on? Toxicity of a product? Air in a chips packet? Are we ensuring dignity of labour? But, the finished product of a charkha is more than just a loin cloth, it's a symbol of self-reliance and the glorious heritage of Indian handloom,” she explains.

Her tryst with education can be summed up simply as fate's will to guide her passion of teaching. On her arrival to Mysore in 1974, her application for a Master's program at Madras

University did not materialise, but an opportunity to work as a teacher at an upcoming school arose. Falling head over heels in love with teaching, she made the choice to be in education forever. “Once I was smitten by the field, I made sure that even when I left teaching as a regular job, I would find ways and means of working for children. One of my student’s parents were dance teachers, and I was wondering how I could use *Bhartanatyam* as a tool for education,” she says. Post her teaching stint at PS Senior Secondary School in Chennai, she noticed a considerable amount of myths on rural performing arts amongst cityfolk and decided to move in the direction of awareness of rural arts. “Due to the urban-rural disconnect, there are bound to be misconceptions. So, I joined as Director of Education at Dakshin Chitra, wrote columns, and choreographed performances to help bridge this divide and promote the rural arts using story-telling mediums such as puppetry and dance. Dr. Deborah Thiagarajan, the current art and culture historian for Dakshin Chitra, and I then joined hands to draft a proposal to the Ford Foundation for an organisation dedicated towards reinterpreting rural art for the urban audience. So after my 11 years with Dakshin Chitra and Madras Craft Foundation, Aseema Trust gained shape and I decided to focus my time towards addressing and bridging the artistic divide with Gandhian values.”

Making time for Dakshin Chitra and the Madras Craft Foundation whenever possible, Dr. Devika began studying Gandhi’s philosophies and education policies. “I wanted to see how relevant it was in today’s world, and well, we’re currently going in the opposite direction. Gandhiji emphasised on the importance of earning and learning from class one, examining facts and concepts through one’s own unique perception and consuming only Indian products.” Wildly successful in her interactions with children,

she is overjoyed at the children's fascination with the charkha. "The charkha is a looking glass for the ideal Indian country. It's a symbol of rich history and culture, spans a vast geography, and tells us the story of the true Indian spirit of economics, and children bumble with questions every time. I also take the time to tell them that of the 10 clothes they buy throughout the year, at least two should be handloom. It's okay if I reach out to only 5 from a group of 100; I deem even that a success."

Five important ideas of Gandhian Philosophy that Dr. Devika feels should be lived by are: Examine everything through different angles; Avoid all intoxication; Respect all Indian languages; use and buy nature friendly and indigenous products; and bring in dharma and truth in our daily lives. Talking about the relevancy of Gandhian philosophy she says, "It's a very foolish idea to even think Gandhi's philosophies would be relevant today. It's very contextual—the application. But in a way, it is possible. I feel Gandhi was extremely clever when he assessed the possibility of Satyagraha protests getting violent, hence the charkha. It is a form of self-rule, and symbolises ultimate swaraj. Today we're in a crisis, because the more technologically dependent we become, the more we are at risk. We call ourselves modern for harnessing atomic power when we can simply harness solar power. But, the political power struggle is taking its toll on power as a result, apart from other issues.

Let go of this temporary power and everything is likely to fall into place," she signs off.

— *Divya Karthikeyan*



MINDING THE MIND

When The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health (BALM) was established by Banyan in 2007, the objective of establishing this “strategic initiative” lay in the desire to take on a more academic approach towards mental health. In doing so, what the NGO also planned to achieve was a three-pronged approach (dissemination of The Banyan’s work, increase human resource and train future personnel) to furthering its cause. “The plan was to keep the focus on mental health and social action towards the same,” says MirjamDijkxhoorn, Deputy Director of BALM. With a specific focus on mental health and conducting extensive research on the same, the initiative has today, come a long way.

“Working at BALM since 2008 has been a whole new experience for me,” says Mirjam who is the Deputy Director of the initiative since 2010. “The fact that we get a chance to research, publish articles, and utilize forums like seminars to express our findings

goes on to give the work we do that extra fillip,” she says. What an initiative like BALM has also managed to do, is provide an academic platform for the kind of work that we do, and thus allow education to takeoff in a big way.

BALM has initiated the Institute of Mental Health, Social Sciences and Trans disciplinary Research (IMHST) in collaboration with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and VU University Amsterdam, which offers an MA programme in Social Work (Mental Health) and is preparing to start another MA programme in Social Work and Counselling which is expected to commence in the coming year. But the academic prowess of the organization aside, it's the major contributions to government schemes that have won it many a laurel. The most noteworthy of these is the feasibility study that it conducted last year, on the central government's MNREGA scheme. “Our study focused on inclusion of differently abled people under this scheme, including working on suggesting what would be suitable working hours for such personnel,” says Mirjam. The results of the feasibility study were then handed over to the government, which is now actively looking at its implementation. However, the bigger indication of its great rapport with the government – undoubtedly an endorsement of its work – has been the manner in which The Banyan's clients are not necessarily relocating to government run health centers, but are co-locating mental health clinics in government run centres, which are accessible to anyone in the community.

The one area that makes BALM's work in mental health truly special is its non-clinical approach towards researching the same. “We study the social factors involved in mental wellbeing,” says Mirjam. She continues: “Our studies focus on what kind of role society plays in shaping the mental makeup of the individual, and how his or her mental framework changes based on the society

he lives in. Many studies at BALM are action research studies, by implementing programmes on the ground and studying its implications during implementation.” In the process of this non-clinical-yet-academic approach towards researching and understanding mental health better, BALM has also managed to enhance The Banyan’s understanding of mental health. Proof of this lies in the many training programmes for The Banyan that it has organized; even going on to help implement these programmes. The seminars that it has conducted have thrown light on various burning topics like Social Entitlements and Mental Health Issues, Perspectives of Mental Illness in India, The Role of Faith Healing in Mental Healthcare, Human Rights and Mental Health Institutions and Media and Mental Illness.

A well-thought-out structure with customized steps to ensure the right approach towards mental healthcare includes the following strategies: Contextual Analysis, Strategy formulation, Partner visits and exchange of ideas, Creation of a Training, Capacity-building and Implementation plan, Monitoring and Evaluation of impact and fine tuning of practices, and Hand Holding and Phase off. BALM has also partnered with the Chennai chapter of the Family Planning Association of India (FPAI) until 2012, and is also in the process of integrating Mental Health Services into FPAI’s urban community level clinic (Chennai Corporation’s Health post). The target group of such an initiative includes people with mental illness, their caregivers, the community, community-level workers, general practitioners and government health facilities. Other partnerships with Catholic Relief Services and Missionaries of Charity have also helped further the cause of BALM, allowing it to care for inmates of the Missionaries of Charity Home in Kolkata, also engaging in their rehabilitation – work that will continue even after BALM’s role ends.

Through its efforts, two goals continue to remain atop its list of priorities: to expand access to mental healthcare and increase active participation the mental health sector. However, Mirjam herself believes that the drive to research some more, is no doubt, the biggest goal at hand. “There’s no doubt that continuing to engage in research is a priority,” she says, “international research grants are being given for it, and there’s a whole lot of encourage to conduct extensive research in mental healthcare, today.” Needless to say, with research, strong emphasis is also laid on publishing articles and information dissemination. However, another area that Mirjam hopes BALM will focus on is the introduction of diploma courses, in addition to the already-existing MA courses at the IMHST academy. “They will really go on to make a difference towards education in mental healthcare,” she adds.





VOLUNTEERING AS A CATALYST

Most of us reading this story might know what it is to be a volunteer in a development organization. What is more onerous is the task of channelizing volunteers' energy and interests for the common good. In this story, we are going to learn about one of the country's largest youth volunteer NGO – BHUMI.

Bhumi was started in August 2006, by a group of young people who wanted to do something for the country. Working on multiple issues brought them to focus on the education of marginalized kids. When we have grey eminences and young blood alike, debating on the need to reform the present education system, here we have young volunteers striving to make the little difference they can in the quality of learning among underprivileged kids. The organization established its first chapter in Chennai (its largest till date) and today, works across the cities of Chennai, Mumbai, New Delhi, Tiruchirapalli, Pune, and Bangalore.

Bhumi is a team of just 4 employees, supported by a 1000+ volunteers, all of whom are below 30 years of age, reaching out to 8,000 children, in just a span of 7 years. “Volunteers are our strength. Their commitment and excitement reposes faith in what we are doing every day,” says Dr Prahalathan, Founder, Bhumi. The organisation’s mission is very clear. They work to bridge gaps in the quality of education received by these children, by providing a platform for the volunteers to work on bringing inclusiveness in the society. Interestingly, the team is at it – equality and inclusion can and must start only from here.

Volunteers at Bhumi are engaged in numerous projects. Besides, they are also involved in raising funds to the extent of 40 percent of the resources. Some of the projects needing a mention are *Kanini* (computer literacy programme), *Speak Out*, *Lakshya*, *Little Einsteins*, *Nakshatra* and *Joy to the World*. In the computer literacy programme, the children are taught basics of computing, and advanced concepts depending on their aptitude levels. Recognizing the need for sharp communication skills and the trend of marginalized kids not being able to communicate in English confidently, Bhumi introduced this project called ‘Speak Out’, which is an interactive English learning programme for kids who have little or no proficiency in the language.

As a naïve listener, I interrupt to know how children receive all this and the challenges they face in reaching the kids. “What we do is essentially a supplementary education model, taking away the children’s play time. So, we got to make the content as interesting as possible, so that kids come to our classes,” explains Prahalathan.

Are the volunteers seen as regular teachers?

He responds, “That is another challenge we face. By restricting the age limit of volunteers to 30 years, we were able to ensure a fraternal bonding between the children and the volunteers. Though this approach has also resulted in leadership creation for nation building among young people and has created a brand for Bhumi among youth, we feel we need to break this barrier sometime soon.”

The most interesting of all the projects at Bhumi is Lakshya where every child is paired with a volunteer, who eventually learns to and ends up playing the role of a socially aware mentor. The child is helped with identifying his or her abilities and strengths. “Individual attention to every child is the key concern and the project allows us to do just that. It is very exciting to see how children develop a simple idea we mention during a casual conversation,” says a volunteer from Bhumi. From simple ideas to simple gifts, Bhumi is aware of the sensibilities of under privileged kids. The project Joy to the World is an annual initiative where the children’s wishes are fulfilled on the eve of New Year. More than 4,000 children benefitted from the programme this year.

Bhumi also has a project called Little Einsteins where Math and Science subjects are taught using live demonstrations and multimedia presentations. Working with so many children across different cities does present a case for get-together. Nakshatra is an annual talent festival organized by Bhumi for children in orphanages, giving them a chance to exhibit their talent and explore their abilities in an atmosphere of healthy competition. “Over 5,000 children from 75 children’s homes have benefitted across Chennai, Bengaluru, New Delhi, and Tiruchirapalli,” quotes Prahalathan.

Numerous projects, all running from the volunteers’ support

typifies the trend among youngsters today. Recent reports illustrate students' interest in interning with a development organization before joining mainstream UG or PG courses.

So what does volunteering mean to them?

“The reasons for volunteering are different with each volunteer. Some do it as their college requires them to do so; some do it to use their free time productively; while some get into volunteering only to know what it is like. Bhumi's passion and goals influence the new entrants to the extent that most of them stay beyond their planned schedules. One of our volunteers who came to work here for 3 months is now into his second year. Some have also taken up organizational leadership roles. There are many who recently celebrated five years at Bhumi. All this only proves that Bhumi is achieving what it set out to among the volunteers—leadership and social awareness,” he says with pride.

He admires the zeal with youngsters have taken up daunting tasks to make this country a better place. “Every year Bhumi gives awards recognizing best volunteers and the highest honour is the torch bearer award. When we gave out the 2012 awards, we realised that most of our previous awardees have chosen greater challenges. Currently, 7 out of 13 torchbearer awardees have quit their regular jobs to take up full time roles in the non-profit/education sector,” he says with a sense of satisfaction.

Having said that, awards are not a surprise! Bhumi was recognized as one of ‘Asia Pacific Emerging 100’ youth social entrepreneurship by the FYSE in 2009. The NGO was also chosen as the ‘BIG NGO initiative’ at the ‘BIG Chennai awards’ held in December 2011. Bhumi's Ms. Vaishnavi Srinivasan won the ‘Youth Volunteer of the year’ award at the ‘Apeejay India

Volunteer Awards', 2011. "That's a long way from 15th August 2006," agrees Prahalathan.

Where does one see Bhumi in the future?

While interventions in education related issues were an expected reply, he has a surprise here too. "We want to make volunteerism a national habit. With our current model we hope to reach out to 50 more cities before the end of the decade. By then we would be a few thousands strong and would like to take up newer challenges as they come," he asserts and signs off.

Bhumi's reach and impact will definitely be a story to be reckoned by its team and our readers alike!

— *Shanmuga Priya. T*





A DIFFERENT SIDE

A team from the Gandhi Study Centre has embarked on unearthing the lesser-known facts surrounding the travels of the Mahatma in Tamil Nadu...

While it's common knowledge that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi made nearly 20 trips to Tamil Nadu between 1896 and 1946, what most people of Tamil Nadu aren't aware of, is the fact that one of these trips included a trip to an orphanage in Poonamallee. It was here that the Mahatma spent a great deal of his time with volunteers and children, actively promoting social progress and through this, a freedom struggle of sorts. It was a freedom struggle that wasn't as simplistic or restricted to winning independence from the English; neither was it a freedom struggle that could be brought about by arms. Like Gandhi once said, it was a struggle that had to be approached from the bottom up — a freedom from within.

In an attempt to chronicle Gandhi's many trysts with Tamil Nadu, a team from the Gandhi Study Centre has embarked on a project that aims to bring out Gandhi's relationship with Tamil Nadu. "Right from his days in South Africa, Gandhi-ji had great respect Tamil Nadu, and nothing but admiration for its people," says A Annamalai, Director, Gandhi Study Centre, who headed this project. "Not many are aware that Gandhi actually visited this State quite frequently," Annamalai continues, "Our project aims to tell the people of this nation and the State, just that." On its last leg now, the research project, carried out by nine members of the Gandhi Study Centre —Mohan, Vitranarayanan, Shivakumar, Nithyanandam, Shivalingam, DrPrema, DrDevadutta, Saravanan and Annamalai himself — will be ready this Gandhi Jayanthi. However, Annamalai is more than eager to give us at Conversations, a preview of what the team's work is all about.

"At a basic level, our work comprised of a great deal of information gathering," he says, "A great deal of information about Gandhi-ji himself, is available at the Gandhi Museum in Madurai. But what aren't as ubiquitous, are his journeys to Tamil Nadu and his interactions with our people." In fact, it is this missing link that has now become the focus of the study carried out by the Gandhi Study Centre, and Annamalai. "Near Pallani, there lies a village called VaneerValasu. You probably won't even find it on the map today," says Annamalai, narrating yet another anecdote from Gandhi's journeys in Tamil Nadu. "During the freedom struggle, the Mahatma wanted to visit this village, which didn't have a road by way of which one could access it. So, just when Gandhi begin have to second thoughts about stopping by, the villagers of VaneerValasu started doing something unheard of before. Overnight, the village-folk began laying a brand new road, all by themselves; just so that they would have the honour of hosting the Mahatma." In fact, when the Gandhi Study Centre

team visited the place, the team was more than surprised to even find a little monument that marked Gandhi's visit to the tiny little hamlet. "Not many people know about such little things," says Annamalai.

When the compilation of the study is expected to be completed in two months from now, be ready to view its presentation like never before. According to Annamalai, an audio-visual avatar for the presentation of the documentary is currently being worked on. "We are planning on having a map of Tamil Nadu that will represent pictorially, the areas that Gandhi visited." Through the course of its research, the team made use of audio-visual equipment to record, holistically, every tiny bit of information that the study came across. "In a way, this is our gift to Gandhiji for the great man that he is. Believe it or not, even today, the people of VaneerValasu respect his memory in a manner that is unheard of before. Such is the greatness and enigma of the man, even today," Annamalai says.

This Independence Day, it is perhaps apt that Gandhi's memory be brought to the fore. For were it not for his personal struggle for freedom, the very term 'freedom' would in all probability, be missing from our vocabulary. "In fact, that is pretty much what our study also focuses on: Gandhi's approach to gaining freedom — through social progress," says Annamalai, echoing the effectiveness of Gandhi's famed Bottom-up approach to gaining freedom. Through the documentation of the Gandhi Study Centre, the people of this nation are also given the opportunity to learn the lesser-known facets of this bottom-up approach, in addition to imbibing those qualities of the great leader that made him the persona that he is today. "His simplicity, fearlessness and honesty are certainly qualities to emulate. These are definitely facets of his personality that the entire nation could do with a bit of," says

Annamalai. Needless to say, the other aspect of Gandhi's that world leaders would do well to emulate Annamalai feels, was the sense of unity he brought about through his fight for freedom. "He was the kind of person who could bring about a sense of unity between a commoner and a barrister," he says, "That was what made Gandhi special: simply the fact that he united people, united communities."

This Independence Day, before we decide to be just a bit more patriotic than we are on most days, it would definitely be worth our while to remember with love and pride, the one man who fought so that we may be free. No doubt, Mahatma Gandhi is the reason we experience freedom today. Such documentation of a lesser-known side to his work, one hopes, will go a long way in infusing a greater sense of pride in all Indians, especially those who live in the State.





EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE

It's an initiative that has spread to nearly 600 villages in Tamil Nadu today. Its aim: to provide basic quality education to every child, and its methodology three-pronged. In the last two years of its existence, city-based NGO, Eureka Kids, has managed to achieve what few social initiatives have come close to: fulfill most of its mission, and do so in a manner that is nothing short of admirable. And in doing so, not only has the NGO managed to achieve most of their goals, but has also played a stellar role in helping other NGOs realize their dreams and goals too.

“After-school education was the aim, and when we started out it was our hope that we could do our bit to educate every child out there,” says Dr A Ravishankar, Director of Eureka Child. In a nutshell, the NGO's mission follows a three-pronged action plan: direction action, partnership and most importantly internal advocacy. However, the most visible action has been

the many partnerships that Eureka Child has been involved in, more specifically with the government. “But the problem lies in quality,” says Dr Ravishankar, “In fact, that’s precisely why after-school education has assumed so much importance today – simply because most children in our schools don’t know to read a sentence properly, or even work out a simple subtraction.”

But it would only be right to say that the story of Eureka Child began much before the organization was registered two years ago. The problems that the nation faced (especially the 1992 riots) prompted Balaji Sampath (Founder, Secretary, AID India) to do his bit for children’s education and progress. When he was a student at IIT Madras, he thus began volunteering at nearby villages, teaching children a few basic subjects. It was this culture that would later go on become the driving force behind Eureka Child, even as the NGO began a slew of project launches. These included initiatives like ‘Let’s Speak English’, ‘Toy Van’ and ‘*AriviyalAnandanam*’. As their names suggest such drives included holistic education in subjects like prose and science; the ‘Toy Van’ initiative ensured that such children were given access to toys.

Today, initiatives like ‘Eureka Books’, ‘*Arogyam*’ and ‘Eureka SuperKidz’ further the cause and mission of Eureka Kids. Many would agree today, that such projects not only help achieve the objectives of basic education, but represent the growing force of innovation in the field of education. Ravishankar agrees. “One of the biggest challenges that we faced while partnering with Government-run schools, was the fact that when the supervising officer would be transferred, or left, many useful measures that he helped introduce would also inadvertently die a natural death,” he says, “That’s why, we decided that our initiatives should pass

the basic longevity test, and stay true to what they set out to do.”

And for all these impressive plans, the goals of the NGO itself aren't too lofty. “We just want to ensure that every child has a basic education,” Ravishankar says, “This is not an attempt to teach a child big things; it's only our bit to ensure that minimum education is provided to all children today.” But what must certainly win admirers for the NGO all over, is the methodology that it adopts, through its mission of education for all. “Small things like setting goals for children to ensure on-time completion of portions, or bringing about interactive teaching methods to the classrooms really matter,” says Ravishankar.

And like all social initiatives, funding is certainly a key element to the functioning of Eureka Kids. Patrons can support the initiative by adopting villages, buying books and other learning material for children, and even oversee the education of children. The NGO's goal is to reach 45,000 children in 700 villages by the end of the year. Research carried out by the NGO has also revealed that following its efforts to educate children in a more holistic manner, the number of children who began knowing to simply add numbers also increased over time, as did the number of Standard Four children who knew division and read sentences in English. Statistics have also revealed the children from Classes 5 and 6 improved their knowledge of advanced math by significant margins.

The road ahead is simple. “We want to continue doing what we are currently engaged in: providing children with the best possible basic education. We don't have lofty plans for ourselves, or expect to do great things,” says Ravishankar, “Our ambitions, goals and aims are limited. But we are confident of achieving what we set out to do.” And there's no doubt, that in its efforts,

Eureka Kids has become an agent of change today; the attempts to uplift children by way of educating them, figuring proudly atop its social initiatives. And like Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”, what Eureka Kids has successfully managed to achieve, is a sincere attempt to change this world one step at a time.





FINDING FAMILIES FOR THE ABANDONED

As we all can see, children in India are denied even the very basic right to family under various circumstances. Whether it is child labour or broken families or abusive conditions of life, children have been forced to compromise their childhood and their right to a loving and caring family. Karna Prayag Trust strives to change this situation in its own way, focusing specifically on children who are abandoned.

A small child was found abandoned at a hospital, soon after her birth. Her parents disappeared, making it impossible to trace as they left behind a fictitious address. The child was then brought to Karna Prayag Trust, where she was named Sita and given in adoption for a childless couple of Indian origin from Germany. Seven years later, when Sita came back to the Trust to see where she had come from, another girl called Meena was befriended by the family. Eventually, Meena was also adopted by the couple

as Sita insisted in having a sister. Today, Sita is a web designer, married, and has a daughter named Tara. Recently, Sita and her husband came to the Trust to gift Tara with a brother. This is just one of the stories that Karna Prayag has made in the lives of people across generations.

Formally registered in 2003, Karna Prayag Trust in Chennai has been serving as a reception home for children who are abandoned under different circumstances— at hospitals soon after birth, at railway stations, shopping malls, bus stands, etc. “The Police, Government hospitals and even individuals bring to us these tiny helpless little babies, who have been abandoned by their parents for one reason or another,” says Sheela Jayanthi, Director of Karna Prayag Trust.

“It all started in 1980 as a unit to receive and care for infants who were brought for admission to the Chatnath Homes SOS Children’s Village orphanage in Tambaram. Unexpectedly, we soon had couples knocking at our doors requesting to take a child in adoption. Why restrict a child to institutional care when there was a family waiting to accept the child as their own?” adds Sheela.

Karna Prayag Trust valued the gift of family to each child, and so began working on an adoption process. The Trust was declared as a fit institution by the Juvenile Welfare Board in 1992, and was authorized to carry out in-country and inter-country adoptions. Upon reception of infants, they are taken care of until they are ready for adoption, by a committed team that consists of a Neonatal Paediatrician, Nutritionist and Occupational Physiotherapists.

On receiving an infant, the Trust simultaneously handles the task of personal care for the child and processing papers to

establish Indian identity of the child, followed by formal papers like relevant court orders, registered birth affidavit, passport and other documentation through the relevant legal and Government systems. The child's medical problems are also dealt with extreme care and expertise. Every child has a medical record that is updated periodically, covering the time from reception to adoption.

With couples wishing to adopt, the Trust registers them and processes their adoption papers through home study, counseling, personal interviews and identification of the right child. These processes are managed by a team of social workers, counselors and an adoption committee. The children are first placed on foster care with the family until all the requisite clearances are obtained, and then the process is completed with legalization.

Every child's story here moves your heart. How they find their way to Karna Prayag is another sombre rendition. For instance, Bina was a child rescued from a shopping bag that was checked in safe keeping. The security had contacted the police after waiting an entire day to see if someone came up to claim the child. The police finally brought Bina to the Trust. Today, this child means everything for a joint family in Chennai.

Karna Prayag Trust embarked on new responsibilities as the needs emerged. They reached out to more people who needed care - pregnant women who had nowhere to go and young women who sought training in infant care. "We started educational programs for young mothers on affordable nutrition, simple hygiene and immunization routines. We publicized the adoption option and legal procedures that were involved, and also on the importance of girl children."

In 2007, the Trust started a day care centre to focus on integral

development of pre-school and after-school children of working mothers from the neighbourhood. Functioning on all working days, the centre has a programme worked out to meet the physical, cognitive and social development of the children through play way method. In addition to all these ongoing activities, the trust makes it a point to bring annually prospective parents and parents with adopted children together, giving an opportunity for the audience to discuss out stereotypes and taboos pertaining to adoption.

Having learnt this holistic approach devised by the trust's team and the difference it has been making in the last few decades, it is no surprise that they are a recipient of the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's Award for Social Service in the field of Child Welfare. Their services continue to add smiles in the lives of abandoned children and childless couples alike.

An intake of more than 1000 infants, mostly girls who are placed in adoption, with a few taken back by the biological families is a record that any onlooker might recollect with awe!

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



AIM FOR NO PAIN

In our rich and illustrious history of science, medicine and surgery, a great deal has been said and written about the exploits of great Indian doctors — their discoveries, the methodology that was used to treat illness and diagnose ailments. That is perhaps why we as Indians have prided ourselves on our medical exploits, while unfortunately somewhere along the way, forgetting to simply care for those who suffer from pain, by which they become the bearer of illness. In a sense, Lakshmi Pain and Palliative Care Trust was built simply by the realization of these ideals. It began when Dr. Mallika Tiruvadanan had admitted her father for treatment at a hospital, where she began noticing a number of patients being admitted in excruciating pain. Interestingly, the doctors would go on to treat these patients to cure them of the ailment as opposed to administering treatment that was aimed to relieving the patient of pain.

“That incident exhorted me to bring about awareness of palliative

care, and tell doctors about what it is all about and why it must be an integral part of our healthcare system,” says Dr. Mallika as she chats up with us about her NGO and the need for palliative care, today. Lakshmi Pain and Palliative Care, Dr. Mallika’s brainchild, has today become an example to follow, in terms of “caring” for the patient apart from “curing” the ailment. When the organization began in 2000, Mallika immediately knew that the first step she would have to take was to ensure that awareness of palliative care was spread far and wide. “Sadly, the system of our medical education is such that most doctors and nurses today don’t quite know how to talk to patients especially those suffering from chronic illnesses,” says Dr Mallika, “Our MBBS curriculum doesn’t, for instance, have a chapter on palliative care.”

The Free Online Dictionary defines the term ‘palliative’ as “tending or serving to palliate. Relieving or soothing the symptoms of a disease or disorder without effecting a cure”. In the same breath, Dr. Mallika believes that if there’s one thing that general medicine lacks, it’s the number of experts on this subject: “there are only a handful of palliative care experts, today.” But a step in the right direction, oftentimes, goes a long way in making a difference.

“We began with a set of foundation courses that were attended by doctors, paramedics and nurses,” says Dr Mallika, “In fact, a course called Essentials In Palliative Medicine which we have been conducting since 2006 has gone a long way in really making a difference to the kind of work that we do on an everyday basis.” She continues: “In the end it’s all about education and awareness.”

Part of the process of spreading awareness also involves breaking misconceptions about palliative care. One such misconception is the belief that palliative care is deemed necessary only in the case of terminal illness, when in reality palliative care could be

administered right from the beginning of diagnosis. However, Mallika feels that the greater misconception that needs to be broken down is simply the notion that morphine (normally administered to bring relief from extreme pain) is addictive. “In fact, we were lobbying for several years as far as licensing the nation’s narcotic policies is concerned,” she says, “And a lot of this campaigning had to do with the need for oral administration of morphine and lobbying to make the drug increasingly available.”

In fact, so committed has the organization been towards increasing awareness and bringing out large-scale palliative care in the system, that its website www.lakshmitrust.org has a comprehensive list of FAQs, misconceptions about palliative care, real-life scenarios and what can be done to tackle them, testimonials and even a brief history of palliative care and the trust itself. With a vision to develop palliative care facilities and human resources that are equipped with sufficient knowledge to become authorities in the field, one might feel that Lakshmi is well and truly on the track to educating the masses about the niche medical necessity.

Through its journey, the NGO has also had to overcome several challenges in terms of raising funds to fulfil its objectives and goals. And the requirement is definitely quite significant, today. “We have an inpatient clinic and an outpatient care unit, which works towards easing the pain of our patients,” says Mallika. And needless to say, funds are crucial to the running of such a vast network of pro-bono services. A team of doctors and paramedics also conducts home-visits on a regular basis, visiting the homes of those patients who are unable to visit the clinic, and taking care of their treatment and care.

With a team of consultants spearheaded by Dr. Mallika herself, Lakshmi Pain and Palliative Care is all set to go the extra mile

in educating the masses and the medical fraternity about the importance of palliative care. But there is of course, a greater mission that lies ahead: “that of allaying the sufferings of those who are in need of palliative care,” says Mallika. She couldn’t have said it better. One hopes that her small steps towards educating the masses about the importance of palliative care, has a far greater and significant outcome in the years to come.



THE SOCIAL EDGE

The Loyola Outreach Programme (formally known by its abbreviation, LEARN) was a module that first began in Loyola College, in 2001, when a process of re-structuring began making its presence felt on an academic level. Incidentally, this was the year when the college began seeing the full potential of its autonomy — a status that it was granted back in 1978. Post-2001, syllabi saw a great deal of modification and modernization, even as teaching modules were also given a facelift. “It was around this time that the college felt that a lot needed to be achieved on the social front, as well,” says Dr Bernard D’Sami, who is today, director of the Outreach department of Loyola College. “Until this time, our postgraduate students had a sense of social awareness thanks to their outreach module, LEAP,” he continues, “But our UG students didn’t exactly have this kind of exposure.” It was then, not more than 12 years ago, that it was decided that undergraduate students of the institution also needed to be given

a social edge to the kind of academic credentials they derived by way of an education at Loyola College.

Thus began a journey that is today, stronger than ever before. Loyola's Outreach programme is indeed a module that has gone from strength to strength, to become an element of the college's holistic approach to education. "What many of us felt was simply the fact that what the student learnt in class was for his head," says Dr D'Sami, "But they needed something more. In fact, they needed something for the heart."

Loyola's Outreach objectives are fairly simple. The aim was easier to comprehend. "Change the society around you," Dr D'Sami, "That's what we intended to do. With the aid of the Corporation, we identified close to four localities that were in need of our help. We began sending students to aid teachers of corporation schools in these areas; in due course we extended our help towards those deserving students in need of home tuitions." But that is not all. The Outreach programme even goes about doing its bit in the promotion of women's empowerment by way of rehabilitation of widows, and even in aiding day-care centres. The areas that are selected include Choolaimedu, Chetpet, Kodambakkam and Nungambakkam. "We did not want to engage localities that were far from the college. We were conscious of possible travel constraints are students might face and thus decided to lend a helping hand in small way, in the areas that were around us," says Dr D'Sami.

In all, the Outreach department has an eight-member faculty that oversees the running of the department throughout the college. This staff is aided by internal faculty in each department, who are entrusted with monitoring its respective department's participation in the day-to-day activities of the Outreach department. "Our

structure has helped us achieve our goals and objectives,” says Dr D’Sami. These goals, of course, include social awareness and more importantly, the need to develop a sense of pride around this social awareness. “The students of Shift One go about their outreach activity after college hours, while our Shift Two students get to class once they finish their outreach programme,” D’Sami explains. In fact, nearly 40 to 50 deserving students in benefactor schools are identified and provided help with regard to admission and scholarships in Loyola College.

Dr Bernard D’Sami feels that the biggest achievement of the Outreach department, among its many achievements, is the attitudinal change that it has imbibed in its participants. “One day, our former principal Rev Dr Albert Muthumalai was overseeing a disciplinary committee hearing, after the committee had ordered the suspension of a few students over indiscipline,” he recalls, “After calling for a meeting with the boys’ parents, Father had ordered their suspensions one by one. At the end of this meeting, one student refused to leave his office and wore a sad look on his face. Father, quite impatiently, asked him why he hadn’t left his presence yet. The student replied, ‘I don’t mind being suspended, Father. But let me complete my outreach hours.’ The boy explained how despite his suspension, his students at a Corporation school nearby would wait for him to arrive, twice every week. He couldn’t afford to fail them, his suspension notwithstanding. In fact, Father Muthumalai often recalled this incident while dwelling on the kind of attitudinal change that Outreach has brought to the college.”

Interestingly enough, Rev Fr Joseph Antony Samy, the present Principal of Loyola College, has himself served as Director of the Department of Outreach thus underlining the importance that

the college has attached to the functioning of the department.

Perhaps the greatest story of the programme has been the great success that its flagship project, Give Life Café, has been met with. As part of an innovative and first-of-its-kind initiative, the Outreach department inaugurated a high-end cafeteria and bakery on campus, which provided employment to deserving students before or after college hours. Chennai Mission, an NGO founded by Mr. M. Mahadevan of Hot Breads donated the machinery and infrastructure for this cafeteria and offered training to students in baking and confectionary making. In fact, the proceeds from business at Give Life Café went into funding education needs of children of widows who live in the slums nearby.

No surprises then, that when the Give Life cafeteria was inaugurated in 2008, the kind of reception that it got from the student community was nothing short of staggering. Cold coffees, burgers, Calzones and even flavour-filled milk shakes find pride of place on the menu. Even today, the patronage that Give Life enjoys, is an aspect of its functioning that truly deserves special mention.

On future plans of the Outreach department, Dr D'Sami is hopeful of taking social service to the next level. "We've identified a few slums that require our help, and with them we've also identified numerous societal issues that call for our attention. Our aim of course, stays the same: to bring about a change in our environment," he says. Interestingly, another objective on the agenda is extending the Give Life initiative that the Outreach Department introduced in 2008, to an even bigger avatar." However, through it all, one factor has stayed the same: the need to give back to society, and in doing so, upholding the mission, vision and principles of Loyola College.



FROM THE BOTTOM-UP

The story of how Prof Narayanan and his son, Manickam, were quite taken aback on witnessing a ten-year-old mechanic mend their car in 2001, is well-known. In fact, their “unsettling” encounter with Muthu, a little boy who was supposed to attend school, but was working as a young mechanic, led the father-son duo to take their baby-steps towards establishing Pudiyador, twelve years ago. More than a decade has passed since that evening at the mechanic, and the duo still hasn’t lost sight of their mission: to bring about after-school academic help, to encourage children to pursue extra-curricular activities and to build character through various interactive means. In fact, it is this continuing mission that has served many a young child in realizing potential and leading better lives.

“In a nutshell, in order to bring about all this, we first need to ensure that our little children stay healthy,” says Chiai Uraguchi,

Programme Director at Pudiyador. “What is health? The World Health Organisation defines Health as staying physically, psychologically and socially fit. And as part of our efforts at Pudiyador, we ensure our kids are physically healthy by taking good care of them and their dietary requirements, we take care of their social health by way of interactions and getting their parents involved in their growth process and finally, our counselors ensure that psychological wellbeing is guaranteed, which takes care of that last element of their health.”

Quite simply, Pudiyador has taken upon itself the mission to bring about sensitivity in underprivileged children, even as it strives to encourage uniqueness and the child’s natural intelligence. The NGO has put its best foot forward in bringing about such qualities from a child by way of comprehensive classroom and extra-curricular environments after class. “The focus is on growth and the need to provide basic healthcare for these children, and to sensitize their parents to the need for this as well,” says Chiai.

Over time, three centres were established to cater to the needs of such children. The first was established in 2001 itself, at Ramapuram. Run by Prof Narayanan and Manickam, the centre began with a small gathering of five children, but is second-home to nearly 40 children today. When Pudiyador opened its second centre in 2005, at Urapakkam, the number of children at this centre was 60. Just two years later, a third centre was opened in Adyar, on the same model of the Urapakkam centre. In fact, the Adyar centre of Pudiyador is of special significance since it plays host to students from the University of Michigan who assist volunteers of Pudiyador in running this centre. After having served at Pudiyador for close to 7 months now, Chiai is also slowly learning the ropes in running the day-to-day affairs of the NGO. “It has been such a

learning experience for me,” she remarks.

Art, sports, theatre, music and dance: what Pudiyador has successfully managed to do in 12 years is introduce underprivileged children to the kind of education that only a privileged few were able to enjoy. “In fact, we conduct comprehensive programmes to monitor the progress of these children, even as some of our very own teachers undergo learning experiences in how we ought to go about this process of transition,” explains Chiai. No doubt, the very attempt to provide underprivileged children with an education that they haven’t had the privilege of experiencing, is perhaps Pudiyador’s noblest initiative. The NGO’s centres work from 5.30 to 8.30pm on weekdays, while weekends see activity at these centres from 9am to 6pm.

Interestingly enough, the transition doesn’t stop with just the kind that is imparted to children of the local community. One of Pudiyador’s aims is to make each centre self-sustainable, and thus hand over the operations of such centres to the local community within a five-to-ten-year period. And it isn’t just children that the NGO focuses on. Programme modules on substance abuse awareness and adult literacy are also conducted from time to time, even as means to improve economic conditions of families are also being worked on.

Needless to say, help is always welcome. Donations to the NGO by way of funds, good or services are invited, even as specific emphasis is laid on manpower: full-time staff and volunteers. Books for the library, electronic equipment like old laptops, and chairs and desks are also some of the requirements of the NGO, today.

From a little club in Prof Narayanan’s backyard to a fledging

NGO today, there's no denying that Pudiyador has come a long way. "But our short-and-long-term objectives continue to focus on ensuring that our children are healthy, and only by way of this health can we bring about some solid change in their lives and academic careers," says Chiai, "And being healthy essentially includes staying physically, psychologically and socially fit." In a sense, that's what has become Pudiyador's standout feature: that beyond the need to bring about societal change, and educate the underprivileged, it's the methodology to work from the bottom-upwards that has been this organization's most prized asset. And for that, this NGO looks all set to go places in what Chiai calls a "holistic approach to change". Being holistic, more often than not, includes being thorough. And in the attempt to bring about change on a personal and societal level, there's no better substitute for thoroughness, today.





PATHFINDER

As I walked into Dr. Ambika Kameshwar's home in Chennai, I felt even the silence rhythmic. Her maid led me to the traditional living room and in a while she appeared with a beaming smile.

We spontaneously engaged in a conversation, as if we were childhood friends. Exchanging pleasantries, we sipped our evening tea and travelled back in time.

"I started singing at the age of 5 and dancing at the age of 6. There was something beautiful about singing and dancing. It was such a presence," said Ambika.

Her expressive eyes, and her natural hand gestures caught my eye. I told myself: "She is a dancer though."

Reminiscing her childhood days, she added saying, "Children

are normally persuaded by their parents to learn music and dance and it was the same for me as well. I enjoyed the attention that I received, and I had much joy in song and dance.”

Ambika Kameshwar grew up in Delhi. Her mother, Sulochana Natarajan , a singer, was her first Guru. Sharing her musical journey she said: “As a child, I used to come to Chennai to visit my relatives often. I learnt music from Shri Ramanathan and Smt. Rukmani Rajagopal. After marriage, I shifted base to Chennai, and I learnt from Smt. D K Pattammal who was a musical legend. It was such a beautiful experience.”

“When did you start teaching dance for the disabled,” I queried.

“I worked with renowned dancers Shri Narendra Sharma at Delhi and Kumari Meenakshi in Bangalore. There was this little inner voice inside which kept telling me that I should do something beyond dancing and singing on stage. But, I could not define what it meant.”

“My father, a devotee of Shri Ramana Maharishi, was running Ramana Maharshi Centre for Learning at Bangalore. His friend Mr. Srinivasan, also a devotee of Shri Ramana Maharishi, was managing an academy that provided vocational training for the visually challenged. He approached my father and asked him, “Can your daughters teach the visually challenged children music and dance for our annual day program?” My sister and I instantly agreed and that was the day I realized my vision,” she answered.

“Was it easy to teach the visually challenged dance,” I asked.

“Although my sister and I had experience teaching children music and dance, it was a challenge to teach the visually challenged.

Singing was not an issue, as they would beat me at singing. But, dance being a visual art, it was a challenge to teach. I had to demonstrate dance to the children by sense of touch. They would feel the mudhra to learn it. And, once they learnt it, there was no need for me to teach again. Their sixth sense was amazing and their attention was complete.”

“When I would say *Kataka-Mukha-Mudhra*, they would do it. Once they had the repertoire of movements, it was easy to teach. It took time as I had to give individual attention to each of the eight children who were selected for the dance programme. The Lord guided me to give the right inputs and the children were very receptive. I was only 18 years old, but felt very grown up then,” she said smilingly.

“How did they perform at the annual day program,” I probed.

“Too good! I still remember the program vividly. I had told a visually challenged girl to come running to the stage and stop with her hand up. It was an entry movement. As I had to operate the cassette recorder, I was standing below the stage. I was worried if the girl would stop at the right position, as she would fall off the stage otherwise. But, she stopped exactly where she was supposed to,” said Ambika wiping a tear.

Hiding my goose bumps, I told her, “It must have been an enriching moment for you.”

“Yes, it was. I decided that this is what I wanted to do, and even after 32 years, I still get emotional when I think about it,” she added.

When her engagement to Kameshwar brought her to Chennai,

Ambika requested her co-sister Mrs. Poonam Natrajan, founder of Spastic Society of India, to allow her teach dance for the special children, and she happily agreed.

“I started teaching dance to children with neurological impairment or multiple difficulties. When I see a child, I see him capable of many things rather than not being able to do certain things. I have never seen disability. I have seen only their ability. Each child was beautiful; each child was different; and each child gave me thoughts to take home. They told me what to do and what not to do by being themselves. I started structuring my dance and music classes to help them achieve developmental goals,” she explained.

Ambika used to be a freelance writer and wrote articles for Junior Quest magazine. She once interviewed Babli, a child with Down’s syndrome. When she returned home, she expressed to her father that she wanted to render more service for children with disabilities. Thus was born RASA—RamanaSunrityaAalaya—in 1989.

“My father guided me to register RASA as an NGO in 1989. I trained teachers to handle special children and also got trained in Indian theatre. I took Natya as an elective in MA as well as MPhil, and did my PhD in ‘Communication through Indian theatre’ and her Post-Doctoral Fellowship was on the application of Indian Theatre Arts for Holistic Development

Dance, drama, music and story-telling are the tools of Indian theatre and each has its own qualities. An amalgamation of all this is what life is all about. To teach life through theatre is enjoyable and reaches very fast,” she said.

As Ambika empowered herself in Indian theatre, she simultaneously did courses to understand children with special

needs. She called it THD - Theatre Holistic Development and formatted this methodology. In 1994, she inaugurated a Post Graduate Diploma Program for trainers to empower themselves.

— *Marie Banu*





FOR THEM, WITH THEM

“The name hardly matters. Whether we call them partially abled or mentally challenged, it only reflects our attitude towards them,” begins Ms Zoraida Samuel, Managing Trustee of Rehoboth, a home for the mentally challenged women in Chennai. Leaders from the social development sector have expounded the challenges in managing a home, but with mentally challenged individuals, home transcends to shelter, training centre, workplace, and more. It is a place where their inherent abilities and personalities that were never looked at by others are honed to make them independent and productive members in the society.

Rehoboth is one such home. It started as a shelter for 2 women in a rented house. The desire to care for these women was born during her days of graduation in Psychology. “My placement with an opportunity school required me to work on the social

and emotional environment, intelligence quotient of the special children and the kind of special education they needed. Academic work apart, I was shocked by my observations there,” remarks Zoraida, who goes on to explain the situation that moved her conscience. “Adolescent children who were mentally challenged were not wanted at home. They were not seen as children, or as individuals who were different in terms of needs and functionality, but as liabilities. It was too raw for me to buy that. I immediately decided to do something for them.”

Experience during her Post Graduation in Psychiatric Social Work threw her to the plane of acute abandoning by families. Adding to this trauma, which the victims may not even realize sometimes, is the exploitation they face on the streets after being abandoned. Her tenure in Little Drops, an NGO that provides care and shelter for the abandoned elderly, as Project Coordinator for four years, opened doors for further thinking and reflection. When two mentally challenged abandoned women were brought to Little Drops, the organization expressed its inability to accommodate them as they were not equipped to meet the needs of these people. Zoraida was on instantly. She decided to do something for these women. “A friend of mine came forward to give her house on rent. That’s how Rehoboth was born,” recollects an emotional Zoraida.

In the first two years, she managed to work at Little Drops and take care of these women. “The number of inmates grew and I quit my work at Little Drops. I knew it was a call from the almighty and I decided to serve these women,” she says.

Rehoboth, registered as a Public Charitable Trust in 1998, Chennai, branched out in a short period to meet different needs of its inmates. Abandoned women who are rescued from streets

are referred by police and also by NGOs. “Intriguingly, the increasing number in the home prompted me to plan a visit to other organizations that worked for mental health,” shares Zoraida, who concluded that almost all of them worked for children, and that needs of such adults were not paid enough attention to. This is when Rehoboth made a decision to focus on mentally challenged adults. Men and women from this group had different needs beginning with infrastructure. This along with the concern of sexual abuse women were subjected to, pushed Rehoboth to work for mentally challenged women specifically.

“These women were only moderately challenged, capable of caring for self, but were never given the requisite exposure or even toilet training. Most of the families, even before exploring the affordable options available, conclude that they cannot afford any treatment. Once the mother dies, the mentally challenged women are left on the streets,” she despises. Her calmness is back the moment she begins to talk of her inmates’ capabilities. “Some of them exhibit extraordinary intellectual abilities; they value relationships, express feelings, and long to belong somewhere—just like you and me,” her words resonates the pain she feels for them.

The home at Paraniputhur today hosts 180 women, who are trained to take up simple responsibilities here. ‘The residents are trained in: handicraft making, tailoring, embroidery and candle making. Orders are taken for weddings and other occasions for flowers and embroidery works. The ability of the inmates in learning and performing in an organized manner encouraged the board to build another shelter that provides vocational rehabilitation. Thus a rehabilitation shelter with dairy, poultry and vegetable cultivation was initiated in a farmland in Somangalam village. The income from the sale of farm products in their outlet called ‘ASAI and

PUTHUMAI' is pooled in to meet the running expenses of both the homes. Besides the economic aspect, engaging the inmates in these activities also make it therapeutic for their behavioral problems. Farm products, donated and usable house-hold articles are sold after minor repairs, besides products produced at the rehabilitation centre.

The first step in rehabilitation is a complete health check-up which makes the organisation understand their needs and assess the institution's capacity to meet them. All inmates are tested for HIV, pregnancy, infections, diseases and others and in the case of pregnant women, Rehoboth follows a tailored approach so that their children are not affected in any way.

Presently, under the project ARISE, the child and mother are given a separate room. While the mother is under constant medical supervision and undergoes vocational training, the child is allowed to lead a normal life. "All the children born to these women are normal. But, a new concern has emerged. Every other person that these children interact with is mentally challenged. As this is not healthy for child development, we are working towards providing a separate facility for these children so that the programme does not create an institutionalized system," says Zoraida.

Rehoboth has also opened a special school for special children from poor communities, as part of its prevention programme. This centre provides them with the much needed rehabilitation and therapy which they cannot afford otherwise. The fundamental concern is to prevent abuse and exploitation of mentally challenged women when their guardians are away at work.

Talking of sustainability, Zoraida explains that meeting the

operational costs is a huge challenge. “In order to sustain a life of quality, most of our residents need psychiatric and neurological medication. Associated problems like epilepsy, physical disabilities and motor skill coordination need to be addressed with specific professional help. With no government help and foreign aid, we have been able to run the home at a monthly expense of three lakh rupees through contributions from friends and donors.”

The journey is still on. Rehoboth is working tirelessly to bring in cheers in the lives of mentally challenged women and make the general public realize what it takes to make them smile. After all, they have always wanted to live as part of us.

Can we now see them as partially abled?

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*





JOY OF LEARNING

Ashwita, 4, was playing with her toys that was scattered all over the room. While her mother was busy preparing the Sunday lunch, her father Ramu gave her company.

“*Appa*, why is school closed on Sunday?” she asked.

Bemused by her question, Ramu replied saying, “Because, you should be at home, at least twice a week, to play with us.”

The reply did not comfort Ashwita, and she continued to play with her toys.

Like Ashwita, there were many more children who raised similar questions to their parents as they were feeling bored staying at home during weekends.

Ashwita studies at the Montessori section in Chennai School run by Chennai Corporation at Saidapet. In the recent past, this

school has gained much recognition amongst others as it was the first amongst the other schools run by Chennai Corporation to introduce the Montessori system for the underprivileged children free of cost. Following this, the Chennai Corporation started nursery classes in 40 schools in the city.

About 160 children study in the nursery section at the elementary school and they all come from varied socio-economic backgrounds. While the school infrastructure has been provided by Chennai Corporation, Sri Ramacharan Charitable Trust provides Montessori education for children aged between 3 to 6 years free of cost.

Sri Ramacharan Charitable Trust was founded by a group of women headed by Smt. PadminiGopalan in 1999 with the purpose of providing quality education to underprivileged children.

The Trust sources funds from individual donors and provides Montessori training for teachers. They also bear the salary costs for 11 teachers who are employed in the Chennai School at Saidapet and provide all the required learning materials for the school.

One has to see to believe! So, when Latha and I heard about this school, we decided to spend a day with the children, parents, and teachers to learn what was different and interesting for the children here.

We first met about 30 parents of these children who were assembled for the monthly meeting in the school premise. They had arrived ahead of time and welcomed us warmly. Our impression that only families belonging to the low income group would educate their children here was wrong.

“When I re-located to Chennai, I spend considerable time researching about schools in the city. I found this school way better than the others, and so decided to educate my daughter here,” said Archana, an employee of Cognizant Technology Solutions.

While some parents were proudly sharing anecdotes about their children, few were getting excited and not waiting for their turn to speak.

“My daughter said that she will not play with me when I return home, if I did not come to her school today. That’s why I am here now. Although her mother was free, she insisted that I attend this meeting. I am happy that I am here for her sake,” said Nathan, Raji’s father.

Following Nathan’s statement, there was a chorus from other parents stating similar reasons.

When we asked the parents what was interesting in this school, prompt came their responses. “My daughter Shobha keeps the house very clean. She will not allow even a paper to be strewn on the floor. She knows how to cut vegetables and handles the knife like a pro. I am happy that I enrolled her in this school. The school teaches my child everything,” said Usha, who works as a domestic maid.

“Anu, my daughter is the first to have her bath at home. She insists that I drop her at school, and because of her I am early to work,” said Shekar, a mechanic.

“Balaji, my son, never uses his shirt to wipe his running nose. He waits and asks me to get him a handkerchief. He also tells me to close my mouth when I yawn or sneeze,” said a proud Uma.

Latha and I were overwhelmed hearing their comments and exchanged smiles. The discipline of the children and the cleanliness of the classrooms were extraordinary.

JayanthiKarthikeyan, Trustee of Sri Ramacharan Charitable Trust joined us in our discussion.

“We select only teachers who have a passion to teach the underprivileged children. Although they are offered lesser salary when compared to the government paid teachers, they have shown much interest and satisfaction working here,” said Jayanthi.

After spending about an hour with the parents, we went around the school visiting the nursery classes where Montessori Method was adopted.

In one of the classrooms, Miss Prema was seated amidst six to seven children. She was teaching Shanti how to write the letter ‘ka’ in Tamil by gently holding her hand and tracing the letter. While she was teaching, the other children were observing her quietly. Our presence did not seem to distract either of them.

As lunch time neared, the children were getting ready to return home, and were organising the play materials back into the respective racks. While Jothika was sweeping the room with a tiny broom stick, Sapna was holding the dust pan for her. They all seemed like adults, independent and efficient.

We lost track of time while clicking pictures and headed back home with a heavy heart that we missed educating our children here

— *Marie Banu*



PadminiGopalan, 82 is full of energy when asked about her trust activities.

“I started by having a small tuition centre in my verandah. When my children were young, I used to wonder who will teach children who did not have parents who could teach. In 2003, when I heard about the Montessori system, I wanted to introduce this method for the underprivileged children. As you would know, Montessori system always had the elite tag,” said Padmini.

“When I checked the cost of the learning materials, I was taken aback as it was amounting to 60,000 rupees. Therefore, I approached two people who were experts in the field to seek their opinion. But, both of them said that it was absurd; it won’t work; and it is too expensive. They expressed that Montessori means freedom, and therefore it would not be appropriate for the underprivileged section of the society who is being aimed at.”

“But, I noticed that none of them said that it was an inferior system. Being too good, it was a temptation for me. I approached Smt. Uma Shankar, Director, Centre for Montessori Training in Chennai who encouraged me to go ahead with my plan. I requested for two teachers to guide me, and she assigned them,” added Padmini.

Padmini checked with several vendors before she bought the learning materials from Kolkata. This set the beginning of the Montessori Method of learning to be introduced in schools run by Chennai Corporation. This method was first launched in VeeraPerumal School at Mylapore in 2005, followed by Chennai School in Saidapet in 2007.

“What are your plans to make this system available for more underprivileged children?” I asked.

“If Chennai Corporation permits us, we will continue to work in their schools. The advantage of working with Chennai Corporation is that the children can continue studying in the same school for three years; one year in the balwadi and two years in the kinder garden,” she concluded.

One can see the effects of the Montessori system by enquiring about the child’s performance in the primary school. There is a visible advantage that these children have gained when compared to others.

We hope more children gain from Padmini’s initiative and the mindset that Montessori training is expensive and meant only for the elite fades away.

— *Marie Banu*



“SELF-RESPECT IS THE FIRST STEP TO WOMEN’S LIBERATION”

One of our former leaders had opined that one can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women. Does that really apply to India is a question we all have to ponder with. STEPS, an organization registered under the Tamil Nadu Societies Act of 1975, based in Pudukottai will help us answer this question.

In a country known for its heterogeneity, the context of subjugation varies with communities. And the group that has had very little opportunities to speak for itself is the Muslim women. Sadly, they themselves do not realize this most of the time. This brings us to the birth of STEPS. Its founder Ms Daud Sharifa Khanom attended the third National Conference on Women’s Movements in Patna, as a translator at the age of 22. “That stage told me stories of abuse, violence, rebuke, hurt, and humiliation on one

hand; and courage, resistance on the other,” she recalls. Soon after, like minded men and women came forward to do something against gender discrimination.

Thus, STEPS was born as an informal setting in 1989 and was later registered in 1991. From training young girls in self-defense, organising poster exhibition against gender violence and discrimination, STEPS soon got into the good books of functionaries. STEPS collaborated with the District Administration in the implementation of non-formal education in the district. Its good work was noted and the District Administrator provided land for the construction of a women’s centre near Pudukottai bus stand that could be used by women in distress. Over the years, STEPS’ activities began to echo its tag line—“Self-respect is the first step to women’s liberation.”

Working with women is quite a complicated and challenging field because the issues to be addressed are multifaceted at all levels. “STEPS chose to work for social and gender justice, and help women raise voice against violence meted out to them,” explains Sharifa. Interventions by STEPS at multiple levels have led to better articulation of women’s rights. Notable among these activities are organisation of women, especially dalit women to obtain ownership rights on the sand mines and joint ownership of land by women. From individual attention through case work and counseling to provision of basic facilities to more than 100 villages and providing training to 1,000 women in karate, STEPS has left no stone unturned in building self confidence among women. “You taste real success when all your efforts are acknowledged. STEPS is more excited about being invited as Chief Guest by local colleges and women’s groups while celebrating International Women’s day. It is heartening and encouraging,” she smiles.

STEPS has become synonymous with women's rights, especially Muslim women. So true! Ever since 1998, STEPS has been organizing Muslim women into groups and training them on specific vocations. More than 450 groups are formed in 10 districts in Tamil Nadu. The increased presence of STEPS led to the emergence of Muslim Women's Federation, which is a platform for them to voice their views for or against matters that concern them, unlike the Jamaat (group of clerics) which adjudicates in their matters without hearing their part of the story.

Working for this federation did not come easy. The women who actively participated in the process had to face life threats too. The women together are coming over all these hurdles to earn their rightful place in the society.

In 2004, Tamil Nadu Muslim Women Jamaat Committee, first of its kind, was formed at the state level comprising of two Muslim women from the 10 districts were STEPS works. It works like a Community Tribunal hearing cases concerning women and their children. "What is most frustrating is that, our complaints are not taken up by the police. They in turn refer it to the Jamaat, where women are not allowed to go," she says furiously. STEPS has also taken initiatives to strengthen the capacities of the Jamaat members by facilitating training and discussion on the religious tenets that affect women and were interpreted to the advantage of men. Sharifa has also had religious text concerning women's rights translated from Arabic to Tamil distributed in the villages of Tamil Nadu.

"Naturally, we are all subject to abuse and character assassination. Our commitment to the cause is taking us forward. There are always three things that one needs to thrive in the development sector—commitment, behavior, and talent,"

briefs Sharifa.

The Jamaat Committee once deliberated on the issue of low literacy levels among Muslim girls. Consequently, STEPS started a Home for these girls at Annavasal, Pudukottai in Tamil Nadu. The Home presently plays host to 25 girls between 8 and 15 years of age, who are dreaming of a better future only because they can now go to school without any hindrance.

STEPS is increasingly concerned about the health status of the Muslim women. In some of the villages where toilets are not available, women attend to nature calls only in the morning and in the evening, as they are not allowed to come out during the day. Worse is the case in Kailpattinam village of Thuthukudi district where women defecate inside the house and then throw it into the sea. The implications of this practice are multiple, but how we are going to help women has to be seriously thought over. STEPS is deliberating on this with all its stake holders.

With the support of more than 3000 women, STEPS led by Sharifa has embarked on the herculean task of building a mosque exclusively for women, in the district of Pudukottai. With the land donated by a neighbouring village, the team is working on full swing to raise required funds to complete this task. “Why should women be discriminated in offering *namaaz*? They will do it in their mosque, complete with a woman priest,” she asserts.

Despite pressure from the religious patriarchs and other groups, Sharifa has stood by the decision, along with the Jamaat Committee. What will ensue will be a surprise for both the team and its observers.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



SIMPLE YET WORKABLE!

There are a number of proverbs, idioms and quotes saying that simplicity has its own value attached to it. It can also be the way in which an organisation's work is planned and administered. So proves Sukriti Social Foundation, a registered Trust, established in 2006.

Sukriti began out of one individual's conviction to the cause of the 'dis..' no, 'differently – abled'. Sowmya Simhan, the Founder of Sukriti appears to be a very amiable and socially conscious person. As the conversation sets in, I begin to realise that I was more than correct. Herself a differently abled, Sowmya has strived and struggled to live life as normal as anybody else would. That brings us to the objective of this institution. Sukriti wants to contribute to building a society where the differently abled

enjoy equal opportunities and are able to live with dignity and self-esteem.

Sowmya had always intended to work for the benefit of people like her, once she became independent. “There were a lot of physical, social and emotional barriers I had to overcome. Fortunately, I had a few support systems that helped me to get through these obstacles. It cannot be the same for everybody,” asserts Sowmya. Realising the kind of hardships that the differently abled have to face on a daily basis, she decided to do her bit in making their lives better and livable. Right from her first salary, she has continued to pool resources for this cause.

During her student days, Sowmya had volunteered for a number of organisations. Today, she is a board member in most of these organisations. Interestingly, she did not restrict herself to the issue of disability. “I have worked with organisations across sectors and this has helped me to understand the social and economic barriers for the differently abled from different perspectives,” she explains.

Sukriti came into existence with generous contribution from friends and family who knew what Sowmya was working for. “It is a kind of acceptance that we strive for in this society. Those who understand support our activities,” remarks Sowmya, who is also a member of the Lions club.

At Sukriti, a four pronged strategy is followed to address the diverse needs of the disabled, i.e. prevention, rehabilitation, advocacy, and employability. Their interventions pertaining to prevention creates focus on the causative factors and channelizes efforts to contain the same. When prevention does not succeed, rehabilitation is looked at multiple levels. Distribution of

mobility aids at Sukriti has made a remarkable change in the individuals' lives. "Being able to move around independently, without anybody's help, is in itself a great sense of freedom and achievement for us," she says.

The fact that rehabilitation is not the end of the cycle is very well articulated in Sukriti's activities. Sowmya delves into concepts of economic independence and the self-esteem that fosters in the minds of the differently abled, as she elaborates on the training programmes organised by Sukriti to make the beneficiaries employable. The transition from a time when the society refused to recognise the disabled to now, when a lot of organisations work for their welfare has a lot of aspects to ponder over. "Today, there is more awareness and marginally more respect for us than earlier. If we look at a span of two decades there has been a change in people's attitude. Yet, there is a long way to go ahead," she exclaims.

Lamenting about the fact that a large number of parents still view disability as a curse, she calls for the acknowledgement of every individual's potential, whether abled or disabled. "Why would disability disprove our potential in doing something?" Sowmya insists that the role of a family, the first support system for any individual, is of prime importance in dealing with the disabled. "While abilities are totally ignored, disability is looked at with magnifying glasses. This is where the role of family falls in place."

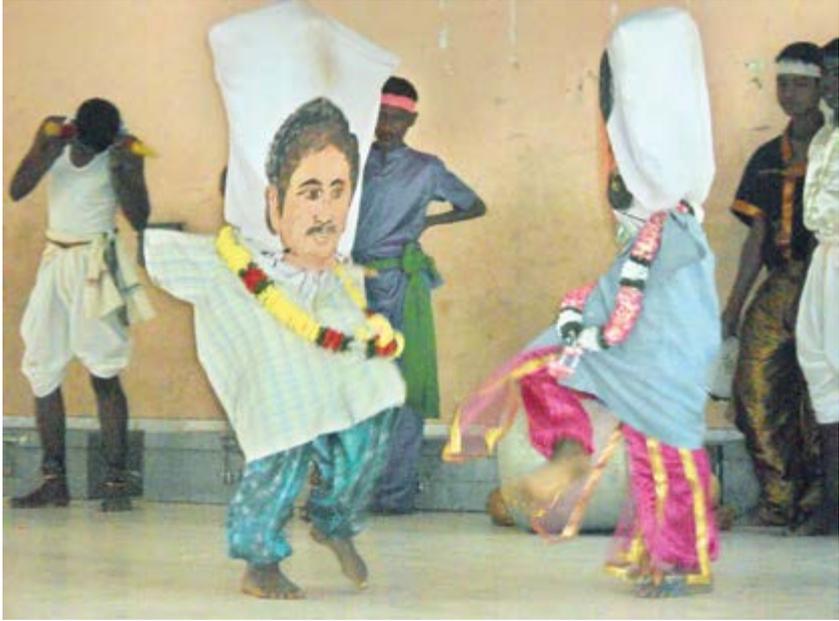
In the context of employability, Sukriti has provided cycle training programmes for 44 individuals since 2009. 34 persons have been rehabilitated successfully and are now earning around 4,000 to 8,000 rupees a month. Another 16 individuals have used the training as a source of supplementary income. What is more appreciable is that numbers do not drive the work at Sukriti. "We

are a small organisation. We do not work on targets. We want to reach as many as our resource base permits. All we want to do is a thorough work in every individual's case," says Sowmya.

Sukriti's advocacy activities focus on creating awareness on different forms of disability and a barrier free environment for the disabled. "The construction of ramp at Valluvar Kottam is entirely our effort," she says proudly. The mention of government policies does not excite her as she feels that they are outdated. "The aspirations of a disabled person are not the same, as it was 20 years ago. As scenarios keep changing, so should policies, suiting their current needs and aspirations," she adds.

On a concluding note, she states, "All we need is an opportunity to prove our ability, firstly to ourselves and then to the society. We do not need sympathy!" Calling for a concerted effort from all sides, Sowmya is prepared to wait, because it will take time for change."

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



CHANGE IS HERE

What you probably do know about United Way of Chennai is that the NGO considers caring for underprivileged children as one of its most important missions. What you probably don't, however, is that its definition of underprivileged goes beyond mere financial status. "Kids that lack values and family ties are also underprivileged," says Shyamala Ashok, Executive Director, United Way of Chennai, "After all, these qualities go a long way in determining how privileged a child is; money isn't the single deciding factor."

For the last three years (it began in the city in 2010), United Way of Chennai has been at the forefront of social change, its primary mission to "ignite a worldwide social movement, and thereby mobilize to action-to give, advocate and volunteer to improve the conditions in which they live". Although still in its infancy, there's

no denying that United Way of Chennai has indeed achieved a great deal. With an impressive board of directors (names like M A Alagappan, Kiran Shankar, and Lakshmi Narayanan lend the NGO its credibility and identity), and a team that constantly strives to fulfil its vision and accomplish its mission, United Way of Chennai is well on the way to social change.

“Our directors have been an inspiration,” says Shyamala, “Their very names go before them and do a lot as far as the credibility of our NGO is concerned.” Shyamala heads three committees at United, including the Brands and Resource Mobilization committees. “We meet and interact with our directors on the day-to-day functioning of the organization.”

There’s no denying that a major part of United Way of Chennai’s work is focused on underprivileged children, and more specifically, children from juvenile homes. “We visit juvenile homes across the State, locate young children who have been imprisoned and run the risk of having their futures turned upside down,” says Shyamala, “To these children, we provide an avenue that could enable them lead a future sans crime. We teach them and educate them on values.” Most importantly, however, are the skill-based modules that the NGO teaches the children. “This allows the kids to reform and begin a life for the better.”

In the course of its work, United Way of Chennai has also come a long way as far as building a skill base is concerned. Interestingly, skill-building isn’t just restricted to inmates of juvenile homes, but also the physically disabled. “Creating employment opportunities, not only helps these children with a future, but also goes a long way in bridging the skill requirement that most companies suffer from, today,” says Shyamala. Not surprisingly, several corporate enterprises have been among the first to stand up and be a part

of the revolution. Companies like HDFC, Nokia, Cognizant, RR Donnelley, Caterpillar, and HSBC are a few such corporate bigwigs. “The role that corporate entities have played in our growth has been phenomenal,” says Shyamala. Other NGOs that have partnered with United Way of Chennai are Hope Foundation and Nalanda Way.

In a State like Tamil Nadu that has come a long way from poverty, and where empowerment is the go-to word of today, the service put in by United Way of Chennai goes beyond the realm of an NGO doing its bit for a better tomorrow. Take for instance, an elementary school at Kalpakkam that United Way Worldwide built, in association with Hope Foundation. Not only did the school serve to satisfy the needs of underprivileged children in the vicinity, but also went the extra mile to encourage parents (with micro finance), of paying a small fee that would play a key role in their sustenance. The school is currently in its second level of scaling up, and is located at the Tsunami-hit Kancheepuram district.

“Our corporate partners recognize the significance of their role, and fulfil expectations to the maximum,” says Shyamala. The challenge, according to her, is the process of equipping the public with knowledge of all the NGO does. The need, according to her, is to enable and enhance a process of feedback that she believes will go a long way in improvement. “Feedback from the public is extremely important to us,” she says, “After all, it is precisely that, which paves the way to get better at what we do.”

United Way of Chennai also prides itself on conducting several events in partnership with corporate enterprises. The Wipro Chennai Marathon 2012 was one of them, as was Chennai Cycling 2012 — two of the more notable events conducted in 2012. Along

the way, several corporate events such as fundraisers, workshops and skill-impartment courses have also become one with the NGO's functioning. Surely, three years may be too short a time, but the amount achieved in this short span has indeed been more than significant. "But we have a long way to go," says Shyamala as she signs off, "Striving for social change has been our calling and the coming years will see us continuing in our attempts to achieve just that."

— *Daniel Almeida*





AT THE HEART OF ART

When she had her first art exhibition in 1989, Viji Nageswaran didn't know just yet, that a few years down the line could well see her with an art gallery of her own. "The critics in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore loved my work, and it all began on a good note for me," says the prominent city-based artist who also runs Vinnyasa Premier Art Gallery. In due course, as her husband (Nageswaran)'s business kicked off, a mezzanine floor became vacant at the establishment. "He suggested that I use it as a makeshift gallery of sorts," she says, "I jumped at the idea. Not many artists had much space back then, and any semblance of a platform for your work, was a huge gift." There, began a journey

that today, stands the test of time thanks to commitment, sheer talent, a proclivity for the artistic and most importantly a social edge that Viji continues to possess.

Vinnyasa began at the humble mezzanine floor in 1996. “I began by shipping in the works of some of my artist friends in Bombay,” says Viji, “The gallery also had on display, some of the works of local artists too.” For the next two years, the mezzanine would be Viji’s art space — but not for long. “As we went about work, we realized that this wasn’t much space, given the number of paintings we were bringing in. The wall space was just not enough.” Her solution came in the form of the Late T T Vasu, who used to head affairs at The Music Academy. “Mr Vasu inaugurated our gallery in 1996. When I met him, I simply asked him if we could use some space at the academy, and he said yes,” she says, “This was a huge blessing since The Music Academy is definitely one of the city’s better-known landmarks, and augured well for my gallery.” Vinnyasa was at The Music Academy for nearly seven years and a half. When a change of guard occurred at The Music Academy in the mid-2000s after the demise of Vasu, there was a need to shift Vinnyasa from the premises. “I was thankful for all the help, and began looking for another space for my gallery,” says Viji. And that was how the present location of the gallery, at CIT Colony, came to be.

Through Viji’s journey, the entrepreneur in her has strived to be more than what she is — an artist. One of the more notable aspects of her career has been her efforts in providing upcoming artists with a platform to display their skills. “Being an artist myself, I know the pain that most artists undergo while they are beginning their careers. Art is a passion that comes with a heavy price tag,” she says, “You invest a lot of money into buying your

canvas, paints, brushes, and a lot of time too. You then spend for a studio, for publicity, for conveyance charges. However, you aren't exactly assured of getting it all back. Should you have a show and somebody likes your work, chances are you'll make a sale and get some money. Should that not happen, you go back and paint again simply because you love art." Given the situation, one of Viji's other passions, was to help upcoming artists. "The need of the hour was space —a platform for someone's work," she says, "One concern that most artists who let out their galleries to other artists, is that they might lose potential clients. I didn't let that affect me. If an artist was in need of a client, and if my art space would help them out, so be it."

Viji's affordable art shows were for unknown artist and for "hobby painters" too. "I would look at their works, and if I found them interesting, I would invite them to do a show with other artists at my gallery," she says. This way, a number of independent artists received some publicity and platform for their work. Along the way, several independent artists became increasingly aware of Viji's work. Many of them would write to her, requesting for space, send in some of their works and postcards. She became known as a shepherd of sorts, for independent artists.

Some of her more notable initiatives include a tie-up with Dr. Ambika Kameshwar's Theatre for Holistic Development, where Viji provided her gallery for DrAmbika to conduct some of her workshops. Vinnyasa has also been instrumental in its support of the Multiple Sclerosis Society. "Two years ago, we organized a live painting by ThottaTharini, whose works was later auctioned off," she says, "We raised Rupees three lakh, which went to the Multiple Sclerosis Society." Vinnyasa has also offered a helping hand to Shiva Shakthi Homes.

No amount of work would be complete without support from the family, and in that respect, Viji has had more than she could ever need. “My husband has been extremely supportive in this journey,” she says, “My two children, settled abroad, have also been supporting me fervently.” For now, encouraging young upcoming artists is what Viji will continue doing even as she commits herself to do her bit for encouraging art in all its form and beauty.





BULLS AND MUSIC

Chellammal, 37, was sitting outside her dilapidated tent at Kasimedu Kuppam in Ennore, Chennai. Her home was amidst the ten tents that were set up in a haphazard manner in the one-ground open plot. There were three similar habitations in the locality and each had a different story to tell.

I walked towards Chellammal along with 10 to 15 curious children who followed me. Most of them wore colourful clothes, but appeared shabby. They urged me to click their pictures and pulled my camera to view them on the camera display.

As I stood there, aware of the people around me, I suddenly felt suffocated.

“Is she a foreigner? If she takes your picture, ask for money,” said one of the men to Chellammal.

Latha, our NGO contact, eased my interview process by introducing me to the men and women who were gathered around us.

Chellammal was spontaneous and welcomed me to her tent. We seated ourselves in the small cement patch in front of her home and began conversing as if we knew each other for a very long time.

“What do you want me to say?” she asked.

“Just tell me about yourself, your family, your bullock,” I replied prompting a smile.

“I have three children—two daughters and two sons. My son has studied up to tenth standard, and my daughter stopped schooling after eighth standard as she got married. My younger son and daughter are studying in the nearby school. I also have a six-month-old granddaughter, and we all live together,” said Chellammal.

Chellammal hails from Periyapalayam, a town situated about 40 kilometres north of Chennai, in Tiruvallur district. She belongs to the Poo Idayar community, commonly known as ‘boom mattukaran’ or Perumal Mattukkarar in Tamil.

People belonging to this community lead a nomadic lifestyle and move from one place to another along with their caparisoned (decorated) bull. They worship Lord Venkateshwara of Tirupati and originally hail from Andhra Pradesh. It is learnt that they that were earlier flower gatherers and sold flowers for their livelihood.

“I also own two bullocks. The older one is two years old, the other is a calf,” she said.

Chellammal leaves her home at 5 AM along with her bullock and visits homes and market places at Thiruvottiyur which is located

8 kilometers from her home. At times, we even start at 3 AM when we need to visit farther places.

“We do not want to steal, nor tell lies. Therefore, we visit homes with our bulls to earn our living. We convey messages like ‘you will live well, your children will do well’; ‘good things will happen in your home’. As we speak, we make our bull shake its head and kneel before each home. Each family gives us around 10 rupees and some prefer to give only rice and old clothes,” said Chellammal.

“The caparison for the bullock costs Rs. 5,000 and I recently bought a calf for Rs. 20,000. Although I earn around Rs. 200 a day, I end up spending Rs. 100 to feed the cattle. The earnings are not enough to meet my family’s day to day needs. I have an outstanding loan of Rs. 50,000. My husband is visiting homes in the city for the past one week along with his bullock. We spread ourselves in the city so that we can earn more money for our family.” added Chellammal heaving a sigh.

The community members earn their living by performing in front of homes, public places, and during festivals. The bull is trained to shake its head whenever a question is posed to it. If the bull shakes its head up and down it denotes ‘yes’; and if it shakes sideways then the answer is presumed to be ‘no.’

They have a special percussion instrument—Urumi—which is beaten by hand on one side, and is simultaneously rubbed forcefully with a curved bamboo on the other. The term ‘boom boom’ refers to the sound made by the drum or Urumi. They also use a wind instrument to play songs.

As I looked around to get a glimpse of her bullocks, she signaled her son Muthu to bring them from the cattle shed.

Muthu spontaneously asked if I wanted him to decorate his bullock and hinted that I would have to pay him money for doing this. “Will it be a bother for you?” I asked politely.

“No problem at all,” he replied.

Within five minutes, he brought the bullock decked up in bells, colorful ornaments, and clothes. He even played the wind instrument and entertained us.

As I set to click pictures, the excited children crowded closer around me. Their body odour was unpleasant though, and I tried hard not to express my discomfort.

I returned to Chellammal and we continue to chatter. “It takes around 3 to 6 months to train a bullock. Some even take longer to get trained,” she said.

“Can you manage the bullock alone?” I asked concernedly.

“It is like managing our own children. The bullock is no different,” she replied.

After clicking pictures of the children again, Chellammal led me to the other settlements in the neighbourhood. There were mostly men who were lounging in their tents and appeared to be drunk.

As the evening drew to a close, I bid adieu to this colorful community. The children followed me up to the end of the road and kept waving until the car was out of sight.

—*Marie Banu*



COFFEE TO GO?

A historic and unprecedented event at the COP 11 (CBD) Conference in October 2012 was the release of a landmark report, “Coffee to go? The vital role of coffee towards ecosystem services and livelihoods” by Pavan Sukhdev, the lead author of the TEEB report and UNEP’S goodwill ambassador. The fact is that the report was undertaken at the request of the Karnataka’s largest growers federation-KGF-in partnership with CSM (a non-profit organization with a solid track record for over a decade in addressing the triple bottom line - of planet, people and prosperity). The study captures the role of Indian Coffee towards ecosystem services from all the three districts of Karnataka and has been prepared with support from the Coffee Board and the leading coffee business that has been initiated and led by farmers.

A snapshot of the report and its implication

The ubiquitous cup of coffee is characterized by massive economies of global production, consumption and trade. The economic value and the significant contribution of coffee to the State of Karnataka are formidable. Coffee is the largest agricultural export for the State which ranks Number one in coffee production in India. However, a dark cloud has been negatively impacting the very survival of coffee because of the climatic change that is unleashing havoc on the coffee and the economy of the State of Karnataka.

The shade grown coffee in Karnataka is not only a significant contributor to the revenue and livelihood of the State, but the Agro Forest practice of shade Coffee (Coffee agro system is second only to forests in maintaining the flow of bio diversity and ecosystem services) is simultaneously a critical contributor to the Western Ghat ecology, because of its symbiotic relationship with the fragile ecosystem that is a one of the bio-diversity hot spots of the world. These play a critical role as the guardian of monsoon in Peninsular India provides life sustenance to more than 245 million people through its river system that originates and flows Eastward draining into the Bay of Bengal (Cauvery, and Ganges). The Ghat is also home to hundreds of mammals, birds and amphibians, some being rare and threatened to extinction.

Shade Coffee, by its very practice, is a natural mitigate from a climate threat perspective and some of the century old practices of the coffee growers are classic practices of climatic adaptation. However, a combination of factors, namely the Transformation of the market and production system of Coffee, is battering the Coffee producers, majority being small producers. Another factor

of climatic variance is that it brings unprecedented diseases, unpredictable and erratic weather that causes very low or excessive rains including powerful gales that wipes out precious trees and devastates the Coffee farmers profoundly.

Squeezed and scissored between market and changing patterns in the monsoon, in which the small grower has least power, the grower has started to feel no incentive at all to continue the struggle in growing coffee. The grower who has always played the role of a positive guardian of the Coffee agro system is feeling alienated, frustrated and wiped out. The vulnerability of the grower and the larger vulnerability of the Coffee economy are intertwined with ecological vulnerability of the Western Ghats only further accentuated by climate change. The dark clouds of Climate change which can unleash havoc comprehensively for now and the very near future across economy, ecology, sacred culture and society are all at cross roads and need not be a story of doom. This crisis's can show us a way that is opportunistic, creative, and solution driven.

The short study on and about Coffee economy and ecology has given us more than a sneak preview of the vulnerability of Coffee economy and its surrounding environment, but it also identifies the benefits that can be harvested and accrued with smart interventions along with enlisting range of stake holders. If the sector should flourish forward strategies must be put into action without any delay.

First step - The way forward and an action plan

- Undertake an in-depth vulnerability assessment along with the suite of the economics of ecosystem services and biodiversity in coffee growing districts. Include clear suggestions and recommendations for more guided investment in conservation

with multiple benefits, practical as well as policy actions for the State and Central Government, and those involved in coffee business.

- Capitalise on the new wave of awareness and willingness among global consumers who are willing to pay more price in order to conserve coffee.
- Use the story Coffee agro forest as a battering ram against climate change and weapons of mitigation and adaptive practices.
- Take steps that intrinsically include grower's needs. To offer incentive schemes for conserving native habitat within agricultural matrix, which generates financial rewards. If urgent action is not taken, it would lead to monetary loss to the economy of the State and Centre and colossal loss to employment and livelihood
- Develop an action-oriented advocacy plan that will increase the voice, ability, capacity of the growers at the grassroots and also build sustainable institutional change for the key stake holders.

In the end, we seek to inform more progressive climate change adaptation policies and strategies in India in the interest of the small producer.

—*Pushpanath Krishnamurthy*



FOOD SECURITY, RAIN FED AGRICULTURE, THE LEGISLATION AND ALL THAT

Just 60 kms from the throbbing city of Bangalore – aka as India’s Silicon city, I am in the back yard, so to speak, in Kodahalli hobli, a Block in the District of Ramanagaram in Karnataka. The villages, some of which look spectacular with green hills and water overflowing with more than expected rains in the old water bodies. As I soon found out, the beauty hides the real struggle of the peasants here with very small patches of lands on the undulating and treacherous hill path, as though hanging in the air. Narayana, 45, the farmer with few guntas (40 guntas makes an acre) held my hand, as I was slipping and failing to climb. He casually mentioned that walking up and down the hill is almost a daily activity, and most times just carrying a bag of manure up can be a killer!

Why do you struggle so much? You can just sell and move to town as many in this East side of the capital do? I asked as I recently learnt that the villages on other side of the National highway 241 were swallowing these villages in order to provide luxury homes to the new rich. Narayana replied saying: “After all the struggle, I am feeling a bit hopeful. We have formed groups which collect and support each other in reclaiming small patches of land.”

He showed me a few guntas of healthy looking ragi, the finger millet crop that he planted on his newly reclaimed land. “I will harvest 8 to 10 bags which will give me enough to eat and also sell,” he smiled with pride and confidence.

This new found confidence has arisen out of the technical and financial support from DHAN Foundation, an organization that works across the country on livelihood and poverty issues. DHAN more recently decided to work with the rained fed agriculture community by undertaking a number of actions.

The positive feelings that has gripped this community in the past few years are because of the facilitation, inputs, community building efforts, and the small successes they experienced from the land they possessed.

Sujaya, a team leader is a full time staff of Dhan. She is willing to learn and is active in supporting and enabling the group members. She hails from a lower middle class family and is a graduate from Forestry College in Ponnempet at Madikere. “I was keen to join the DHAN Academy, but could not make it. I feel happy to work as a coordinator here, said Sujaya.

While supporting and developing leadership among men and women is of priority, one of the reasons for DHAN’s success is to develop a cadre of professionals to work and bring as much

learning from the commune as much as bringing fresh ideas and innovation to the villages.

I find this aspect of DHAN, in integrating different sections of population to address poverty and exclusion, exceptional and worth studying for any actor interested in sustainable rain fed agriculture.

Land reclamation, even if small patches, and land rejuvenation has started to show results in providing better food security at the home front.

I was never prepared for what happened next!

We went to meet Mahadevayya, 37, who was tall, elegant, a bag of energy and an unsurpassed host. He was multi-talented—from Dollu Kunitha to Kosale Kunitha (spiritual- cultural expressions) and has been called upon to sing and dance by the Karnataka Government and many others. Despite his wide travelling, he remains deeply rooted in his village. Native chickens, goats, and pet dogs run wild around his big home which has a front yard large enough to play cricket!

Mahadevayya's father and grandfather are known for their knowledge on native herbal medicine and are also acclaimed for integrated cultivation.

“For each plant I grow, a remedy or a cure for any ailment from constipation to cancer is hidden,” said Mahadevayya.

He took me around and showed a range of organic solutions that he had prepared. The fish paste was his favorite concoction, and smelt almost like eatable molasses. “Apply this paste to any plant and it gets an army of buzzing bees. This not only helps pollinate better but also prevents any other pests from attacking the crop,”

said he.

He then showed me collections of valuable minor millets and local onion that he stored in a separate building. The collection, preservation, and propagation of his work is done with the help of DHAN.

Deep faith is something that sustains the peasants here and it is something that makes them feel that irrespective of having a bad year, they hope that the next year will be better.

DHAN has a great ability to identify and support such individuals and take their traditional knowledge and good practices to other farmers through their farmers groups. They also propagate through various events such as the Seed Festival in Bangalore.

After what was looked like more than a sumptuous all-organic meal, Mahadevayya served ground nuts and took us to show the formidable crop of local Ragi (Finger Millet) at his plot, a little away from home.

This plot, along with a dozen others, were provided with rich silt from the local water tank. This boosted the crop and its ability to retain water, and seemed ready for Harvest. “This crop is the only one that survived the recent high wind and rain, whereas the other millet crops that was grown in an inorganic way did not,” he said with pride.

From supporting rain fed farmers federation to documenting community bio-diversity registers and community seed banks; from providing small critical grants to providing quality ground nut seeds; from identifying native millets to providing groundnuts through participatory selection process; from soil health enhancement through tank silt provision to land levelling;

from solar fencing to protecting crops from wild beasts; from developing solidarity among groups of men and women to improving knowledge, skill, competency, and leadership of local community—the women and men of Kodhihalli are bringing a silent revitalization of the natural and community resources.

The work is just a few years old. But, it shows promise and has made a breakthrough in sustainable rain fed agriculture.

—*Pushpanath Krishnamurthy*

TRENDSETTERS

*A glance through a few personalities
who have made their mark in the
social work sector through their
pioneering efforts*



ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

There's a fine line it seems, between the terms 'mentoring', 'training', 'consulting', and 'coaching'. However, according to Bhaskar Natarajan, President of Hyderabad-based International Coach Federation (ICF), there's a clear-cut difference. "A mentor is somebody who teaches from expertise, while a trainer focuses on bridging a skill gap. Even a consultant derives his relevance from being an expert," says Bhaskar, as he tries to throw some light on these differences, "A coach however, is somebody who engages with someone on the same platform. His job is to ask questions, not just speak from experience." Interestingly, this approach is reflective of the Socratic approach to teaching, wherein the philosopher once said: "I cannot teach anyone anything. But, I know how to ask the right questions". Bhaskar endorses this approach, as far as coaching is also concerned. "It's all about tapping potential, and getting the best out of a person,"

he says, of coaching.

From a social perspective, the role of coaches and the process of coaching, both assume a great deal of significance. “This is because a leader in the context of a social enterprise, assumes a great deal of importance,” says Bhaskar, “The role of the leader of a social enterprise to ask questions like ‘how’, engage in open-minded discussions, bring about qualitative changes and make these changes for the better. Hence, there’s an awful lot of potential for coaches and coaching, in social enterprise.” For nearly four years now, Bhaskar’s not-for-profit venture, International Coach Federation (Hyderabad Chapter), has dedicated itself to promoting coaching and the need for coaches in several walks of life. “There are several coaches that play important roles across the industry: life coaches, sales coaches, and leadership coaches to name a few,” says Bhaskar.

Corporate enterprises and NGOs are those organizations, according to Bhaskar who are most in need of coaches. “These sectors have also shown significant interest in hiring coaches to streamline processes that take place within their walls,” he says. “There are several coaching programmes. Some last for six months, while others are a week or ten days,” continues Bhaskar, “Through these modules, the primary aim of coaching is to bring about self-awareness — the ability to hold a mirror to yourself and see what needs to be tweaked in that which already exists.” A typical example, according to Bhaskar is a recent case of a corporate enterprise that realised, not long ago, that its team meetings were becoming increasingly unproductive. “On employment of coaching methods, it was learnt that the managers spent an awfully long time in meetings that brought about no results. It was then proposed that meetings which were usually

eight hours long per week be restricted to not more than two or three hours a week,” he says, “This way, the company began making decisions in a short while, even as it began enjoying more time, which lent more productivity, which meant more money. By investing in a coach, the company realised a return on that investment in a relatively short span of time.” According to Bhaskar, some companies have even realised a whopping 700-fold return on investment. “Every rupee invested in coaching has brought back nearly 700 rupees and this in a situation where only 25 percent of an outcome has been credited to the role played by a coach.”

The term ‘grow’, Bhaskar says, is an acronym for ‘goals’, ‘reality’, ‘options’ and ‘way forward’. “From that perspective, the focus is significantly placed on growth, as far as coaching is concerned,” says Bhaskar, “Goals have also been of extreme significance as far as coaching is concerned. Coaching also helps achieve other objectives: how do I avoid procrastination? How do I deal with a tough colleague? How do I help my company cut costs? How do I propose a breakthrough idea?”

From a team-strength of merely five, when the organisation began in 2009, ICF has grown by leaps and bounds. “There are nearly 200 trained and certified ICF members across the country today,” says Bhaskar. The organisation also has a strong presence on Facebook, and in keeping with its edge as far as social networks go, the organisation also conducts monthly learning events, online. However, by his own admission, there were challenges when Bhaskar started out. “People, even in family, didn’t quite know the difference between a coach and trainer,” he says, “Gradually, after much explanation, people have begun to understand. Coaching has today, begun to supplement classroom training to a

significant extent.”

The future could see ICF partner with several high-profile organizations in the near future. “At present, non-profit companies are the ones which are yet to explore coaching avenues, while MNCs have good knowledge about the importance of coaching,” says Bhaskar, “Family-based companies have taken steps in this regard, but somehow seem to have coaching, consulting and training, all bundled up into one package.” He continues, “Private and public companies have roped in coaches in the past, but a lot needs to be done with regard to these enterprises as well.” No doubt, the road to the future seems to have its hands full with potential. However, with organizations like ICF, dedicated to the cause of promoting coaching, the future also looks tremendously promising.



ENSURING SAFETY FOR CHILDREN

How well do you think you know your Child? Listen to Dr Chetan and you will be surprised to know that we are ignorant.

It is shocking to learn that everyday around the world lives of more than 2000 families are torn apart due to loss of a child to an unintentional injury. It gets brushed aside as an “accident,” but if each parent had the right awareness, they could have prevented it. The grief that the affected families suffer is immeasurable and often impacts the entire community. Such tragedy can change lives irrevocably.

Children around the age of five are at high risk and susceptible to unintentional fatalities; major or minor injuries; or disabilities. Causality of such casualties rests with adults,

who design, decide and execute the Children's world in "Adults Frame".

Yes, children live in a world designed for adults, while their body contours, reflexes and behavior is prone to injuries. In GOD's creation – Children are curious and fearless. They explore sans the capacity to understand danger and the adults who design or act for them do not have the thought leadership to preempt such disasters. Some of the characteristics of children like smaller body size, vision, hearing, and limited risk perception, makes them more susceptible to be involved in traffic crashes, burns, poisoning, drowning and others and also affects the injury outcomes.

The psychological characteristics of children like impulsiveness, curiosity, experimentation, lack of knowledge on judgment of distance/ speed, low levels of concentration, makes them vulnerable for injuries and to neglect safety issues. Children move from a phase of protected environment and traveling with parents/elder siblings to states of independent travel along with an urge to take risks, experiment with various devices/products thus increasing their vulnerability to all types of injuries.

Child safety is not in the local or global agenda. Can it be in the parents agenda then? Let us take a micro data of Bangalore city and according to Bengaluru *Injury Surveillance Programme*, 5509 children were admitted with injuries, and 209 of them lost their lives in 2009-2010. If these are reported data, there could be alarmingly unreported loss of lives and statistically one death for every 27 non-fatal injuries. It was learn that girls were safer when compared to boys and majority of the injuries were from school going children who belonged to average socio-economic groups.

What it means

- Every 36 hours a child in Bangalore succumbs to an injury related problem
- World over every minute a child loses his life to injury and accident.
- No single disease in current times is causing so much death and disability as that of Child fatality due to unintended and unsafe environment.

World Research Data

As per WHO estimates, nearly 950,000 children die in the world due to an injury each year. The burden of child injuries in India is not clearly known, as injury information has not received much importance. National Crime Records Bureau data and few independent studies reveal that nearly 15 - 20 % of injury deaths occur among children. For every death, nearly 30 to 40 children are hospitalized and are discharged with varying level of disabilities.

The number of children sustaining minor injuries can only be guessed, as the problem is huge and phenomenal. The outcome from injuries is significant since it occurs in the younger age, thereby affecting long-term growth and development of children. Children with disabilities after an injury lead life with persistent difficulties in the rest of their lives.

Injuries lead to poor academic performance at a time when education is receiving a major thrust. The socio-economic hardships and psycho-social disabilities are huge and largely unmeasured. As injury burden, pattern, determinants and outcome varies from region to region, it is essential to understand

these characteristics to formulate effective child safety policies and programmes. Larger policies and programmes in transport, housing, environment, education, urban and rural development and others do not consider needs and limitations of children. Consequently, children share the same environment that is designed for adults. Further, child injury problem is unrecognized and hidden in the larger agenda of communicable and infectious disease control, and are not considered as health problems. At the same time, absence of efforts within and outside health sector makes it difficult to lead larger advocacy and prevention efforts.

What are common childhood injuries?

- The most common causes of injuries among young children are
 1. Falls - from a table, a bed or a ladder, or falling over when running
 2. Consuming poisons, getting affected by burns (hot water or fire or excess sun burn), drowning
 3. Subjecting to injuries while learning a new skill (bike or skate board)

Understanding Challenges

- Young children cannot understand danger, or that they might get hurt or even killed even when you have told them about the danger.
- They can understand “**Stop**” or “**no**”, but not the why of “**Do not run onto the street because you will get hit by a car**” as activity over takes caution and the absence of precedence.
- Toddlers may understand “no” but not obedience to “no”.

- They have “**Tunnel Vision**” and hence only look at chasing a ball or running to a friend and cannot **judge** whether something, such as a car, is moving, or how fast it is moving and the consequence of that action

Keeping children safe

Dr Chetan has taken it up as mission to reduce unsafe environment for children through awareness, social activism, design interventions and counseling. It is his strong conviction that adults are responsible to mitigate risk for the child from unsafe environment. His practice in UK and India as a pediatrician and attending to child injuries resulted in root cause analysis. He has created a set of steps to follow in order to best protect a child. Every step he recommends is out of an injury that a child has suffered and is not academic. Here are the simple steps that he recommends to get rid of the danger:

- Left over Chemicals used in garden should be disposed off and not stored.
- Urban lifestyle with Bunk Beds has resulted in falls. Make it safe proof.
- Ladders if used in houses should be in grounded positions.
- Do not position stools and tables near windows or parapet walls or balconies
- People living in flats or exposed to road traffic should keep the child’s play area away from car park and runs.
- Kitchen/toilet cleaning items/medicines which are colorful attracts children to consume. They should be stored in child-proof cupboards.

- Do not leave keys in two wheelers and four wheelers.

Laughable but essential as your child is more precious.

- Child Helmet when riding a bike, or wrist and knee protectors when skating.
- Use sun-protecting clothes.
- Let the grills in your houses be vertical. Child enjoys climbing and Horizontal grills is not “Fall-Proof”.
- When the child is present along with the mother, he attempts to pull everything that he can reach. Hence, directions of cooker handle, saucepan should face the wall and not towards the child.
- Water tanks, water buckets, washing machines, mixers, grinders, and iron box should be child-distanced. Child internalizes parents/elders and their safe or unsafe behavior is imbibed.
- Role modeling is important by not violating traffic rules or double jumping stairs, or un-authorized crossing of roads.

Help them learn skills so that they do things the right way

For example:

- If you have a tree that ‘needs’ to be climbed, help them learn how to climb down again.
- Help them learn how to use a knife safely.

Teach them by telling them what to do, and what not to do

- Even though small children cannot understand all that you say, eventually they will learn to control their own

behavior. Talk to them about stopping at the traffic lights, walking across the street when the walk sign turns green.

- Stop any unsafe activity of a child whenever, wherever and however it may happen. If distance is a challenge, use voice and noise like “stop” to distract the child.
- Have emergency phone numbers near the phone:
 - o Doctor, Police, Ambulance, Fire
- Have a first aid kit in the house and car.
- Check that homes and public places you visit with your child are safe.
- Do a first aid course which includes emergency resuscitation, so that you will know what to do.
- Last but not least – talk this – be an advocate of child safety as Child safety is not our choice, it is our responsibility!!!

People tree Foundation

I met Dr Chetan Ginigeri, a humble young man who sleeps, eats, dreams, and acts on child safety. Every place he got trained or worked is so branded that you will wonder why he chose child safety than enhancing his bank balance. Yes, Dr Chetan Ginigeri is a Pediatric Intensivist, formerly heading one of the Largest Pediatric Critical Care Units in Bangalore at Narayana Hrudayalaya Multispecialty Hospital.

Dr. Chetan is a Transplant Intensive Care specialist. He has the expertise and experience to care for children requiring solid organ transplantation, especially post liver transplantation. He got trained

in leading institutes in India and abroad namely at King's College London in the United Kingdom and at the Jawaharlal Institute of Post Graduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER), Puducherry and the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh.

He shunned materialism and with a set of well-wishers founded the Pediatric Intensive Care, PEOPLE TREE Hospitals for CHILD SAFETY and pro bono organized Child Safety workshop for Companies, schools, clubs and apartment complexes. He spoke about children knifing or using guns in Schools, overcrowding of children in School Busses and the fire accident in Kumbakonam as avoidable incidents.

CHILD SAFETY – A NEW PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM!!!

“Be the *small* change, Make a *big* difference”

Dr Chetan picked up a leaf from Late DR. Venkataswamy Naidu of Arvind Eye Hospital known as DR V. Yes, He focused on eliminating needless blindness and this has become a sustained movement for over four decades and is running strong even now in India as well as across the world. It is being effectively carried forward by Dr. Nachiayar.

Dr Chetan believes Child safety promotion and injury prevention requires an integrated and coordinated scaling up. It has to start at macro level at the policy making co-ordination between varied ministries and Departments of Government of India and varied State Governments.

Since child injuries happen due to several causes, the solutions will also be several. Multiple interventions need to be implemented in an integrated manner to obtain maximum results as each one

contributes for decreasing injuries to a certain extent. Road safety, home safety, School Safety, Playground safety, safety of Public and Private Places where children visit should be given high importance to reduce child deaths and injuries. The missing link is 'Adult Awareness' while there could be several known and proven interventions and public health alerts.

Young children should be specifically taken care of by their parents or caregivers. Specific and well-designed programs on safety of children at micro and macro level is the mission of People Tree Foundation. Few from IIM Bangalore have joined Dr Chetan in this mission to create an India Movement and can we extend a helping hand?

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HERO – TODAY AND TOMORROW!

Sankaralinkam, 24, is undergoing the work experience programme at Copper Chimney, coordinated by SPASTN. From housekeeping to hospitality, this young man is ace in his work.

SPASTN along with Copper Chimney has been providing special children with training since November 2011 and till date, 25 children have benefitted from this programme.

Conversations traces Sankaralinkam life's path from the age of 2 to 24.

When I entered the Copper Chimney restaurant on a Monday morning, I was greeted by Sankaralinkam. He was cleaning the entrance glass doors and greeted me instantly.

“I have come here to talk to you. You may finish your work and

join me,” said I cheerfully.

He looking at me curiously and smiled.

After he had completed his tasks diligently, we sat together to chatter.

“What are you doing here? I asked.

“I am working at Copper Chimney,” he said with pride.

Speaking of his family, his face lit up as he said, “My father’s name is Kalai kannan and my mother’s name is Rama Nachiar. I have two sisters Aishwarya and Lavanya. I live in Perambur and Uncle Pannerselvam drops and picks me up from Copper Chimney every day.”

“Are you enjoying your work here? What do you do with your salary?” I probed.

“I like to work here very much. When I received my first salary from Winners Bakery, I bought Aishwarya, my sister, a new set of clothes for her birthday. It was an orange *churidar* and she liked it very much. We all went to the temple and even put some money in the *hundi*,” he stated without a pause.

“What do you want to become when you grow up?” I enquired.

“I want to be a hero like Rajnikanth.” After thinking for a moment, he added innocently, “I want to be a hero at Copper Chimney.”

When asked who Rajnikanth was, he instantly narrated a comedy clip from one of his movies ‘*Chandramukhi*’ and prompted me to laugh. I was amazed at his memory as the scene appeared vividly in front of my eyes.

I took a break from our conversation, and spoke with his father Kalai kannan, to learn how he succeeded in bringing up his truly special son.

“I was living with my family in Abu Dhabi as I worked for a National oil company. When Sankaralinkam was two and a half years old, the doctor diagnosed him with autism. My wife and I did not eat for three days as we were very depressed. The word ‘autism’ was a new word for us. We returned to India, and since then we have devoted our lives for the sake of our son,” he said nostalgically.

“It must have taken a lot of courage for you to overcome the trauma. Now, I am sure that you are proud of your son,” I told comfortingly.

“Of course, yes! I am glad to say that my son has completed his 12th standard through National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and has even done his DTP training. Every day, he types a page from Abdul Kalam’s book ‘Wings of Fire’. He expects me to treat him like an adult and involves himself in all household discussions,” he said humbly.

Speaking about his children, Kalai kannan said: “My daughters are very affectionate towards Sankaralinkam. Lavanya, my older daughter, has done her MS in Speech pathology. She pursued this course as she was interested to work for special children. Although she is in the United States after marriage, she stays in constant touch with us. Aishwarya, my younger daughter is presently studying at Velammal engineering college in Chennai. While studying in the eighth standard, she served as my son’s scribe when he appeared for the 10th standard examination.”

“Are you happy that your son is working at Copper Chimney?” I

asked politely.

“Yes, I do. I was hesitant at first to allow him carry out housekeeping tasks, but Ms. Jayashree of SPASTN counseled me. She made me realize that there is dignity of labor and about the value of the work experience programme. I am thankful to the staff at Copper Chimney for being kind towards my son and treating him equal, “he replied.

Kalai kannan acknowledges SPASTN and the support extended by Mr. Mahadevan and his staff at Copper Chimney for Sankaralinkam’s growth today.

Talking about his spouse, he said emotionally, “My wife has visited most of the special schools in the city to seek admission for our son. Our expectation was high and it took a long time for us to accept that our child was autistic. My advice for parents like me is: ‘You accept first. Then expect the society to accept and help you. Don’t hesitate to ask for opportunities to your child.’ Today, I am proud to say that my son is capable of being socially and economically independent,” concluded Kalai kannan wiping a tear.

— *Marie Banu*



SUCCESSFUL EXPERIMENTS IN INTEGRATION

Whenever, stake holders discuss about integration and mainstreaming, the beneficiaries with special needs are trained or prepared to adapt to the new scene. However, practices to ensure their acceptance by the other half is usually forgotten. In this column, we will get to know about Ms Diana Thloor, Founder, Chrysallis Performance Arts Centre for the Challenged and her efforts along this unbeaten path.

Integration to her was a multidimensional concept. "Failure to capture its significance in totality might affect the challenged children rather than creating a support system for them," she says very consciously. The birth of Chrysallis is a very interesting encounter between her Christmas parties for children and the idea to help differently abled children to perform. During the party organized for 300 children from low economic backgrounds, a child affected by polio and cerebral palsy wanted to join the

musical chairs game. In spite of her trying to dissuade him, he went on and... WON! "Hanumanth was the fastest, moved around in lightning speed, with his face communicating nothing but pure joy of participation," she says.

This was the critical incident. She was more than sure that she wanted to do something for these children.

Diana is a theatre person who works through movement, dance, drama for children with different challenges. The first performance 20 challenged children, many of whom were blind, became a huge success. Today, she has more than 150 stage productions, social films, radio shows and art programmes to her credit, all in the span of a decade. She has written original scripts for Special Need Schools and has directed and staged theatre performance bringing on stage over 320 performers in a single production. "The sense of participation brought in by these performances adds to their confidence levels. The kids will always want more and never less," she smiles in her own characteristic manner.

Essentially Chrysallis started in 1999 as an outreach programme teaching dance and drama to children from Bangalore Special Schools. Eventually the network she tried to build up paid off. She introduced 'Christmas with Chrysallis' to bring all the children to a single event. With only 2000 children in the first two years, it presently reaches out to more than 1 lakh children across India's metro cities. Friends and individuals are contacted to send gender neutral gifts for children costing no more than 25 rupees to Chrysallis, with a note inside, mentioning to age and gender of the recipient. The volunteer teams wrap it and distribute the gifts to the children.

Talking of volunteers, I must mention her open appeal in the blog: “Every moment of every day - I think about how to change perceptions on the abilities of children with challenges. Join me on this journey and help make a difference.” Evidently her volunteers are her great strength. She aims to create a network of youngsters who believe in the abilities of challenged children and spread the message of equal opportunity. Chrysallis also organizes volunteer enrichment programmes to create awareness on various issues concerning children with special needs.

Besides her engagement with Chrysallis, she also takes time out to direct and choreograph plays on causes taken up by various organizations. *Lion King* with Spastics Society of Karnataka, *Alladin* with the *Vidya Niketan*, *Who loves you?* (an original stage musical) for the launch of the Alpha and Omega theatre are just a few. In 2003, she staged a play titled “*Bhavana*” for the awareness campaign of Sudatta, an adoptive parents association. The film undertakings by her are on the topics of Suicide Prevention, Mental Illness, Adoption of a special child, Foster Care, Adoption of a child with HIV/Aids, Abuse of a Male Child and others.

She also organized a programme bringing children with and without challenges, and teachers together to create awareness on the needs of special children. This was part of a process to evolve a module or a strategy to integrate children with disabilities with regular schools in future. “In an attempt to expose children and teachers to stark realities, 15 children were paired with disabled children and six teachers were asked to teach them for 10 minutes each. A sign language expert explained what was being taught for the benefit of the children with hearing disabilities. At the end of the history class, two children with visual disabilities could not say anything about what they had learnt, and apparently children

with hearing disabilities had found the class was going too fast and hardly understood what was being taught,” she recounts.

With sufficient experience convincing her on the need to bring children with and without challenges together, she launched a project in 2006. “The Chrysallis Power of One” was a 180 day long campaign raising awareness on integration of children with and without challenges across 33 states and union capitals in the country. “The intention was to inculcate peer acceptance, social interaction, fellowship and understanding among the children. They cannot be peers unless they are encouraged and taught to play and study together. We have to start from them,” she adds. The various paintings that these children had made portrayed the importance of special relationships, says a visitor at the exhibition of these paintings.

Besides arts and drama, sport is also used as a medium of integration. In 2007, Chrysallis decided to organize the first of its kind carom and chess tournaments for children and adults from both the groups. A team was formed with one challenged individual and a normal person.

Whenever children with different challenges and those without any come together to play or perform on stage, it certainly becomes a sight of happiness, paying off for all the hard work invested through various programmes and the numerous rehearsals they had been through. More often, it is very hard to realize that children performing are challenged. But for Diana, all this was not hard. “Inculcating discipline was. We try to focus on articulation and sign language to convey stories. Stories, Diana says, with a simple line and message can really do well, leaving an impact on the audience.

Having learnt the holistic approach through performance arts that she has evolved to bring about integration in every sense, it does not come as a surprise to know that she is the recipient of numerous awards like Kalasha Women Achiever Award for Social Work by the Inner Wheel Club, Sadguru Gnanananda Award for Woman in Social Work in 2004, and Shrishti Special Academy for Social Excellence in 2003.

What all of us can do for this integration oriented initiative to succeed is spread the word, send Christmas gifts, volunteer and wish them all success in their endeavours!

— *Shanmuga Priya. T*



CONVERGENCE OF NEEDS AND CAPACITIES

How does it sound to learn about professionals from different walks working together in a community to make it sustainable and self-reliant? All doubts about this conception are grounded by EWB – India (Engineers Without Borders – India), which is an evolving network of professionals striving to create a movement for ‘constructive change’. This is probably the microcosm of what we all envisage in the name of good governance.

“EWB India was established in 2005 by Prof. Ali Uddin Ansari of Muffakham Jah College of Engineering and Technology (MJCET) and friends in Hyderabad,” says Dr Ashok Agarwal, Chairman, EWB-India who is also its Co-Founder. EWB – India’s work intends to encourage students and professionals to take up socially relevant projects that impact those at the bottom rung of the ladder, all during their academic duration itself. Interestingly, different chapters are formed, not by the parent body, but by the

students or professionals who intend to bring about a change in the present situation.

“We try to create an interface for technology, need, professional capabilities and aspirations to learn to complement each other, in the process of bringing about sustainable rural development,” he elaborates. The heterogeneity of individuals who come forward to join this effort is also reflected in the Board of Directors and Advisory Board, which are comprised of individuals from the fields of Environmental Sciences, Human Resources, Telecommunication Engineering, Information Technology, Civil Engineering, Mining Engineering, Economics and others.

Here is how it works – a student or a professional who is socially concerned and wishes to contribute towards the development of rural and backward urban communities registers with EWB-India. Upon registration, the individual is connected to the already existing chapter or a new chapter is established depending on the interests expressed. Thereafter, the team is encouraged to conceive, prepare and implement projects for the communities. All along, they will be guided by information and networking support from EWB-India, in addition to the workshops and conferences organized by the national and international offices and panel of experts provided to mentor the students.

Initially, it sounded a bit complicated. Ashok clears the air, convincing that the best solution to existing problems can come only from the concerned communities. That the involvement of youth from the very community makes the execution of the identified solution easy and effective is a given. “EWB only facilitates the process of bringing these youth on a common platform. The members are given the liberty to identify and propose projects that meet the needs of food, clean water, shelter,

sanitation, education, health and livelihood,” he adds.

Youngsters today are urged to do different things at the same time - volunteer, undertake vocational training courses, etc. So, how easily do they identify themselves with EWB – India’s mission might be a concern to any stranger. “EWB works with a long term perspective in mind. The idea is to create a network of mutual help and capacity building, with a responsible attitude towards nature’s resources. The same problem might require different approaches in different communities. Capacity building and mutual help comes in very handy to help the communities identify and execute the solution”.

Some of the recent projects being implemented include solar power plant at an orphanage in Hyderabad, converting agricultural waste into Fuel Briquettes in Madhya Pradesh, solar lighting at Sirohi village, Haryana by providing individual lighting to about 500 families, creating a self-sustainable village economy with economic analysis and background research in West Bengal culminating in the development of a sustainable action plan, vocational training for women in Faridabad to support family incomes, etc. “We confront the real issues troubling and people’s development with small, yet effective attempts,” remarks Dr Ashok.

Over the years, it can be seen that it has evolved into a global network of students and professionals engaged in a large number of projects that promise a better tomorrow. Environment sustainability rural development, and upliftment of backward communities are terms that may not augur well together in the vocabulary of industrial growth, given the scenario in our country. Nevertheless, ‘putting the last first’ seems to have been the guiding principle for EWB – India’s work, where no member

in a community must go without food, water, shelter and other basic needs.

For Ashok, working with the communities is met with mixed responses. “Quite often the community takes it as a charity without really owing the initiative and supporting it from their side. The critical issue here is effective participation of the community, which includes financial participation by the community to some extent to ensure the sustainability of the project over the next few years. As you know, it is very challenging,” he admits. So what keeps them going? “When we look at the smile on the faces of young children in the orphanage and the children in the Government ZPS High school for the infrastructure we had set up; the tribal community that never had any power earlier and now has the power on the streets and in homes, we are moved. There is fresh energy to work for many more such communities and concerns”.

Beginning with the formation of a chapter in a locality or the collaboration with an NGO to work in a time bound manner to receiving consent from the community to go ahead with the projects, every step is a challenge that members of EWB-India are facing. Undeterred, they are determined to get this network growing, fostering the convergence of needs and capacities in every community, for development that is sustainable and responsive to nature.

— *Shanmuga Priya T*



FINDING FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN

“We are loved and we are cared for.” This is the message that invariably flows as one walks into Vathsalya Charitable Trust, Bangalore, which is welcomed by smiles of little children here. More comforting and surprising is the voice of its Director, Ms Mary Paul, who is 56 years old. Her voice and looks just don’t go with her age. With a warm smile, she begins to introduce me to the Trust’s work and her association with this institution.

Upon completion of her Masters in Social Work, Mary Paul worked with the Christa Mithra Ashram in Ankola situated in North Canara (coastal belt of Karnataka) for a year. Then, she joined Macmillan in Bangalore as an Editor. “By 1987 I was sure I wanted to get back to Social Work,” she says. This is when all her certificates in Counseling (family and Marriage, career, and addiction) helped identifying the next step. In 1989, the Board of Trustees hired her as the Director of the Vathsalya Charitable

Trust that was registered in 1988. “Setting up the infrastructure and starting the work was truly fulfilling,” recalls Mary Paul.

Under her leadership, the Trust initiated a range of programmes for children. The Education Sponsorships for girl children from poor socio economic backgrounds gave them the confidence to work in the area of child care. Adoption programme was launched soon. All programmes at Vathsalya were evolved on a need basis, and so was the adoption programme. The Trust received orphan children through a legal body, who were then placed in families (domestic and international) through the court. “We at Vathsalya believe that every child deserves a permanent loving family of his or her own. From adoption, we forayed into Family Foster Care programme,” she continues.

With things beginning to take a concrete shape, it was time for Mary Paul to take a break. This is when she founded the ‘Kutumba’ in 1991, in Doddagubdi, Bangalore. Kutumba is a rehabilitation centre for physically challenged women from the rural parts of southern India. The centre takes care of all the needs of its residents, including transport facilities to undergo vocational training at different centres like the Association for People with Disability (APD). As she rightly puts it, “Kutumba is a home away from home. The centre is all theirs’ until they are placed in a job, after which they move out.” Soon, the circumstances in the community insisted the need to establish a day care centre for the children in the village.

Whether it was Vathsalya or Kutumba, counseling has been an integral part of the work in both these centres. “Counseling is a very challenging job. Not all individuals are the same; each has his or her own levels of adaptability and openness,” says Mary Paul while elaborating on the need for counseling for the

residents in these centres. Almost a decade after the establishment of Kutumba, Vathsalya's Board of Trustees wanted her to come back to the Trust and streamline the activities there.

“By 2001 the situations in which the programmes of Vathsalya were planned had changed. New challenges, and along with them new opportunities had opened up,” says Mary Paul, reasoning out the decrease in the number of children available for adoption. She attributes this scenario to two reasons – an increasing number of couples looking at abortion as an option and the government starting its own adoption programme, taking over what NGOs were doing over the decades.

This is when she decided to develop the foster care programme on a full swing. Earlier in the 90s, most of the children were under child care and only 15 percent were placed on foster care. With persistent efforts in the decade after 2001, the situation changed – almost 85 percent of the children were in foster care now. Foster care for more than 1,000 children over the years has been a herculean task. “It has never been easy. However easier is not necessarily better,” says she immediately, seconding my thoughts.

The year 2005 had a whole new experience in store for this counselor. In the aftermath of Tsunami, she along with two of her colleagues went to Car Nicobar in Andaman Islands to train the heads of government departments on Grief Counseling. “It was so touching to sit with people who had lost everything. Imagine losing everything overnight and starting life from scratch. We felt with them the pain they experienced,” she recollects. The 20 days spent in the islands, she believes, is a highlight of her career as a counselor. Today, she is an Associate Faculty with the institution that organized this programme – PtoP (Person to Person Institute

of Christian Counseling, Hyderabad).

To Mary Paul, working with kids has been very joyful and fulfilling. Over the years, from planning and managing the programmes in these centres, she has moved to spending more time in administration. “I feel that I have come to the tail end of my work at Vathsalya. I will need to spend more time at Kutumba,” she expresses. Mary Paul is very appreciative of her teams in both these centres who have consistently worked in the best interest of destitute women and children.

“Vathsalya is in the 25th year of its establishment and is blessed to have donors committed to the cause. On the other hand, Kutumba is completely supported by contributions from friends and well-wishers. More than two decades of work has been possible only because of the dedicated teams and the almighty’s blessings,” says Mary Paul, reiterating gratefully that both the centres are now managed in their own facility, since 2006 and 2007.

In all these years, over 2,000 children had been received, out of which around 1,000 are with families in adoption and approximately 400 have been repatriated back to birth families. Those who are disabled cannot go for adoption and will remain with the centre forever. 8 children from here are placed in group foster care at Swanthana, a home for children with special needs.

Mary Paul is a recipient of the Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhini, Sadguru Gnanananda Award for women in social service excellence in 2002. She feels strange about receiving awards and says, “We do what we are here for. Receiving an award, followed by the appreciation and recognition it calls for, is no doubt wonderful, but I would prefer that our good deeds glorify God.”

The future does not intimidate her. Confident that good work will find its way, she shares that like before, even the future interventions will be need based. “We are working on the need to establish a day care centre for the children of migrant population in Bangalore. Soon, we might also work with the elderly. We are constantly exploring the needs of the community.”

Truly, Mary Paul has carried the message – every child deserves a loving family – all through her journey.

— *Shanmuga Priya T*



THE BEGINNING, THE PROGRESS, AND THE SUCCESS!

We have known childhood friends who cherish memories of having total fun playing in their backyards, cycling or fishing together, studying together, etc. But here, we have the story of two childhood friends who have steadily moulded their foray into the social development sector. “Suyam Charitable Trust, established in 1999, is the outcome of all the simple and yet constructive steps that allowed us to reach the people,” says Mr. Muthuram, Trustee.

Mr. Muthuram and Dr. V. Uma (Founder & Managing Trustee) have taken part in numerous activities at such a young age that what followed later was only a natural outcome of it. “When we were 10 years old, we were bothered about the incomplete nature of slum children’s education. The fact that they did not make it

like other children was disturbing. So we decided to educate them in our terraces,” shares Muthuram.

He confirms that age does bring in maturity, whether one acknowledges it or not. Muthuram and Uma began to explore other activities like medical camps. Soon, volunteering for temple work (managing crowds) came up and the duo’s interaction with like-minded individuals grew bigger and stronger. Uma formed the Vishal Rangers Team to manage the task at Ranganathan temples in Tirupati and Chennai. Organisation of organ and body donation camps was next in line.

Sometimes it takes one specific event to convincingly push one towards their passion. *Vizhigal kattum vazhigal* was one such event in 1993. “An eye exhibition that caught the attention of more than 180 people introduced us to the concept of reach,” says Muthuram, recollecting that 22 cataract surgeries were performed then.

With more and more activities shaping their skills and potentials, friends and well-wishers suggested that they give a concrete shape to their work in the form of an organisation. Thus was born ‘Suyam Charitable Trust’ in 1999, with notable public support. Now comes the most interesting part – the monetary support. Interestingly, the duo came up with the idea of collecting 10 rupees from each friend. This was called the *Anamika* initiative. It helped them create a corpus of 5,000 rupees to establish the Trust and the remaining 40,000 rupees was utilised to purchase a land near Periyapalayam.

“Sometimes the message is very simple and pressing – the moment you decide to do good things, the required support flows in,” he smiles.

Uma's interest in personality development programmes helped her choose Social Work as her career option. With both sharing an MS in Education Management, it was obvious that their interest in education was taken forward. Led by Uma, they organised 30 personality development camps for Corporation school students and children's homes in Tamil Nadu.

"In one of the schools, the scoring percentage of students improved from 57 to 87. We were excited to see the impact," exclaims Muthuram, who firmly believed that this transformation was a result of simplified methods of teaching and learning. He thinks it is very important to strike a chord at the right time. "Post 10th grade our students have a constant dilemma on their choice of career. Only timely guidance can be of help," he confirms.

As he explains, he is more heartened by the change initiated by their team of volunteers. A school girl decided to commit suicide on being threatened by a boy from the community. "On being counselled by a Suyam volunteer, she was able to overcome the trauma. Incidents like these reiterate that we are on the right path. Certainly, age is no barrier to inspire or get inspired," he asserts.

The reach of the programmes was visible in the camps organised for the students. At least 200 students would enrol for the camps at Suyam. The school teachers also made it a point to be a part of these camps. In all, it was an enriching experience to all the members.

"A one day seminar conducted for the students of Hindu College at Pattabiram further added value to my experience. Whether one is in school or college is immaterial. What truly matters is an individual's level of excellence and the inculcation of right values at the right age". Educational needs of adult and children,

medical assistance programme including post-operative support were the regular work undertaken by Suyam. Additionally, the organisation manages to do its part in other realms, when found a chance. Suyam volunteers had planted 1,000 pits and saplings at Tambaram Sanatorium Hospital in Chennai.

After about a year into its operation, the girls' team at Suyam underwent a course in videography. The need to submit a documentary at the end of this course saw them exploring the possibility of filming the lives of families living near the water pipes at Kilpauk in Chennai. As always, the attempt had to win the assent of the people as they were wary about being used as objects of shame by many. Their frustration and helplessness was understood. The team led by Uma promised to act on their plight and convinced them on the need to film their lives. The movie titled '*Nadaipathai pookkal*' (meaning 'pavement flowers') came out with a strong message that education is the only key to transform their lives.

But how did they get into begging? Suyam organised numerous workshops and programmes to change their attitude towards begging. Serving food from a star hotel to these people broke the ice. The community was convinced that Suyam was here for their good and promised to cooperate. Suyam requested every family to send at least two of their children to schools. The number grew unimaginably faster. 2 became 20 in no time.

Next was the resource barrier. Surprisingly, the community came forward to help Suyam. They wanted Suyam to run a school for their children in their land near Avadi. In addition, an old couple in the region came forward to lease their house to them. With supplementary funds from different sources, *Siragu Montessori School* was established in June 2003.

“The Governor of Tamil Nadu who came for the inauguration was totally inspired by our work. But the school did not last for long. The building was set on fire in 2004 by some miscreants. With the help of volunteers and supporters, we erected another school within two days, but were again forced to vacate. It was then Suyam decided to create an asset. The sale of 10 rupees bookmarks brought in 1.2 lakh rupees. This along with a loan of 2.5 lakh rupees enabled us to purchase a land in 2005. With limited resources, we opted to build a small temporary structure using hollow blocks for construction. Soon, the tide was turning in our favour. We repaid the loan in 2009 and constructed nine permanent class rooms with the support of Madras Knights Round Table 181,” narrates Muthuram with pride.

Accolades to Suyam are not a surprise, considering their record of reach and consistency. Siragu was awarded the second place in the Akzo Nobel Community Program Best Practices Competition in 2007. Across a selection of 2,500 volunteers, 500 projects from 45 countries, Suyam Charitable Trust was awarded for the facilities they provided through Siragu Montessori School. The money that came along with the award—50,000 euros— was invested in the project.

The results from Siragu were more than convincing. The students excelled at Olympiad and some have also made it to FIIT-JEE coaching. With the strength of 550 children, Siragu has branched out with two more schools – one in Chennai and the other in its outskirts. Siragu envisages developing the schools to higher secondary level, with residential facilities for both teachers and children.

Was this all? No. The horizons of Suyam’s work kept expanding with time. The team came across 43 families from a nomadic tribe

2 years ago. With no criminal records on them, their exploitation by the local goondas was a cause of worry. Suyam intervened and protested to bring an end to this menace. The Government finally allotted a piece of land for these families near Morai.

Today, the children from these families are educated at Siragu, with buses plying specially for them. 15 families were given auto rickshaws and women were offered a loan amounting to a total of 24 lakh rupees from the government to aid their vocation. They are trained to make paper products ranging from pen stand to tables and chairs. The team is now all set to create a record for making 101 paper tables, using one tonne waste paper. The photo frames made by these women are purchased by Suyam itself and the resources are pooled in to provide basic amenities to these families.

In short, Suyam lives by the principle of inclusive development and has demonstrated its effectiveness. Let's wish them success in all their efforts to grow and replicate.

— *ShanmugaPriya. T.*



FROM MOTHER TO DAUGHTER – PRERANA

It is not very often that we come across a person whose thoughts and enthusiasm does not comply with their age. At 56 years, Ms Prashantha Jois, Founder of Prerana Resource Centre comes across as one. A psychology graduate from a town called Sagar in Karnataka, she is a devotee of Swami Vivekananda and an ardent believer of his philosophy of ‘jeeva shiva seva’ (meaning – service to the needy). After marriage in 1984, she became a member of an 18 member family. “My family life taught me the redolence of human relationships,” she says.

Her schedule in the new family gave her the space and time to ensconce in her meditation. “The women in the house used to finish all the household work by 8:30 AM. The rest of the day was mostly a time for introspection and search for that one thing I found missing,” Prashantha explains. One day, during

her meditation, she found herself engrossed in thoughts of rehabilitating the disabled, especially the blind. “That moment, I owed to rehabilitate at least 12 visually challenged girls in my life,” says Prashantha, who is all perked up now, in sharing her experiences from the past.

Her mission began soon. She visited neighboring villages at her relatives’ place near Meerut. Observed how challenged individuals were treated. “It was the most painful part. I saw blind girls being treated like animals. With poverty restricting them from treating their ailment, these children were seen as a burden to the families. No one realized that their other organs were functioning to the optimum,” she shares.

Totally convinced about her mission in life, she communicated her interest to the family members who also got convinced about the role she wanted to play in the lives of the disabled. With support from her family she set off to rehabilitate the differently abled. She sold all her jewellery and started a rehabilitation centre for the visually impaired orphaned adolescent girls, in a rented building.

Prerana Resource Centre (PRC) was thus born in 1992 with 12 inmates. It aimed at providing a holistic rehabilitation that took care of food, accommodation, mobility aids, training in multiple trades and then mainstreaming them in the society. Prashantha took the effort in observing trades in the industries and trained the girls in the centre. She blind folded herself and worked in four factories for six months to prove that visually impaired people can work as normal as anybody else.

The number of inmates grew to 35 girls in just 4 years of its establishment. The girls were trained in self-grooming, home management, mobility, etc. “They were happy with my affection

for them and began to feel important and confident. Their satisfaction evinced that I was on the right path. Thanks to Swami Vivekananda's books that always accompanied and directed me," Prashantha adds.

Prashantha's name was soon synonymous with PRC. The girls here lived like a family, mutually sharing all the responsibilities in administering the centre. "We have batches for washing, cooking, cleaning, vegetable cutting— all of us share the work." It is interesting to see a visually impaired girl help a handicapped girl and vice versa. The culture of helping others with one's strengths is imbibed as a habit here.

Prerana's achievements are many. It has placed 315 visually challenged girls in jobs and facilitated the process of getting disability ID cards for 915 members. Prashantha has also organized marriages for 22 girls at the centre, 4 of whom have children now. "I have grown to be a grandmother," she laughs out. Today, the centre houses 120 girls with different impairment who are trained in basket weaving, and making telephone mats, garlands and paper bags. The centre that has registered around 1500 inmates today stands in its own building that is equipped to rehabilitate 90 members. Prashantha has collected 52 lakh rupees from philanthropists and donors to establish this facility.

Prashantha's work has received accolades from several forums. PRC received the National Award for Placement Services in the year 2005 from Government of India; Government of Karnataka honoured her with the State Award for Best Service to the Disabled, in 2006. Prashantha is also the recipient of Kittur Rani Chennamma Award for Best Social Service (2006) and State Award from the Department of Welfare of the Disabled (2007) from the Government of Karnataka. So far, over 75 organisations

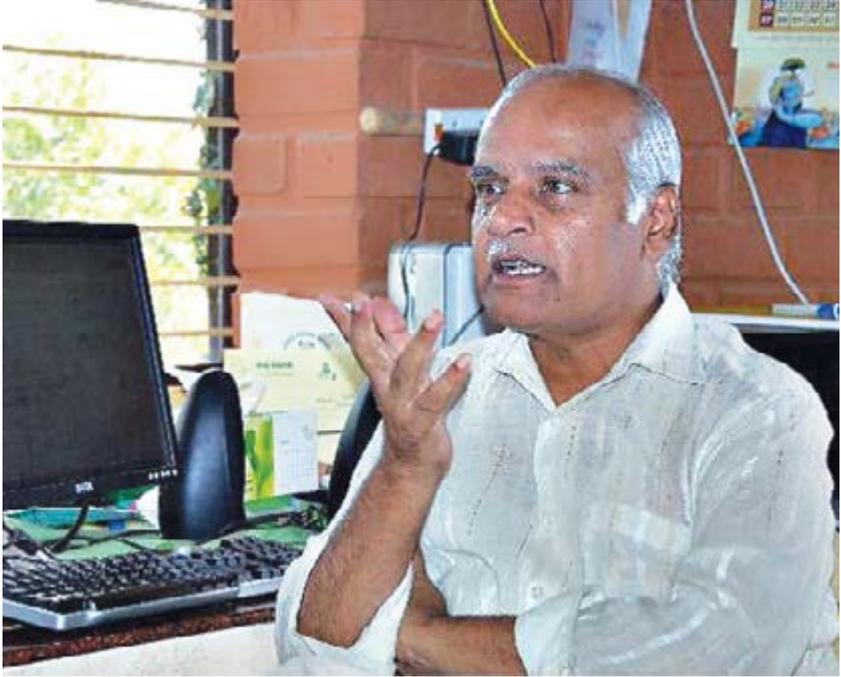
have honoured her with felicitations.

With her health becoming a concern after she met with an accident, PRC had to face the challenge of missing her personal presence. “The main problem now is maintenance. My mobility is limited ever since I fell down and had a fracture,” says a concerned Prashantha. She admits that bringing in girls to the centre was not a challenge, but maintaining this work certainly is. Her daughter who was working with Robert Bosch has now taken to her shoes upon request.

When questioned about her satisfaction in the reach of Prerana, she recounts “All those who called me a mad lady as I was trying to rehabilitate the visually impaired saw my work and started supporting me in different ways.” That says it all!

— *T. Shanmuga Priya*





MILK GANDHI

A Lecture session makes him a Gandhian

Reverse migration is the need of the hour to realize the Gandhian dream of Swaraj. Dr Reddy has moved from walk to talk. He has re-engineered the rural and urban bridge through a prosperous rural entrepreneurship model.

Farmers parting land and their children migrating to urban areas in elusive search of prosperous white collar jobs agitated DR G.NS Reddy, a veterinarian by qualification and spirit. As a student, his immersion into Gandhian in Spirits was triggered by one of the lectures of Dr. Manibai Desai.

Dr Manibai Desai joined Mahatma Gandhi during the Quit India Movement. In August 1945, on an invitation from Gandhiji, he went to Sevagram Ashram in Wardha where he was influenced by

Gandhiji's views on Gram Swarajya. In 1946, Gandhiji established the Nature Cure Ashram at Urulikanchan and entrusted the responsibility to Manibai. During the next 47 years, Manibhaiji promoted nature cure as a reliable solution for community health and also established BAIF Development Research Foundation, an organization committed to sustainable development of Rural India.

It is not surprising that Dr Reddy joined BAIF. His baptism in BAIF and influence of Late Manibhaiji and the contextual necessity resulted in the birth of Akshayakalpa Farms and Foods Pvt. Ltd., probably the first dairy industry to produce organic milk involving farmers in the State of Karnataka.

Do we really know Milk?

Milk is a misunderstood product in our country today and it is shocking that we drink a white adulterated liquid in the name 'milk'. In the National Survey conducted by the Food Safety and Standards of Authority of India (FSSAI) to ascertain the quality of milk throughout the country, 68.4% samples were found to be non-conforming to Food Safety and Standards Regulations, 2011. Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Daman and Diu, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and Mizoram returned 100% non-conforming samples while Goa and Puducherry returned nil adulterated samples. But, unconsciously or consciously we are patronizing without even knowing the harmful effect of such milk. It is sickening that detergent is one of the ingredients that go into adulteration.

Unfortunately, in the urbanized world, the cow has become a machine producing a white fluid that looks like milk. The cowherd in cities milks the cows in the morning and allows the cows to graze on all kinds of filth on the streets, only to milk them again in the evening. Further, the cows are administered

hormones to improve its productivity and is fed with cattle feed that is actually harmful to its health. The cow is also the recipient of indiscriminate dispensation of antibiotics. To make matters worse, the milk itself is highly prone to serious contamination in our country. Anything that can dissolve in water—soda, soaps, detergents, urea, are added to milk to make it thicker!

What is Organic Milk?

We need to applaud Dr G.N.S Reddy, as he relentlessly speaks about milk and defines organic milk as Amrita to differentiate our understanding of milk. The audience size does not deter him, and the magnitude of milk adulteration bothers him. It is important why organic milk is wholesome, different from our regular milk. The merits of raw organic milk which enhances our immune systems and keeps doctors away needs to be understood by us. Most urbanity will come out of ignorance and consciously reduce the damage they are unconsciously doing to our environment. With Dr Reddy's wake up call, we can also do something to reverse it as there will be multiple benefits. Our children will carry on a positive attitude towards environment; and will support cow milk and cow spiritually.

Organic milk will not have traces of pesticides, antibiotics, administered hormones or adulterants. In organic dairy farms, cows are not subjected to any stress. They are not tied, and have free access to food and water. They are provided with rubber mattresses to avoid hard surfaces and are fed with only green based diets.

Antibiotic traces in milk make children resistant to treatment by doctors and hormone traces will make young children grow disproportionate to their age, creating a lot of health and social

problems. But, organic milk will have a beneficial effect on growing children.

Milk Gandhi

Dr Reddy founded Akshayakalpa as a social enterprise in Tiptur, Karnataka, to promote rural agro based enterprises.

If farming becomes an enterprise, it is sustainable and that calls for shaping each farmer as an independent entrepreneur and enterprise on par with his city based counterpart. The goal is to improve the quality of life in villages making it attractive for the young educated youth to choose agriculture as a way of life.

This is possible only by creating adequate cash flow in the hands of the farmers, who otherwise would be deprived of basic income to meet their daily needs. Consequence of not doing this could result in extremism.

Dr Reddy's thought process got support from IT professionals, well-meaning experts from all walks of life who wanted to make a difference. They expressed that agri-produce should not be sold as raw material for processing at a different location as this will take away jobs and capital from rural areas.

“Many villages will become either old-age homes or deserted places if there is no early intervention technology and captive investment in the agriculture sector,” says Shashi Kumar.

Shashi is not a traditional farmer, but a postgraduate from Illinois University, United States of America. He was Lead Architect with Wipro Technologies and left his lucrative job a year ago in order to be part of an initiative to set up organic dairy farms in rural areas of Hassan and Tumkur districts.

“Organic milk is produced in exclusively designed automated dairy farms. The capital investment is 21 lakh rupees per farm. We are in the process of setting up several of these farms. Farmers are paid a price higher than the regular milk. At present, the quantity of milk is also less, leading to very high overhead costs,” says Shashi.

“More importantly, organic milk cannot be compared to regular milk. They are two different products with different values as food items. We maintain cold chain to preserve the milk at 4 degrees from the point of production to the consumer’s door. Each and every farm is provided with chillers so that the milk is not exposed to higher temperatures at any time in the product cycle. This makes it the safest milk in the market. Organic raw chilled milk has a higher nutritional value than the regular pasteurized milk,” he adds.

In Akshayakalpa’s organic raw chilled milk there will be neither bacterial nor heat degeneration of protein. The bio-protectants rich in raw milk remain intact and there is a higher availability of vitamins and minerals. Organic milk is rich in omega 3 fatty acids.

Bridging the Urban –rural divide through “Go Dhan”

We in urban areas can drink organic milk, but we should partner in scaling up its production. We cannot buy land but we can partner as an investor and we need to do it for the sake of our children and for our nation’s prosperity. It is simple –partner with Akshayakalpa! It makes both business and health sense. Traditionally, our parents and grandparents worshipped the *Gomatha* or the “Sacred Cow” for centuries. It is sad our children have neither association with cow, nor the value or emotional connect with Kamadhenu, the

“Celestial Cow”. Western science is now doing research on the value of cow worship and cow urine. The patented input would probably enhance our belief system.

Akshayakalpa Farms and Foods Pvt. Ltd., attempts to transform life in villages by creating wealth, reducing drudgery using high levels of automation and mechanization, implementing hygienic methods of production of very high quality organic milk and milk products, and ensuring that customers are supplied highly nutritive milk in a cold chain. Akshayakalpa has come up with an innovative instrument to involve the urban populace in this movement. In the olden days, a herd of cows was always an important asset class that a *Grihastha* was expected to own. In fact, ownership of cows was considered a sign of prosperity. The cow has been at the centre of any auspicious family function or a village fair.

‘You’ as an Innoventurer

Here is an opportunity for individuals – “Go Dhan”—to own cows and enjoy its milk in its purest form with the help of Akshayakalpa’s managed services for years!

You need not be agriculturist to hold land or do cultivation, but be a business partner with a farmer and get tax free return.

If you are spiritual, be part of Sanathana Dharma and even otherwise you will make farming a more profitable and honorable profession.

Farmers have challenge in raising bank finance. Like the Noble Laureate Mohamed Yunus who brought a change to Bangladesh, Akshayakalpa becomes the new Grameen bank with your partnering as an investor. The process is as follows:

- √ The Go Dhan bank model collects a trade deposit of one Lakh rupees for Akshayakalpa
- √ Akshayakalpa will use this money to fund one cow equivalent part of an organic farm.
- √ Investors gets one liter of highly nutritive organic milk every day for 10 years.
- √ The return is approximately 18% per annum and the price is fixed for the next ten years.
- √ Akshayakalpa will be legally bound with the responsibility of ensuring that the money is invested well and organic milk is delivered at your doorstep every day for the ten years.
- √ The deposit is renewable.

Emotive connect and societal revolution

Can we partner in this social revolution in the selfish interest of our health and our children's health and also as altruism of farmer prosperity and reduce the divide between rural and urban India?

By being a member of Akshayakalpa, you get to visit the cow farm, emotively connect with your cow.

Spread a word about this program in your community, company, clubs, etc. Let us be stress free by drinking stress free milk and patronizing the other value adds!

— *S. Deenadayalan and Chitra Avinandan*



IDEAS WILL FOLLOW INTENTION

A career spanning 15 years with the public sector company BHEL did not satiate her. Though the next step was not clear, she was aware that she wanted to do something for the society. So sure that the urge to serve the society in some possible way forced her to take voluntary retirement while she was just 36 years old. This is Ms Susheelamma, Founder President, Sumangali Seva Ashrama (SSA), Bangalore. The two years post voluntary retirement helped her to experientially analyse the nature of social work that she was going to assiduously take to.

“Homelessness bothered me. Having nowhere to go to is a very vulnerable state when an individual caves in to any exploitative force, losing hope,” she explains as though recollecting from a personal anecdote. Providing shelter for destitute women and

orphaned children was the path she chose to tread. Her intentions were not too strange to a neighbour who came forward to donate a piece of land at a nominal price to start the ashram. Thus was born Sumangali Seva Ashrama in the year 1975.

“The ashram hosts shelter facilities for children, women and the aged. Gradually, health initiatives were also initiated in the communities. What is interesting to observe is the manner in which the inmates and the management complement each other,” she says.

The ashram hosts a foster home called ‘Premananda Makkala Kuteera’ for orphaned girls above six years of age. The girls are provided with shelter, food, clothing, education in the primary and secondary schools within the ashram campus. “Above all, there is love and care everywhere. The family-like environment helps in the social and psychological well-being of the girls,” explains a staff at SSA. Presently, the foster home plays host to 106 girls.

Talking of education, the team reiterates the faith in an age old adage – teach not how to fill the bucket, teach how to open the tap. Education is seen as a crucial factor in the progress of these children, especially those from the Hakki Pikki community which is going to have the first generation of literates. The Basavananda Higher Primary School and the SSA Girls High School together educate 396 girls, provide government mid-day meals cooked by the SSA staff and promote their holistic development by encouraging children to engage in extra-curricular activities like dance, music, yoga, etc.

The ashram established the non-formal school for kids from Hakki Pikki community. Living amidst rag picking parents, the children are exposed to unhygienic conditions and rendered vulnerable to

substance abuse. “Anybody observing this community’s lifestyle would realize the need to instill social values, educate and then mainstream them in formal schools. This is what Amma sought to do,” says Geetha, staff at SSA.

SSA established a crèche in 1987 to take care of the children of parents working as coolies, construction workers and house maids. The crèche has been highly successful in providing a clean, safe and healthy environment for underprivileged infants. Presently there are about 24 children in the Creche, aged between 3 to 5 years.

Abandoned women find a safe haven at Sowharda, the home for deserted women, who are provided with food, clothing, shelter and vocational training to help in their independent sustenance. Besides rehabilitation, SSA organizes awareness programmes consistently to inform the inmates about rights of women, children and other disadvantaged sections of the population in our society. Reproductive health issues, ecology/conservation, HIV/AIDS, legal rights are some of the subjects covered in these awareness programmes. SSA encourages entrepreneurship and has supported women ready to realize their financial independence. More than 100 self help groups have been supported, benefitting around 2,000 women.

The aged also share this nest. Punyakoti Vanaprastashrama, the Home for the Aged hosts around 16 women now, leaving no stone unturned in helping them live and die with dignity. Exercise sessions, healthy diet recommended by the doctors and the child cum aged friendly atmosphere makes their life simple and memorable here.

Regular health checkups for all the inmates and counseling are

an integral part of all the projects administered in this campus. “Health care is a priority in our minds that started taking a concrete shape after about a decade of SSA’s establishment,” quotes Geetha. “Soon, the opportune moment came to serve the needy outside the ashram. SSA was entrusted with the management of a Primary Health Center (PHC) at Cholanayakanahalli, Bangalore. More than 76000 people benefit from this programme,” recollects Geetha from her orientation days.

Though the PHC was doing good work, its reach was a concern to Susheelamma. Reaching remote villages that are inaccessible became a priority and we introduced the mobile clinic programme. Besides conducting Health Check-up Camps, the Mobile Clinic also provides villagers emergency services, delivers medicines and facilitates follow-up treatments.

Susheelamma’s story alongside SSA goes to illustrate need based community initiatives that pass the test of time, making a difference in the lives of down trodden. This integral model has won numerous awards and appreciation from the people and government departments. SSA has won the Karnataka State Award for Child Welfare in 1985, Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar Award in 1991, Rani Kittur Chennamma Award for Welfare of Women and Children by Department of Women and Child Welfare, Government of Karnataka, 1998, Rajyothsava Award for Social Work in 2000, Rajiv Gandhi Shiromani Award in 2001 and many many more.

Susheelamma beats her own organization in the number of awards won. Starting with the National Award for Child Welfare in 1985, she went on to win the Mysore Dasara Award for Rural and Women Development by Dept. of Women and Child, Government of Karnataka – 1994 and Janaki Devi Bajaj Puraskar

for Outstanding Contribution towards Rural Entrepreneurship – 1994. Rising Personalities of India Award by International Penguin Publishing House, New Delhi – 2001, Grama Jyothi Award – 2005, Karnataka Padmabhushana – 2006, Samarapith Sadhvi Award – 2007 and Karnataka Best Social Service Award – 2008 are other feathers in her crown. She is also the recipient of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani Award for the year 2005.

Susheelamma started working for ‘some social cause’ with just Rs 15 in her hand. And today, what has evolved in the name of SSA is the canvas presenting stories of progress, independence, success, happiness and above all, fulfillment of purpose. Certainly, intention can do the magic. It can guide you to the idea that ignites all your energy!

—*Shanmuga Priya. T*



CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

When media entrepreneur Vincent D’Souza launched his brainchild Mylapore Times, in the mid-1990s, not many knew that the micro-local newspaper would soon become one with a difference. Over the next decade-and-a-half, the paper has transformed to one that walks the talk and goes the extra mile in making a difference at the grass-root level. Vincent’s approach was simple: as cities expanded, there was an urgent need to introduce several microscopes to explore news stories at the grass-root level — the everyday occurrences in urban pockets and the events that transpired within their many neighborhoods. “What kept us going was a professional outlook,” says Vincent, “Any media company, big or small, succeeds or fails based on how well its people respect and understand the area and the people in it. That’s when we decided that a newspaper for the neighbourhood was the need of the hour.” However, if you thought Vincent’s

only claim to fame was running a well-ready weekly, think again, for just two years after the paper's launch, Vincent announced the launch of an initiative with whose help he hoped to do his bit for society. This was how the Mylapore Times Charitable Trust came to be.

With rich experience in covering news across beats for The Indian Express and The Week, Vincent's stature as a seasoned reporter was well-known when he began Mylapore Times. In due course, launches of Adyar Times and the Arcot Road Times followed. He continues to edit all three micro-local newspapers today. Over the last decade-and-a-half, the papers have transformed the landscape of the neighbourhoods where they circulate. This, even as Vincent's Midas touch in terms of quality control has played a stellar role in maintaining the high editorial quality that the newspapers have established for themselves. When the Mylapore Times Charitable Trust was inaugurated in 1996, it was an addition to the good work that the Mylapore Times set out to do. "In a sense, it was an extension of the philosophy of our newspaper," says Vincent, "It is nothing more than a small attempt at doing our bit for society, at making a small difference." The trust began by offering a pro-bono platform to aspiring journalists before it went on to distribute a few scholarships to deserving students. With these small-scale projects up and running, the trust began embarking on what it originally set out to do — make a small but significant difference to society.

"As time went by, we decided that it was important that we direct our focus towards one organisation, and not merely go about distributing scholarships far and wide," says Vincent. That was how the Trust zeroed in on the Lazarus Middle School in the neighbourhood, run by a congregation of Roman Catholic nuns.

The Mylapore Times Charitable Trust began by distributing a hundred notebooks to children of the school. Gradually, it went the extra mile to open a computer laboratory on the premises for Class 8 students. “It was important that we take this step,” says Vincent, “We realized that opening a computer laboratory for students would do a lot more than merely make these children IT-savvy. Learning to use a computer is today regarded as a step towards becoming confident and industry-ready, especially for a child. It was a step towards making them feel good about themselves.”

This summer, the trust has directed its attention towards constructing washrooms at the school. “Needless to say, hygiene is one of the more important aspects of everyday life that must be paid attention to,” says Vincent. The washrooms will be constructed at a cost of Rs 3lakh. The trust itself functions thanks to the contributions from good Samaritans even as a small portion of the newspapers’ revenue goes into its funding. “The entire process is extremely transparent, and we do our best to ensure that it stays that way,” says Vincent. Then there are stories of certain contributions that are nothing short of miraculous and others that allude to a manna-from-the-sky scenario — like an email that Vincent got one morning from a gentleman who wanted to make a contribution to the trust. “How does someone wake up one morning and decide that he would make a contribution to our trust,” says Vincent, “It is thanks to people like these that we continue the good work that we do. They sometimes request that we don’t mention names.”

Before the commencement of every academic year, the trust provides scholarships to five students, which goes a long way in enabling them to continue their education till Class 12. “We also

undertake small projects like classroom renovations, funding for students who need to buy uniforms,” says Vincent, “We provide small meals to students twice a week; we are currently looking at doing that five times a week now. We’re not very ambitious. We are a small trust and have decided to focus our attention to doing small things, one good deed at a time. In everything we do, we ensure that we do it to the best of our ability.”



ANGELS IN DISGUISE

It was around 8 in the evening and Hari was playing cards alone in his little home. The platform adjacent to the compound wall of a huge bungalow at JJ Street, near Poes Garden in Chennai, is where he lives.

Hari has established his home in about 15 square-feet space in this platform. He had lined the floor with a mat and blankets, and stored his clothes with the help of newspapers. Although the street was busy with traffic, there was an unusual silence when we approached him.

Archana, Coordinator, The Banyan, and Sangeetha Ranganath, Volunteer, greeted Hari and offered him a dinner packet. He accepted it un-hesitantly and smiled.

The dinner packet contained lemon rice and vegetable *sabji* that was provided by Winners Bakery, a project of Chennai Mission.

Chennai Mission along with The Banyan launched ‘Kind People, Happy City’, a movement to sensitize people to the needs of the homeless people, during the Joy of Giving Week in October 2012. Through this program, free food packets are offered to around 45 homeless people in Chennai every day.

Chennai Mission coordinates the cooking and packaging of the food packets. Mr. Balu of Winners Bakery supervises this activity, and ensures that each day there is a different variety of rice that is being served. To name a few, vegetable rice, tamarind rice, lemon rice, *jeera* rice, vegetable *biryani*, and egg curry rice. Each pack contains 450 grams of nutritious food in it and is kept ready for distribution by 6:45 pm every day.

The Banyan manages distribution through volunteers. 30 food packets are served to the homeless men who are housed in the shelter run by The Banyan at Domnikuppam, Santhome, while 15 packets are distributed to the homeless people who live on pavements in the city. This number will increase as and when more people are being identified for support.

“How are you, Hari?” asked Archana.

“Fine,” he replied.

“I have been asking you to come to our shelter home at Santhome. Why don’t you see how it is? There are many people here who will give you company, and you will be taken good care of. See, you are playing cards all alone,” said Archana.

Hari took a glance at the cards lying in front of him and looked at

Archana as if agreeing to what she said.

“Where do you go to have your bath and wash your clothes, Hari? You look prim and proper today,” asked Sangeetha influencing him to speak.

“I go to the sea. I also wash my clothes here,” he said faintly.

“When can I take you to the shelter home?” she enquired directly.

After pausing for a moment, he said: “On Tuesday.”

Hari spoke good English, and had a collection of pens. He appeared lost and waiting for his family to take him back home. Probably he had a fight and moved out impulsively and is now regretting for it. None of us could guess what the truth is.

Bidding adieu to Hari and informing him that we would come again to see him, we set off to meet our next dinner guests.

Sangeetha is a Physiotherapist and volunteers once a week to coordinate the food distribution. While she was at the wheel, Archana was looking out at the dark corners of the streets if there were any more homeless people who needed our attention.

As we stopped in front of the Light House railway station, about 10 to 12 men, women, and children came running towards us. Archana greeted each one by name and when she saw more men approaching her, she held the food packets higher.

“You are drunk. How can you expect me to give you food? This is meant for only those who do not have money or home,” said Archana assertively.

Failing to persuade her further, these men slowly

walked away.

Parvathi received her packet and thanked Archana. She asked her politely, “When are you going to take me to my friend, Poongavanam? I really miss her a lot.”

“I shall let you know soon,” replied Archana.

“Poongavanam and Parvathi were living at the pavement near the railway station for several years. When Poongavanam suffered a stroke, she was shifted to a home run by Missionaries of Charity at Ennore. Now Parvathi wants to join her,” explained Archana.

Sangeetha and Archana spent considerable time interacting with the people here, and I was overwhelmed. For these homeless people, Archana and Sangeetha were angels in disguise who reminded them of hope.

“We are very careful in choosing our beneficiaries as we need to be certain that we reach out to only those who are homeless and lack family support. All our guests are certain that their dinner would arrive around 8 PM. It is not just food that we give, but our time to listen to them as well,” said Sangeetha.

In less than an hour’s time, we had distributing all the food packets that we had. We returned to our starting point—Winners Bakery.

Mohanraj was heading back home after a long day at work. He works as a cook at Winners Bakery. When we told him that all the food packets have been delivered to our dinner guests, he said, “It gives me immense satisfaction to cook for these homeless people. I would like to visit them some day.”

Archana said spontaneously: “Please join me when I visit them

again. I am sure they would love to meet you too.”

Kind people, happy city / *Kanivaana makkal, Aanandhamaana nagaram*, is a movement promoted by The Banyan and Chennai Mission, with the goal of fostering a caring community, so lives of vulnerable people are bettered. Every person can contribute to this movement by participating in street engagement, befriending a homeless person or sharing resources like food and clothes. Loosely structured and driven by passion and individual commitment, we aspire to build local ownership over the next few years and tap into Chennai and India’s rich culture of giving and caring.

— *Marie Banu*



Unsung Beacons – Volume IV is an exceptional publication that showcases several personalities whose contribution has made a remarkable impact in our society.

As you flip the pages of this book, you'll see examples of social entrepreneurs whose life lessons teach us the value of perseverance, dedication, and service. Practical experience and professional ethics have prepared these social change agents to provide a diverse range of services within communities

*Shri. Rajendra Ratnoo I.A.S
Director of Town Panchayats
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