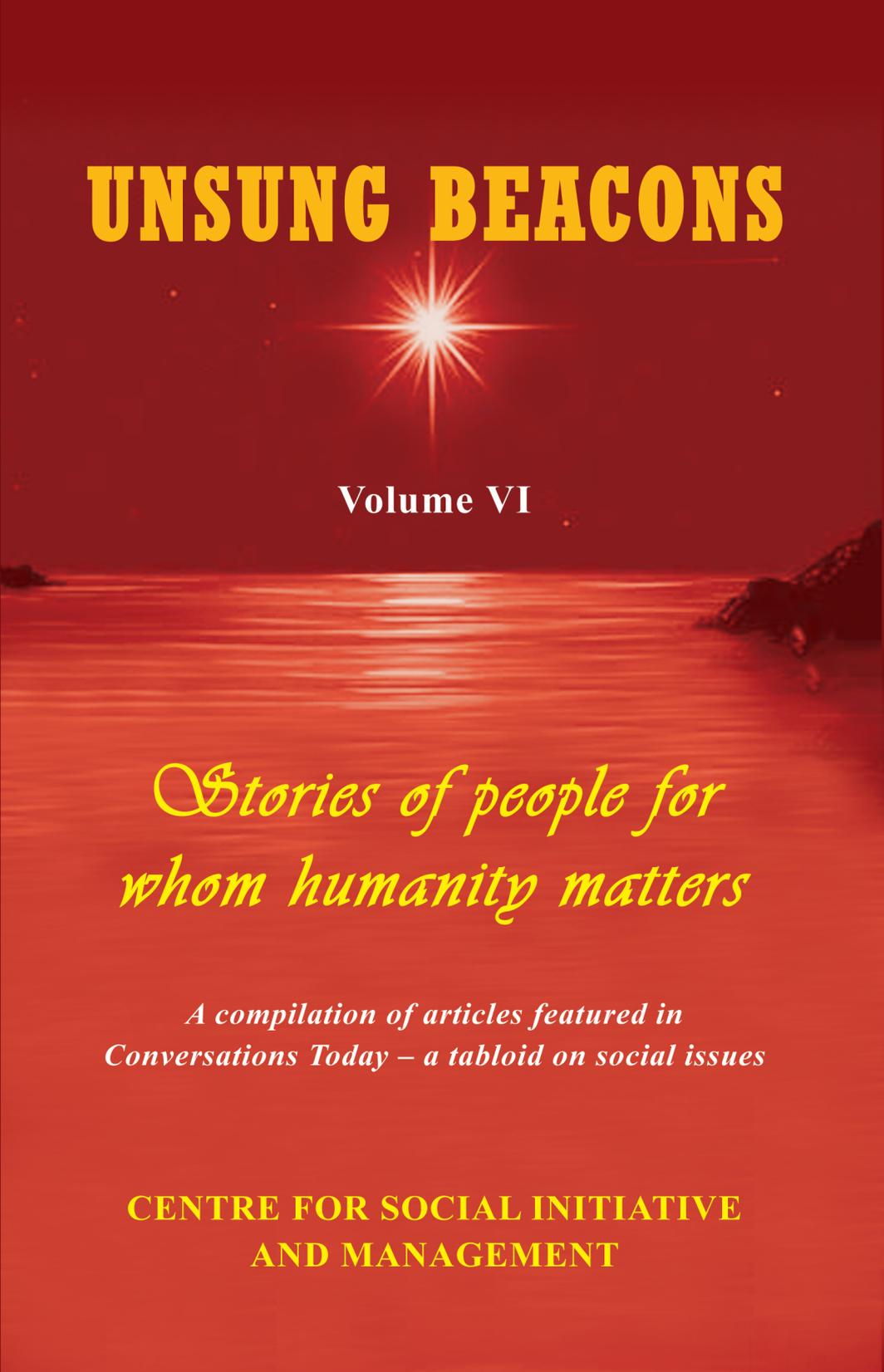


UNSUNG BEACONS



Volume VI

*Stories of people for
whom humanity matters*

*A compilation of articles featured in
Conversations Today – a tabloid on social issues*

**CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INITIATIVE
AND MANAGEMENT**

UNSUNG BEACONS

Volume VI

*Stories of people for
whom humanity matters*

*A compilation of articles featured in
Conversations Today – a tabloid on social issues*

By **CSIM PUBLICATIONS**

First Edition: October 2016

©Copyright: Centre for Social Initiative and Management,
Chennai - 600116

Price: Rs. 150/-

Published by:

CSIM Publications

391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar

Alapakkam, Chennai 600116

Phone: 044 42805365

Email: chennai@csim.in

Web: www.csim.in

Printed at:

RNR Printers & Publishers

19, Thandavarayan Street,

Triplicane, Chennai – 600 005

Phone: 044-28447071

Email: rnrprintersch5@gmail.com

Table of Contents

Foreword	1
Editor's Note	2
I. Alumni Talk	3
1. Surviving sexual harassment as a society	5
2. Just a call away.....	9
3. Educating through Arts	12
4. Changing lives in the slums	15
5. Bridging the gaps	18
6. From Casual Labourer to being a Corporate Consultant	22
7. Helping the Alcoholics.....	26
8. Diversified Social Interests	29
9. Learning to get into Schools	32
10. Water, water, more water.....	36
11. Beautifying women through empowerment.....	40
II. Inspiring Conversations	43
1. Rev. Fr. Casimir Raj	45
2. Shri. Chandrasekaran	49
3. Smt. Geeta Ramaseshan	54
4. Smt. Girija Kumarbabu	57
5. Dr. C. Kumarbabu	62
6. Smt. Latha Pandiarajan	66
7. Rev. Fr Michael Amaladoss	69
8. Shri. S. Muthiah	73
9. Shri. S. Pandian	77
10. Shri. Prahlad Kakkar	81

11. Shri. S S. Rajsekar.....	84
12. Shri Sadguru Gnanananda.....	88

III. NGO Profile..... 91

1. Beginning with ‘ma’.....	93
2. GROWING AN IDEA.....	96
3. A Hand to Hold	99
4. Reviving Development.....	103
5. Messages from Puppets.....	107
6. A 200-Year Old Legacy of Hope.....	111
7. Organically Yours.....	114
8. In perspective	117
9. Education For All	120
10. Lighting the Urban Slums	123
11. Bringing people closer to environment.....	127
12. The Colours of Regenboog	131
13. Ostracisation on the basis of gender and sexuality?	135
14. Serving Happiness.....	140
15. ‘Listening To Someone Is Respecting Them’	143
16. Awareness Overhaul.....	146
17. Strengthening social capital	149

IV. Positive Energy 152

1. Holding the Space	154
2. Positive Living – Mindful Living!	156
3. We all seed each other: The Value of Presence	158
4. Be a Candle and a Mirror!.....	161

5. The work of Aravind Eye Hospitals is a perfect example of pursuing a cause larger than oneself.....	163
6. Habit Energy - How it keeps us in the same place..	165
7. Is it world or is it you?	168
8. Peace Begins With Me	171
9. Say thank you, instead of Sorry	175
10. The Path Ahead: Seeing clearly through Positive Energy Lens.....	177
11. The Energizing Pause.....	180

V. Trendsetters..... 183

1. In The Pursuit of Identity	184
2. Mainstreaming Traditional Knowledge.....	187
3. Back to Communities For A New Beginning.....	191
4. Impacting lives of Tribal through Rubber in North East India	194
5. Rubber & Rabha.....	198
6. Walking beyond token activism	201
7. We Could Be Heroes	207
8. Living the Dream	210
9. Change is in the Chennai Air	213

Foreword

A beacon is seen as a guiding light. This volume is bubbling with inspiring conversations, motivational talks and positive energizers of such unsung beacons. Every conversation has a learning to offer and every experience shared has a lesson to remember.



Experience is the best teacher and life's lessons from these renowned people instill a lot of hope in people who want to begin afresh.

A sparkling idea, a helping hand, a step towards peace and positivity all around is the common thread running through the book.

As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, “Lives of great men all remind us, we can make our lives sublime, and, departing, leave behind us, footprints on the sands of time.”

My sincere appreciations for the compilation and good wishes for more such works in future.

Dr. Lalitha Balakrishnan

Principal

MOP Vaishnav College for Women

Chennai

Editor's Note

I am happy to share the sixth edition of *Unsung Beacons*, a compilation of articles featured in *Conversations Today 2015*. This book provides insights into social entrepreneurship and brings to light the efforts of several changemakers.



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

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

It would have been an impossible task for me to write for this publication without the support of my family. My most sincere thanks to my parents and my sons for their unconditional love and understanding.

Unsung Beacons is not just a collection of live and inspiring social change stories, but also serves as a guiding light for many budding social entrepreneurs and CSR professionals.

We hope that our journey would continue to inspire more people.

Happy reading!

Marie Banu J

Chief Editor – *Conversations Today* |

Director - CSIM, Chennai

I. ALUMNI TALK

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



1.Surviving sexual harassment as a society

Working for women and working with women are two different poles. Challenges are much more stark when we have to deal with women who have survived sexual harassment in any form. The inherent social stigma pertaining to the notion of women’s dignity plays across the board, influencing every stake holder’s response to such an incident. Further, the shadow of patriarchy from our history, that morphs as we evolve as a society, brings in more obstacles in being able to rehabilitate survivors of sexual harassment.

The social development sector is at a juncture where issues of sustainability and impact are very crucial. Gender sensitisation of larger society, particularly men, is the first step to support the survivors of sexual harassment. “Structured awareness programmes is certainly not the end solution,” says Ms Anita Narayanasamy, Co-founder and Managing Trustee of Sankalp Women’s Support Alliance based in Hyderabad.

Anita began her career in the field of advertising and communications. She has worked with advertising agencies, with MNCs and is presently an expert consultant in her field. Her engagement in the social sector began in late 1996. Drawn towards children without families, she spent time with children in orphanages and also taught them English. She eventually began volunteering once in a week with the Freedom Foundation that offered free treatment for HIV positive patients. “Here again I was engaged with the children. The centre had a separate unit for children called the Diya and I was also involved in designing their newsletters,” adds Anita.

As Freedom Foundation shifted its focus to Bangalore, Anita dabbled with the idea of starting her own NGO that worked for children. “I Co-founded ‘Smile For Life’ along with a friend. We trained college students to teach English for children in government schools. We also collected books for neighbourhood libraries and orphanages,” recalls Anita, who soon gave up on this endeavour as her friend moved to Singapore and she could not manage it alone.

With the demise of her niece, her family founded Maithreyi foundation in her memory. Anita was a Board Member and she was involved in providing educational scholarships and sponsorships for underprivileged children.

A few months later, Anita gave up her full-time job and began to volunteer with NGOs that worked for children welfare. It was during this time that she came to know about CSIM in Hyderabad through a friend at Shreyas Foundation, an organisation that advocates for vermin-composting.

“Having volunteered all along, I wanted to do something tangible. And for that, I needed to know the fundamentals of managing a NGO. CSIM taught me the nuances of social entrepreneurship and more importantly, I made a network of friends across the social sector.”

Anita resolved to work for women who survived sexual harassment. The Nirbhaya case in New Delhi saw wide spread agitation across the nation. Anita and her friends organised a candle light vigil during this period. Seeking to keep the momentum alive, a group of around 25 to

30 people decided to meet frequently and plan some concrete actions. “However, with every meet, the number of members dwindled. But, I was certain that this was something I wanted to continue with.”

Anita and six of her friends together established the ‘Sankalp Women’s Support Alliance’ in 2013. Evolving as a one stop crisis centre for women who have been subjected to sexual harassment, Sankalp Women’s Support Alliance has developed networks with professionals like lawyers, psychiatrists, and doctors to help the affected women overcome their trauma, and move ahead in life. Sankalp Women’s Support Alliance has also tied up with other NGOs in this space to support women’s rehabilitation.

Anita is very categorical about the term ‘survivors’. “We do not want to call them ‘victims’. These are not accidents! The women have survived such a traumatic incident. They deserve to be addressed more sensibly.”

Two years old now, the alliance has handled more than 15 cases, and has also involved settlement in and out of courts. Beginning from the registration of an FIR and medical examination, the women survivors are supported all through their rehabilitation process.

Anita and her colleague Ms Sarah Mathews have consistently worked with the officials of the Department of Women and Child Development to ensure that compensation reached the affected women. In case of minors, they also consulted with Child Welfare Committees in ensuing the process. “If women choose to fight it out in the court, we can support them through our lawyers’ network who volunteer with us. We also have a panel of counsellors and have tied-up with shelter homes for those survivors who need rehabilitation,” shares Anita. “Women from poor families are more open to admit that such an event has occurred and move forward, while women from middle and upper middle classes hesitate to do so as they are dictated by social status and stigma,” she adds.

With resources raised through grants, family and friends, Anita and Sarah have also attempted to engage with corporates through CSR and the Internal Complaints Committee (that must be set up in every institution according to the latest legislation on Sexual Harassment in

Work Place). “The law requires an external member, either from an NGO or from a government agency to be a part of this committee. We were approached to be a part of such committees. But, with our insistence on proactive programmes and request for a donation to enable such programmes in bastis they no longer want us to be on their board. We are now trying to raise funds through crowd funding, events and from high networth individuals,” says Anita.

Since the establishment of the alliance, Anita and Sarah wanted to equally prioritise training programmes on gender sensitisation, women’s legal rights, cybercrime, criminal laws, safety of women, etc. for both men and women. “With only few of us handling all tasks, it has been very challenging for us to take our efforts forward.

Training is not a one-time programme that can help achieve attitudinal or behavioural change. It has to be consistent and sustained. However, with volunteers, we cannot plan for sustained training programmes. We need trainers who are full-time employees and this calls for more resources at hand. With very less support from the corporates, our training programmes always take a back seat,” laments Anita who calls this a vicious circle.

Anita shares her concern about the fact that engaging men in dialogues on gender sensitisation is difficult. “Gender issues are about women. That’s the deep rooted perception. So, men dissociate themselves from such training programmes in the local bastis,” she says.

While protecting women against sexual harassment is not realised as a collective responsibility, surviving its high prevalence will continue to emerge as complicated as ever. “Efforts taken by alliances like Sankalp are a promise that situations will change in the future.”

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



2. Just a call away

Health is not just the absence of illness. It is the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of an individual. Unplanned urbanization and rapid changes in the social structure has resulted in high stress levels amongst people of all age groups. Consistent pressure to perform and competition have led to stress, depression, anxiety, lack of self-assertion, and several other problems, which at extreme levels push individuals to take a drastic step like suicide. The prevalence of this issue and its scale of effect has brought a renewed focus on mental health and wellbeing. Social awareness campaigns and related services has been building the support systems required for individuals to tackle these challenges that appear in their personal as well as professional lives.

Balaji is a Mechanical Engineer by profession. Hailing from a lower middle class family, he could not afford to indulge in developmental initiatives that allowed him to contribute towards the society. He therefore volunteered with different organizations and even now at the age of 49, he continues to do so. “While volunteering with different social organizations, I was introduced to the larger objective of suicide prevention. I wanted to tell as many people as I can that one must fight

to live his or her life, without giving up,” shares Balaji, who then got trained and began to work closely in this front.

Balaji was on a mission to give quality time to people who were depressed or had suicidal tendencies so that such people could have someone to listen to their woes. “Just venting out their emotions made a remarkable difference in the lives of many individuals,” he asserts. Changes in life style and the accompanying pressure to sustain the same for social status and acceptance has led to a stalemate where many individuals often feel lost between their external and internal identities. While some take to deviant behavior like alcoholism, substance abuse straining their family and relationships, others decide to eliminate themselves from the predicament.

Driven by a deep rooted willingness to serve the society and trained in counseling, Balaji did not have to look back. “CSIM changed the way I thought I must work.” Referred by friends, Balaji at first saw the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme (SEOP) as another certificate course that can add more value to his work. However, what began as a casual intake in the classes brought in a paradigm shift in the way he visualized his work. “The classes rekindled my desire to become a Social Entrepreneur. I wanted to do more. I founded Darshika in 2015, in Hyderabad,” says Balaji, acknowledging CSIM as a platform that provides knowledge and exposure to build on ideas and experiment on their execution.

Darshika is a voluntary organization that promotes holistic education to instill coping mechanisms which help individuals overcome their emotional challenges and psychological pressures. Following the three cardinal principles of educate, empower and evolve, he encourages a chain of actions that creates space for people to reassess their situations. Run with an extensive network of volunteers, Darshika has been able to work with school students, adolescents, working population and senior citizens.

“Anybody could be stressed about anything. But, there must be someone who would listen and respond to them at that one moment when they feel at a complete loss of self-worth.”

By educating the beneficiaries about the need to speak out their minds, confront the obstacles and empowering them by eliciting the support systems like Darshika, Balaji and team look forward to the evolution of new personalities. Through constructive listening, they facilitate the affected people to analyse their life situations rationally and from all possible perspectives, which in turn helps them to identify alternative approaches to a particular crisis situation. As he insists again, “Darshika perseveres to build moral strength.”

In a short span, the organization has also made its presence felt among national organizations like the Defenders India, which is an umbrella organization of likeminded groups. It has also been associated with several organizations who can refer individuals for support. So far, Darshika has catered to over 200 individuals on a one-to-one basis and most of them, as Balaji recalls, felt that there was no one who cared for them or that their opinions were never respected.

Stress, as he illustrates with case examples, can affect individuals from 8 to 74 years, leading to suicidal tendencies. “We have a child studying in standard four who had attempted suicide due to stress,” says Balaji. Every age group has to adhere to a predetermined and socially approved package of roles and responsibilities. Balaji opines that this emotional baggage, which is the prime reason for the sense of performance and competition, leading to stress, must be eliminated.

Darshika maintains its client information confidential and offers its services free of cost. They can be reached at (STD Code) 27755505 and 27755506, on all days between 5.30 and 9.30 pm.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



3. Educating through Arts

Academic background has little to reveal about any person. And for those who think that happiness lies in pursuing all the little interests in life, shifting from one stream to another is not much of an impediment. So, from science to tourism management and then to fine arts was just the right trajectory for Ms Keerti Jaiswal, Director of Fresh Roots Montessori House for Children, as she feels that each of her experiences have moulded her to what she is today.

Based in Hyderabad, Keerti began her career by establishing the Sona Mela that manufactured 48 different kinds of kids and home accessories designed by her. She employed dropped-out girls with stitching skills to meet the demand in exhibitions. Over six years into this, Keerti had to give up this initiative due to personal constraints.

Soon after, she joined the Gitanjali Devshala as an art/craft instructor promoting the use of arts and crafts in helping children in the age group of 5 to 15 years learn better. Evolving as a renowned art instructor, she went on to spend two decades in the field of education in the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh. Keerti has always believed that instigating educational activities at the right age is very critical. “I believe in education with a

thorough system. Age appropriate education is a luxury to many. Any chances at this affects the overall development of children,” says Keerti who took over the Fresh Roots Montessori House in Hyderabad to promote new methods and innovative practices.

Her continuous engagement with children allowed her to create space for the integration of special children with others. “Children, no matter what their constraints are, would want to play with other children. They long for it. This is their favourite and the most efficient system of socialisation. Even parents cannot ensure this these days and therefore the need for external people like us to enable this process,” says Keerti.

Simple games and small gifts, as she shares from her experiences, can go a long way in integrating special children with other children. Such programmes eventually became an integral part of the school’s activities. Special children from other organisations, children from orphanages coming in were a regular feature. Keerti left no stone unturned in helping these children explore their talents. Painting classes, workshops on mural paintings and many other initiatives not only helped children but also allowed Keerti to further understand children’s needs and development. Some of the mural paintings done by these children were sold and the money was used to run the school.

More and more programmes, exhibitions of art work, cultural events by children and workshops for children happened and Keerti became a meticulous planner in the process. She developed a wide network of individuals and organisations that helped her explore multiple approaches used to teach children and the possible ways of integrating arts as part of the regular curriculum, as she firmly believed that arts can enhance the learning process. Very soon she became an active member of many organisations like The Leo Club, The Round Table, The Secunderabad Club and The Ladies Circle. She was also nominated for leadership positions within these organisations.

Keerti was keen in introducing computer literacy in schools. “A generation cannot be left to update itself eventually. Ensuring that children are abreast of new developments is an essential part of integrated learning,” she says.

She worked as a Computer Trainer with the Siva Sivani Public School in Hyderabad and was instrumental in establishing the department along with formulating the syllabus. Through all her efforts Keerti wanted to make sure that children in small, dysfunctional schools should be provided with equal facilities and opportunities as children in other schools. She played a key role in the adoption and renovation of two Zila Parishad schools in Neredmet and Peddarevapally, by arranging for different lab facilities, toilet blocks for girls and boys, library with adequate books and maps, classroom furniture and frequent sports events to promote their talents.

With such intense experience, Keerti looked forward to start something on her own. “I probably imagined an organisation that would help me do all this on a sustainable basis,” she quips. In 2010, Keerti came across the advertisement on CSIM programmes in a newspaper. “The Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme at CSIM was more than an eye opener. There are so many NGOs and anybody would want to do something on their own. But, the real challenge comes in when you want to sustain the work and impact. CSIM gave me more confidence. It also helped me reassess my decisions rationally. I realised that I can also associate myself with others who do similar work than spend energy in re-establishing a similar effort,” she shares.

Keerti has authored ten books on art and craft titled ‘hues and designs’ that are used in schools across the country. She was also selected for the prestigious Goldman Sachs Certificate Programme for 10,000 Women Entrepreneurs of the world. At 50, she continues to prepare for organising workshops and exhibitions with the same enthusiasm that is characteristic of her’s. Very much fond of children, she reminisces memories of hearing impaired children taking part in drawing/painting competitions and mentally challenged performing so well in quiz contests organised by her. “Arts can do what text books cannot,” Keerti asserts.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



4. Changing lives in the slums

Hailing from a poor family and now being supported by her own parents, in laws, husband and three children in her pursuit, Mrs Loganayagi, Founder of Puthiya Pookal Health & Education Trust in Chennai is an inspiration to many. Raised in the slums around Elephant Gate area, she hardly had opportunities to continue her education beyond class 10. “A local organisation called Marialaya helped me complete till class 10, after which I got married,” recounts Loganayagi.

Although 18 years is legally an accepted age for marriage in India, there are more complex debates questioning about how age alone can be a decisive factor for a girl’s marriage. Loganayagi however defies all this as she was able to associate and socialise with local organisations and pursue her interests. “Mariyalaya inspired me to get into social work. I feel that social work is probably the only field where passion matters more than qualifications,” she says.

Loganayagi was part of the organisation’s self-help group (SHG) that was initiated in slums and eventually grew to train many more SHG members like her. Soon, she got an opportunity to work on a project for HIV/AIDS awareness for pregnant women. Educating them on the

spread of the disease, four modes of transmission and the means to prevent the newborn from acquiring the disease allowed her to further understand the health status in the community.

“I began with small scale projects. Open defecation was a big problem in my locality. The toilets were never put to use. With the help of Marialaya I advocated for demolishing these unused toilets and converted them into places for social gathering. We then built new toilets for children after clearing all the footpaths. When children use these toilets, I feel very happy,” she says.

Puthiya Pookal Health & Education Trust in Chennai is also involved in rescuing destitute elderly from the streets and rehabilitating them in homes. This required Loganayagi to work beyond regular hours as police verification was required for every person who was rehabilitated. “Work life balance is tough! I was able to cope mainly because of the support I received from my family. My children manage all the household chores with the help of my parents,” she adds.

Loganayagi forayed from one issue to another effortlessly, by addressing one at a time. As she was rescuing and rehabilitating the elderly, she also found street children and children of single parents who were left to fend for themselves while their parent went for work. She rehabilitated these children through homes in the neighbourhood. Wherever possible she ensured that these children were admitted in schools through Right to Education Act.

She also addressed electricity and water issues in her area. “I urged the local authorities and provided extra taps so that women can fetch water in the neighbourhood, instead of having to walk treacherously for the same,” she says.

Puthiya Pookal Health & Education Trust in Chennai was in 2009 when all her friends, family and well-wishers insisted that she coordinated her social service activities in a more organised manner and reach out to more people who were in need. Today, the trust supports the education of 100 single parent children every year. “Our source of funds are from individual donors who are from the locality, lorry owners, political leaders and merchants.

Loganayagi's insistence of local presence did add value to her work. The Railway Police Unit calls the Trust authorities to hand over mentally retarded children and elders whom they find on the railway platforms and tracks. The Trust also provides support for provisions and basic amenities to 10 chosen families in the slum.

Having heard of CSIM from a friend at Marialaya, Loganayagi undertook the SEOP programme in 2014. "I am marveled that there are huge corporate funds that can be tapped from corporates," she exclaims.

Loganayagi is inspired by people like her who have successfully juggled household and social responsibilities. "Every time I take a decision, all such people come to my mind. Their experiences help me in deciding my course of action. I can now think like a professional," she says.

Loganayagi dreams of building a home for the elderly and launching education support services on a large scale for children from the slums. She firmly believes that education is the only thing that can help a family move upwards in the social ladder, allowing children to experience a more civilised life. "This is my dream and am sure I will see this happen soon," she signs off.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



5. Bridging the gaps

Interest in the social sector can develop as early as the formative years in school. Despite the lack of formal knowledge on the sector, it is intriguing to know how intimately such programmes or events are organized by school students. “Channelizing all these efforts to enable constructive engagement in the sector can make a world of difference,” says Mr Manmohan Jain, Co-founder of India Literacy Project, Hyderabad Chapter.

Manmohan quit his software career in September 2014 and is now engaged full time in taking the activities of ILP Hyderabad forward. He was the leader of Students Organisation for Social Service (SOS) while at school. “I never knew what Social Entrepreneurship was then. We used to run a small refreshment stall during the lunch hours at school. The money earned was used to buy books or gifts for underprivileged children in the neighbourhood. This was my first experience of generating revenue, where the ideas of business and selling goods at marginal profits became comprehensible,” smiles Manmohan.

Having lived in Rajasthan, Hyderabad, Chennai, and the United States, Manmohan comes in with a wide range of exposure and experience that has added value to his engagement in the social sector. During college, he was in the photography club and also the President of the Students' Union. This allowed him to engage actively in extra-curricular activities. By now, it was time for him to move to US for his Masters in Computer Science. Manmohan had lived in the United States for about 14 years working as a Software Engineer and also volunteering to teach students in primary classes when he got the opportunity.

“I volunteered with Junior Achievement in New York that allowed me to teach World Economics to primary grade students. The unique way of teaching that comprised of business models helped me enjoy my work with young people. My focus on children and education was becoming clear and apparent,” says Manmohan who was soon introduced to a similar project – India Literacy Project in India. He managed to engage himself with ILP through donations, but could never engage himself directly with the project activities. On his return to India in 2003, he decided to give a proper shape to his interests on children and education. His exploration of ideas and opportunities had led to many brain storming interactions, allowing him to grasp the extent of ideas that came across from individuals engaging in multifarious fronts. “My neighbor was also part of this process. We used to discuss our ideas for children and exclaim how blessed our children are while there were millions of them who lacked access to basic of amenities.”

Manmohan, along with his neighbor Ms Sangeetha co founded the Hyderabad Chapter of India Literacy Project in 2005. Beginning with simple story telling and book reading sessions in the Madhapur Government Primary School, they went on to develop a “Shared book” methodology to stimulate interest in literacy and reading among the underprivileged children studying in government schools. With the help of many volunteers they are now running Pustakam sessions in 10 government schools across the state of Karnataka.

“We also conduct mentoring and career counseling sessions for Class 8 and 9 students wherein we impart academic help, soft skills training, explain about various career options and general life skills guidance. In addition, ILP Hyderabad also provides scholarship support to students

who are keen to pursue higher education, but cannot afford the cost. Along with these year round programmes, we also strive to ensure that the students of the government schools have a well-rounded multi-dimensional education. Summer camps, field trips, teacher training workshops and setting up of libraries are organized to meet this objective,” adds Manmohan.

Manmohan and team also engage corporates in meeting the critical infrastructure needs of these schools such as toilets, electricity and provision of additional classrooms. They consciously facilitate interactions between the elite schools and the government schools to sensitize the children from affluent background on the broader issues faced by society and also make them realise how fortunate they are to enjoy the privileges that they have.

During his work with the schools, Manmohan was introduced to CSIM Hyderabad by his friend. “As she insisted that I take the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme (SEOP) with CSIM, I did my bit of homework to learn the course details. It did interest me and the fee was also nominal. So, I decided to give it a try.”

Manmohan liked the classes at CSIM very much. He feels that the course emphasizes the significance of an NGO to have a structure that encompassed elements of marketing, accounting, scalability and methods – all that which any organization would think of to survive and succeed. Further, he was in complete agreement with the idea of quantifying an organisation’s impact through regular social audits. “Not just to present it to the stake holders, an idea of our impact is a matter of personal satisfaction and is very motivating.”

The very notion of NGOs being capable of addressing the triple bottom line successfully drew him to the idea of sustainability through the model of social entrepreneurship. “It is very risky to depend entirely on donors. This concept was very much relevant to the state of affairs in the sector,” he says.

Appreciative of the networking opportunities that CSIM provided during and after the course, Manmohan realized that there were many

individuals who were passionate about change, yet chose different paths depending on their levels of exposure and extent of engagement that was possible. “This observation was very critical according to me. With different approaches on a particular concern taking shape, I was more conscious about the utility of the model we were developing at ILP Hyderabad,” he introspects.

Manmohan has also appointed an alumnus of CSIM in his organization and is now encouraging his Coordinator to attend the course at CSIM. He dreams of two things—establishing a teacher training institute and a mobile library. Given the quality of education in many government schools, he feels that adding value to the most critical link in the system—between teachers and students—can create a lasting impact. He wants to see the day when this mobile library will grow to be a mobile learning unit that will be there accessible by children, even if schools were not capable of supporting it with additional staff and maintenance.

“It is very crucial to bridge the digital divide in this generation and am sure this small effort in digital literacy can develop as a successful model for replication,” concludes Manmohan.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



6. From Casual Labourer to being a Corporate Consultant

Corporate Social Responsibility is an obligation today for all the listed companies, with abounding clarity on what counts as part of it and what does not. Against this backdrop, it would be interesting to know how employees started engaging in social service initiatives through their companies and then took off to pursue their respective areas of concern.

Born and brought up in Sitarampeta village that is situated in the borders of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, J.Prabhakar, Managing Trustee of Networking and Development Centre for Service Organisations (NDSO) Trust, moved to Chennai after class 12 to pursue education in fine arts. Unable to seek admission in fine arts, he joined Ashok Leyland, a private limited company, as a casual labourer in 1973. Nallor Vattam was an institutional set up within the company that allowed interested employees to engage in social service activities.

“Since 1978, I began to work actively in Nallor Vattam. Workers used to meet every week and discuss about setting up tuition centres and organising medical camps in the neighbouring villages,” recalls Prabhakar who draws inspiration from Swami Vivekananda’s philosophy.

In what could be defined as a characteristic critical event, the impact of the group's work in Theeyambakkam village in 1989, led them to work on multiple fronts and also establish a school for the village children. Most of the men in this village were brewing alcohol for livelihood. Mass mobilisation drew these people together where they voiced their concern on need for alternate livelihood opportunities. "We arranged bank loans for some of them to run cycle shops and provisional stores amongst others. But, all these efforts did not serve to be a permanent solution," he says.

It was at this juncture that the founder of Nallor Vattam facilitated the group's visit to Ralegon Siddhi, a model village for sustainable development in Maharashtra that owes its transformation to Mr Anna Hazare. Drawing inspiration from his work during such meetings, Nallor Vattam decided to start a school (Tamil and Telugu medium) in the village with funds collected from Ashok Leyland employees. "We were all earning three to four thousand per month. Every employee in the group came forward to contribute one percent of their salary towards this cause. Within three years, we mobilised 20,000 rupees for the school," recounts Prabhakar, who immediately adds that the success of the school and its acceptance led to its replication in other places like Manali, Minjur, Attipattu and Thirunindravur in Chennai.

Prabhakar is more than happy to mention that during their camps about 100 families in Manali Newtown had come forward to donate their eyes after their lifetime. This tradition continues even today. If anybody expires, a local team coordinates the eye donation process through Shankara Nethralaya.

Amidst all these experiences that gave Prabhakar satisfaction and happiness, he decided to take voluntary retirement from the company in 2002. "I got opportunities to work on assignments with Ananda Vikatan, a local magazine, which kept my interests in fine arts alive. But, I decided to take up social service in full swing," says Prabhakar.

Prabhakar was marvelled to see many social service initiatives across the plane, but wondered why they never came together to know each other's story of triumph and their journey of perseverance. Deeply moved by such encounters, Prabhakar introduced the Ennangalin

Sangamam in 2005 to bring together such service oriented minds. “My wife and I embarked on a mission to visit 100 NGOs every year and document their stories. It was imminent that they all came together on one platform. This was how Ennangalin Sangamam was born. More than 80 organisations in and around Chennai participate in this event, making it a success,” says Prabhakar.

Based on all the experiences, he wrote a book that was released in 2006. It was also decided that such an event would be organised on the first Sunday of every year.

“We never needed money. In the first year, the venue for the event was given by Shankara Nethralaya and food was sponsored. Friends and volunteers understood that this was not a programme or a promotional event. Everyone acknowledged that their services to underprivileged must be celebrated and honoured. Our work was mere coordination. We manage to coordinate this event from our home itself,” he says.

Prabhakar adds saying, “Being a care giver for one child is in itself a very challenging and testing task. But, these are people who deal with more than 100 children on a daily basis. Their work must be celebrated.”

Introduced to CSIM by an acquaintance in 2006 was just timed right for him. The course allowed him to institutionalise these ideas and events through formal registration and establishing networks. “The course made me aspire for more. I wanted to reach out to many more social service institutions and bring them to light.” Thus was born NDSO Trust in 2007, that was founded by three friends.

Prabhakar and group have now met more than 1000 NGOs across Tamil Nadu. In 2014, Ramakrishna Ashram offered the space to conduct this event. Commemorating the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, 100 youth were presented the Swami Vivekananda Award and were encouraged to work collectively on water conservation.

Now in its 10th year, Ennangalin Sangamam has honoured 20 NGOs and has also instituted the NSDO Award (Citation and 25,000 rupees). Having maintained it simple from the beginning, the trust, under

Prabhakar's leadership has attained a stature where institutions and well-wishers offer to organise space and food for the events each year.

Of late, alongside Ennangalin Sangamam, Prabhakar who also serves as a consultant for TCS, has begun to work with Singalipuram village in Kumbakonam district where a study centre and a tailoring centre for women have been set up.

From being a casual labourer, Prabhakar has successfully been able to engage in social service and fine arts, without compromising one for the other. There is no doubt that CSR requires the able guidance of eminences like him.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



7. Helping the Alcoholics

Observations during our regular work can lead us to take significant decisions in our lives, and can even change the course of our work. Purushothaman, Managing Director of Paasam Foundation also did. With a Bachelor's Degree in Optometry, Purushothaman worked as an optometrist in a hospital at Vellore for 19 years. He was also required to visit the communities, and while doing so realised that 80 percent of the families either had an alcoholic or a substance addict. "I was shocked to see the varied implications of this situation," exclaims Purushothaman who was able to gauge the consequences on the addict's family members.

Substance abuse is certainly a disease. The more a person thinks he can control his instincts to use the substance again, the more frequently he tries to test this control. Once addicted, there is no way that a person can get out of it, without professional help. Purushothaman was worried about the social stigma the family gets to face and the likely ostracisation this led to in some socio-economically backward communities. "I was also an alcoholic once and am sober for the last ten years. Thanks to professional help and support rendered by different groups," he recalls.

While the addict's nervous system and circulatory system suffered damage, the families underwent a traumatic period not knowing how to help the addict out of this habit. "Wives are mentally disturbed, children cannot concentrate on their studies and remain unstable because of the situation at home. Elders are often helpless. I had seen all this in my family too," he shares. Helped by timely treatment, cared by family members, support from friends who recovered, and a globally renowned fellowship programme for alcoholics, Purushothaman was able to return to normal life.

Two years ago, Purushothaman resigned his job at the hospital and decided to start a rehabilitation centre called 'Paasam Foundation' to help alcoholics recover and extend support their families in order to cope with the recovered patient in such a way that relapse can be avoided. Paasam Foundation is equipped with its own team of psychiatrists, nurses, general physicians, counsellors, wardens and cooks. The centre has the capacity to attend to 25 patients at a time. The alcoholics are admitted for a period of three months for an all-round treatment that also encompasses family counselling.

In the first month, all physical problems are attended to through diagnostics and detoxification. Physicians treat the effects of alcohol on the patient's nervous and circulatory system. The second month focuses on the mental and emotional wellbeing, allowing the patient to relook into his own anger, frustration and hatred towards various matters. During the third month, Paasam Foundation's team members inculcate positive values and life skills through art of living sessions and discussions.

"Sharing personal struggles has helped our patients learn from each other. Alongside values, they also learn how to stay away from relapse. When they see someone recover and live happily with their family, they get motivated and their interest in the treatment increases. This positivity further helps in speeding the recovery process," explains Purushothaman.

In the last year and a half, Paasam Foundation has treated 120 patients and 80 percent of them are now living happily with their families, and more appreciably many are showing a renewed interest in their

vocations. Unfortunately, 20 percent of the patients have relapsed and are going through the entire treatment cycle yet again.

“This is inevitable! The desire for a little alcohol is always there. While they feel that alcohol gives confidence, the truth is that it destabilises them from even performing the very basic tasks,” says Purushothaman.

Purushothaman came to know about the CSIM SEOP programme through a colleague who also runs a similar centre in Chennai. “We had also referred some patients to their centre at Valasaravakkam in Chennai,” he adds. The CSIM course, according to Purushothaman, was more than useful. “I did the special SEOP programme (Addiction and Counselling Techniques). It gave me a push to perform more efficiently. We sustained ourselves through the nominal fee charged from the patients. The course exposed me to the whole gamut of fundraising and resource management, which taught me that I could handle more patients with the same resources I had. More importantly, the course taught me to move out to the communities. It made me feel good about my work,” he shares.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



8. Diversified Social Interests

Following our parents' path in the choice of career is not new to us and someone who tries to attempt something different can also come back to follow suit eventually. Dr V S N Raju, Chief Orthopaedic Surgeon and CEO of A R C Orthopaedic Clinic in Hyderabad did just that. He first pursued his graduation in Engineering and then discontinued as a sophomore to pursue medicine, inspired by his father who was an allopath. "Heredity got me hooked. My grandfather was engaged in plantation, and always prepared his own medicines and distributed it to the poor. I decided to follow his path, because I realised how complicated Right to Health can be for the poorest of the poor," recalls Raju who grew up watching his family help the poor with their medical needs.

As an orthopedician with many years of experience, Raju is now focussing on micro surgical procedures to restore traumatised limbs, crush wounds and amputations to useful function. "We do not let anything to be amputated and even if amputated, we do all that is needed to put it back together. For victims of domestic and industrial orthopaedic ailments, this could mean an assurance of employment and income. When you recall the impact of these surgeries, it feels like we have reconstructed lives," says Raju who has also been practicing traumatology since 1992.

Despite the rich knowledge and experience, Raju was disappointed as he had no say in the finance matters of surgeries that was executed under his leadership. When his thoughts varied on the cost of a procedure, he could hardly communicate or negotiate on that. “This was actually the trigger that led to the establishment of ARC Hospital. When it is my hospital, I will be able to decide on the cost factors. I can also choose to reduce costs for poor patients, without compromising the quality of health care. Since costs often discourage poor from accessing health care, I wanted ARC Hospital to break the economic barrier and reach out to as many poor patients as possible,” says Raju. The rich patients who were treated at ARC hospital came forward to make donations to help Raju achieve his vision. After all, restoring limbs could help restore livelihood to many households.

Raju came to know about CSIM through an acquaintance. “As it was a short term course, I did not want to expect much. It turned out to become a mentoring process and I saw what more I could do outside the medical field. Non-medical aspects like fund generation, regulation, registration were made easier and manageable. Exposure to different models from across the globe was a surprise to me. All my present work and things that I wanted to do sooner seemed easier now, because I had learnt what I wanted to do,” shares Raju.

According to Raju, development as a process has evolved over the years. It is now a time where social development has been prioritised along the lines of economic development, but there are large scale models with pronounced potential that have failed. Contemplating on these constructs, Raju decided to diversify his engagement in the development sector. A member of many reputed institutions like the Indian Medical Association, International Society for Surgery in Orthopaedics & Traumatology, Indian Society of Surgeons for Hand, Indian Association for Occupational Health, Raju got associated with the Gargi Trust, an NGO in Hyderabad that promotes the use of natural, bio degradable materials in food, clothing and housing industries.

Raju has personally been promoting the use of organic materials like vegetables, grains, paddy and saw dust in making Ganesh idols since 2004. More conscious of the implications of this effort, he is planning for a mass production of such Ganesh idols for school students to create

awareness and encourage use of natural, perishable products. There is more that he wants to do. “Every year on the 2nd of October, I organise a cycle rally for school children to encourage cycling. Presently, I have been trying to design a container that will collect all the water dripping from air conditioners and allow birds to quench their thirst by consuming this water. We are now carrying out tests to check the suitability of this water for consumption,” he explains.

Raju’s efforts at personal level do not end here. Being passionate about blood and organ donation, he organises regular camps in collaboration with other likeminded organisations. He dreams of establishing an NGO in the name of SAHAS (Socially Active Hands Aided Severally) soon, whose primary task would be to create an organ donation registry. “More dreams and more tasks. They keep me going,” smiles Raju.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



9. Learning to get into Schools

The grades of inequity, in almost everything that pertains to education, is a challenge that India has been facing for decades together. In spite of numerous schemes, programmes, civil society initiatives, alternative forms of education, etc. there still remains a large number of children who either drop out before completing elementary education or have not stepped into school at all. Fortunately, all these problems are more apparent than before as the implications affect the populace in one way or the other. This scheme of affairs disturbed Mr Ramesh Balasundaram and his wife Binu, Founders of Bal Utsav, based in Bangalore.

Both of them gave up their corporate jobs in order to work for the above cause. Soon after marriage in early 2009, Ramesh and Binu started contemplating on what they wanted to do. They began to research on the education sector thoroughly. Coincidentally, during this time, the Union Planning Commission released its data revealing that there were 3.3 million NGOs in the country, i.e. one NGO for every 400 people in the country.

“While so much was being done through government schemes/programmes and NGO initiatives, problems persisted and in fact they penetrated deeper in the system. Every cause emerged as a work in progress,” recalls Ramesh who is disappointed with the ‘band aid’ approach in the development sector which did not allow the analysis of a cause’s ecosystem.

India having the highest number of children in the world, Ramesh and Binu believed that solutions for the predicaments in our country can only come from its own children. Bal Utsav was thus established and registered as a Trust in 2009 with the objective of introducing need based interventions in schools.

“Children are taught so many things, but health, especially sexual health, is not imparted as it has to be,” he says. Bal Utsav developed modules to handle this subject in Government Schools and initial success encouraged them to spread across five cities in India. “We soon realised that we had not planned for such a quick expansion. Therefore, we had to relook at our work as the scheme of things progressed with no bandwidth constraints.”

It was in 2010 that Ramesh and Binu enrolled at CSIM Bengaluru for the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme (SEOP). “The course gave us a lot of inputs to restructure our existing work. In 2011, we registered the Trust as a Sec 25 Company. While Trust Laws varies from state to state, Company Laws are uniform across the country and this helps us in planning our expansion more strategically,” says Ramesh.

As part of SEOP, Ramesh interned with the Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (KSCPCR) where he had access to information on government allocations for children across all departments. The findings were more than an eye opener as he learnt that the Government of Karnataka spent only 1.3 percent of its funds on children that constituted 30 percent of the total population. He presented this finding along with a small scale review of models from other countries to KSCPCR. Ramesh was also part of the group project at CSIM which also was on education, thereby giving him another opportunity to look at the Right to Education Act in detail.

“All the maids’ children were in school. So what was the fuss about RTE, I fail to understand,” he says adding that, “A large number of children dropped out of school. 64 percent of children who enrolled in school did not finish class 8. Children either dropped out due to several reasons or did not attend school at all.”

A volley of questions had to be answered to put the puzzle together. Who were these children? Why aren't they in school? Ramesh and Binu found that a large number of out of school children were from urban slums who were caught in the vicious cycle of early marriage, ending up parenting a child by the time they reached 20 years of age. As their parents migrated in search of employment, children were left in community's custody. By the time the second child was born in the family, the first child gets on to the task of taking care of his/her sibling. Averaging at 3 children per family in urban slums, the third child comes when the first and second have completed 12 and 8 years of age. "We found that the last child was sent to school in all probability, while the first child, if sent to school can reach only class 10 when he or she is 22 years old," says Ramesh adding, "for this education till class 10, the older child has to give up earning for his family, and despite all the struggle, the class 10 certificate would not suffice to obtain a job. This is a classic urban phenomenon."

The usual approach is to build more number of schools, but the problem here is not access—it is age appropriate entry into schools. Conscious about the fact that any solution has to be reproducible and scalable, the couple decided not to build any more schools. Instead, they chose to introduce a fast track mode of schooling, which would enable children complete schooling by the time they were 14 years of age.

Museum Schools, the first initiative for Out of School Children (OOSC) was introduced by Bal Utsav in 2012. It is a very unique concept that was able to thrive on government infrastructure which was hardly put to use. Bal Utsav built a curriculum based on the museum exhibits. Beginning with 150 children, the concept of museum schools prepared children to enter an age appropriate class within a period of two years. 47 children in the first year and 113 children in the second year were enrolled in age appropriate classes. "We were glad that they were not just enrolled, but remained and continued to study," says a contented Ramesh.

Bal Utsav's next focus was on children of migrant labourers, more specifically, the construction workers. Joining hands with another alumni of CSIM, Bal Utsav opened 'Tent Schools' at construction sites and taught these children using Telugu, Oriya and Bengali as the

medium of instruction. Soon, they were back to the question of OOSC, but looked at tribals exclusively. “With tribals, the problem was not age, but access to schools. So, we initiated four learning centres in Madikere district in 2014,” says Ramesh.

Bal Utsav’s efforts were soon recognised by the Government of Karnataka. They invited Bal Utsav to scale out their model using the unutilised class rooms in Government Schools and mitigate the issue of OOSC.

Ramesh and team developed a one year curriculum for this ‘School in School’ model. OOSC were brought to school through community mobilisation and the Government of Karnataka provided shelter and food through Akshaya Patra programme. Bal Utsav’s role was to educate these OOSC with their own curriculum, learning aids and teachers so that these children can join age appropriate classes after one year. Being a one year programme, Bal Utsav also decided to organise after school classes to support the children in understanding their lessons better.

While access to schools and OOSC are two significant challenges, one sided approach did not help address both issues simultaneously. Bal Utsav has been able to check both with their innovative models of Museum Schools, School in School programme, and Learning Centres for tribal children, demonstrating that a consistent focus on both these issues is critical in solving the inequities at the level entering schools.

Ramesh and Binu are now headed to rebuild three schools in Nepal. Let’s wish them success!

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



10. Water, water, more water

All of us know that water is a very critical element in nature that sustains life on earth. Yet, there is very little done to replenish our water resources in the light of modernisation and industrialisation. Subash Chandra Reddy has been advocating change in this respect by promoting rain water harvesting methods in villages at Andhra Pradesh and also at Hyderabad.

Reddy has a Diploma in Electronics. From being an active sports person during his college days, he settled with a job at BSNL and is now BSNL's Junior Telecom Officer at Hyderabad.

In the late 90's Reddy's endeavour to work on something constructive led him to volunteer with many organisations. He visited many spiritual centres and also the Jidukrishnamurthy Centre, where he met his mentor, Dr Venkat. Impressed by Dr Venkat's session at the Centre, Reddy decided to embrace his pragmatism. A poster that read—"Thinking is not doing, planning is not doing. Only doing is doing."—in Dr Venkat's room has been Reddy's inspiration since.

“Dr Venkat told me that water and soil in the right quantity and quality are very crucial for a nation to prosper,” recalls Reddy who soon identified himself with the cause of water and soil conservation. He founded the NGO SMARAN in 1997 and initiated renovation of neglected traditional water bodies that provided irrigation and livelihood for farmers. Renovation of Beera Cheruvu tank in Soornagar Mandal helped convert 25 acres of fallow land into cultivable land, resulting in an additional income for the farmers in that region. “Interactions with the District Collector opened up new opportunities for me. He suggested that I take up development of 100 acres of land. Working on this open land brought me closer to the issue,” shares Reddy who grew more passionate about water and soil conservation.

Reddy’s comprehension of all these issues in the context of sustainability came over at a time when the term carbon foot print was still alien to all of us. Enlightened by his mentor and the ensuing conversations with farmers, Reddy realised his mentor’s message, that inputs for agriculture must be reasonable and close to nature. Presently operational in the areas of Ranga Reddy, Medak, Nalgonda, and Hyderabad, SMARAN has undertaken micro watershed development, nursery, rain water harvesting in rural and urban areas. The organisation also conducts free health camps in urban slums and rural areas, provides training for farmers (save grain campaigns) in natural pest management, compost making, etc.

Reddy learnt about CSIM from a friend he met at the Jiddukrishnamurthy Centre. “I actually belong to the first batch of CSIM Hyderabad. More than management of non- profits, CSIM helped me choose my area of focus—water. I am now able to read and connect everything to water. I can read between the lines for the sake of water,” he says.

“A considerable amount of electricity can be saved by restricting lighting of hoardings for only three hours every evening. The power saved by this measure is nothing compared to what we can save by replenishing ground water level by just a litre,” he adds.

Along with passion Reddy also acquired the knack of presenting the case for rain water harvesting using suitable structures with diligent documentation where numbers can help advocate for rain water

harvesting on a large scale. “I owe my clarity on this issue to CSIM. They equipped me with the skills required to document and prove the impact that my technical expertise can bring in. I am sure all this will go on to build a policy on water conservation through rain water harvesting (RWH),” he says.

Reddy feels that RWH is never understood in its totality. “The chain of benefits that flow from conserving water is not fully understood. Thus, there is a need to quantify outcomes of all our models. It does take time to document all these, but it is essential in order to take RWH forward on a larger scale in urban areas as well,” he explains.

Lamenting about norms for construction flouted so blatantly, he asserts that the little space available to replenish our ground water reserves must be exploited for the larger good. “Roads are cemented, soil is carpeted, and floors are tiled. Where is the soil? RWH is very easy in places like Chennai where the terrain is sandy. Percolation of rain water to the water table may not be that easy in places like Hyderabad where the terrain is rocky. Hence, there is need for using alternative methods that calls for technical expertise. This is where we have played a role so far,” explains Reddy.

He is deeply disturbed by the lack of inquisitiveness amongst people and other stakeholders who limit themselves to standard solutions without bothering about the utility or effectiveness of the models used. “People are ready to buy water and deepen bore wells but are not inclined to know what a long term solution could be,” he laments. He feels that efforts must be taken to make RWH an inherent component while planning any construction. This comes at a very minimal cost and precious rain water can be saved rather than being fed to sewage lines or left to stagnate on the roads.

Inverse Bore Well (IBW) method of RWH is widely promoted by SMARAN wherein dry or abandoned bore wells and even working bore wells are converted into recharging structures. NIFT in Madhapur used to buy 15 tankers everyday to supplement its water needs. Reverse tube well method implemented by Reddy and team at NIFT has brought down this external dependency to just 8 tankers a day within a period of one year. From the following year, NIFT did not have to depend

on tankers as the water tables were replenished. NIFT therefore saved Rs.50,00,000 per year apart from having an increased yield from other three bore wells that were present in the campus.

Given the kind of change SMARAN can bring in through its technical expertise, Reddy and team are being consulted by individuals, gated communities, and institutions to check RWH feasibility and establish appropriate structures that recharged ground water reserves. “Yet, after all the feasibility is studied, many clients still say no to this. Water conservation is never a priority for them,” he sighs.

Reddy was recently awarded the Green Warrior Award by AP Forest Department for improving ground water levels through innovative methods. He is also a recipient of Aam Aadmi Award for water conservation presented by AP Biodiversity in the World Biodiversity meet held at Hyderabad in 2012. A growing client base and acknowledgement is reason to celebrate but Reddy is looking forward to more.

“I am into this ocean. I am hopeful,” he concludes.

— *Shanmuga Priya. T*



11. Beautifying women through empowerment

All parents put in their best of efforts to ensure that their children pursue education and develop leadership qualities so that they can lead their own lives independently. Every individual uses this education and leadership in different ways. Here is the story of Vibha Jain, Founder of Wave Foundation in Hyderabad, who used her domain knowledge to create livelihood and entrepreneurship opportunities for women.

A graduate in Nutrition, Vibha diverted to Cosmetology. Backed by sound training under a renowned cosmetologist, and in the service industry with around six years of extensive research on products, she launched her own brand —‘Nature’s Way’. “I had always wanted to be a woman entrepreneur. Manufacturing sector interested me! I could not think of working for someone else,” says Vibha, whose brand now hosts more than hundred products that cater to a range of skin care, face masks, hair colors, de-tanning products, etc. “Women and children can be very vulnerable, whether within or outside the family system,” says Vibha, who wanted to expose women in need of livelihood opportunities to the huge demand for skilled beauticians. She had also organized numerous workshops for these women free of cost.

Even as a business woman, Vibha spent her time with non-profit organizations enhancing their functionality with her strengths. Her engagement with orphanages and schools became more frequent and

planned. While all these happened at an individual level, Vibha wanted to start her own charity and work for the welfare of women and children.

Wave Foundation was inaugurated in July 2014 out of the enthusiasm of a group of women, led by Vibha. “As beginners with no particular focus structured in the form of activities, we decided to organize one event every month. We conducted charitable activities and cultural programmes in different institutions like schools, orphanages and other places that had no sign of fun and liveliness,” shares Vibha, who came to know about CSIM’s Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme (SEOP) from a friend. Interested to do these activities in an organized and professional manner, Vibha took up the course in February 2015.

Much like others, Vibha too grew fond of the flexible routine that ensured participation of all those who registered for the SEOP programme. “CSIM opened a whole new set of allies for me. I began to take in the concept of running an NGO with ease, comfort and professionalism. I learnt the criticality of self-sustaining my contribution to the society,” she elaborates. As successful NGO leaders and activists handled the classes, shared their stories and experiences, she became clear on her pursuit. She was interested to do many things, but the course at CSIM, helped her realize what to focus upon. Since knowledge in Cosmetology was Vibha’s strength, she wanted to use this to create economic empowerment amongst women.

From the focus on charity, Wave Foundation transcended to work from an entrepreneurial perspective. The first mega skill development workshop was organized in August 2015. The organization provided training for women in parlour services and also employed them in the chain of beauty parlours with whom they had a business connect.

Wave Foundation offered placement for women who were trained under the government vocational programme —Setwin. The foundation, however, continued to organise educational and cultural programmes in schools, homes for aged and orphanages. Slowly giving up on charity, Wave Foundation decided to adopt a small private school Vaitik Virachananda Vidyalaya, which was located in the neighbourhood. “We advertised for teacher recruitment and also supervised science assignments in the school. We organise a range of activities for children

during festivals—science exhibitions, skill training, soft skill training, sports events, medical services—to retain the interest and motivation of children to study. If a number could say it, we have organized 20 programmes for 114 children in the school so far. Infrastructure is being taken care by others as Wave Foundation concentrates on education alone. We therefore, are in critical need of teachers and volunteers to administer the school,” she explains.

Beyond workshops and placement, Vibha became a resource person to guide those women who were eager to start their own business units. With a clear focus and vision, Vibha has been able to focus on introducing scholarships for students and provide a platform to link them with other schools and colleges for higher education. Drawing largely from her learnings, Vibha has consciously networked with other institutions to sustain Wave’s contribution in the society. She has collaborated with Akshaya Akruti to help underprivileged procure hearing aids. Alongside, Wave also organizes training programmes to equip parents handle special children.

In spite of having moved away from activity approach to charity, Vibha feels that there is no need for fundraising in order to sustain Wave Foundation. “I have my business to support these initiatives. There are plans to introduce medical services for the poor through Wave Foundation. Instead of spending time on mobilizing resources, I would prefer to concentrate on promoting Wave Foundation and its activities,” says Vibha, immediately adding that there is a need for volunteers to scale up the organisation’s activities.

— *Shanmuga Priya. T*

II. INSPIRING CONVERSATIONS

Interviews with Inspiring Personalities



1. Rev. Fr. Casimir Raj

“In 2001, LIBA was ranked 54th and in 2004 it ranked 9th. This was purely my achievement and am proud of that!”

Fr. Casimir Raj has been associated with education and teaching marketing for the past three decades in various institutions including XLRI Jamshedpur; St. Louis University, Missouri; Wheeling Jesuit College, Wheeling and XIM Bhubaneswar. He was the founder Director of LIBA and Principal of Loyola College, Chennai. He was also Director, XIM Bhubaneswar., and XLRI Jamshedpur, Goa Institute of Management. A member of the American Marketing Association and a PhD from St. Louis University, (in Missouri, USA), Fr. Casimir is widely regarded to be authority in marketing with numerous publications to his credit.

Rev. Fr. Casimir Raj, S.J., as Principal, made the almost impossible as possible. Co-education was introduced only in his period. He has left his mark on the college particularly by starting LIBA (Loyola Institute for business Administration). It was declared, by a Central Government Commission, the best of its kind in Tamil Nadu.

Consistently ranked among the best business schools in the country, LIBA represents the unflagging zeal for education that is a unique characteristic of the Jesuit Society. LIBA is a Jesuit institution under the aegis of Loyola College Society, Chennai.

In an exclusive interview, Fr. Casimir Raj shares with Marie Banu his efforts to launch LIBA and his passion for Servant Leadership.

Can you share with us about your childhood, family, and education?

I hail from Souryarpatnam Village in Ramnad District, Tamil Nadu. We were only 60 families living here and did not have access to roads, electricity and water. My father was an elementary school teacher while my mother could not read or write. In fact, I tried my best to teach her to sign, but she did not want to learn. She has been a great inspiration and I have learnt a lot from her. My father was a dynamic man and I learnt discipline from him. In my village, I am the first person to pursue studies beyond tenth standard. I have four brothers and one sister who are now living in different places.

At the age of 18 I joined the Jesuit order. I studied B.Com and M.Com at Loyola College in Chennai. During my entire study period, I did not refer to any guides. Instead, I reflected on what the professors taught me during class and I made my own notes. While pursuing my M.Com, I bought Ramayya's book on Income Tax and read every case. This gave me better knowledge and it became one of my strengths.

While studying Philosophy and Theology, I became interested in Management studies. My superiors noticed me reading management books and encouraged me to pursue MBA in Santa Clara University, U.S.A.

About your efforts to launch LIBA and what makes this institution different from others?

During my studies, I used to spend my vacation at XLRI, most of the time reading books, and interacting with the professors. My dream was to have an institution like XLRI in South India. While XLRI did not give preference to Catholics, I wanted to make a difference by offering

more admissions to Catholics. I also wanted the Chennai institution to be better than XLRI in 20 years' time.

To tell you very frankly, I am proud of starting LIBA, but am more proud of what I have done later. When I returned as Director in 2001, classes were conducted from 9am to 1pm and it was just like any other College. The day I came, I told the management and students that the classes would be henceforth conducted from 8am to 8pm and in due course this programme would be made residential. I gave full power to the faculty members to set the papers and value them. I even took classes for the faculty on various ways of grading and taught them various models.

It was practically a Madras University based MBA and nobody knew about it. In 2001, LIBA was ranked 54th and in 2004 it ranked 9th. This was purely my achievement and am proud of that! The teachers and students cooperated with me, and there was no improvement in the infrastructure. From that day, LIBA has taken a different path and is well known across the globe.

What are the ways in which you inculcate values and ethics in your students during their study period?

We teach our students values and ethics and make them experience it as well. During the first year, we have a paper called 'Government and Society' where we teach social analysis. We also take the students on a three-day village visit to experience rural life.

I encourage my alumni to sponsor at least one poor village student in a year which would cost only 2500 rupees for a year. I also tell them not to expect anything in return, not even an IT Exemption for the donation they have offered.

Triple bottom line reporting and Social Accounting and Audit will strengthen the reporting systems in corporates for their CSR programme. Will LIBA look at incorporating these in the syllabus?

It is a pity that we are making CSR compulsory for companies. They are making a lot of money and they are now being forced to give two

percent for social work. Even now, some companies are claiming from their beneficiary organization tax exemption for the contribution they have made.

We would like to have one course on Good Governance. One of my friends has made a donation to make this happen and we are working on the proposals.

We would also have a course in CSR and certainly Social Accounting and Audit will form part of this.

You have been following the principles of Servant Leadership and have mentioned that marketing concepts should imbibe values from this. Can you please elaborate?

Since the day I joined Loyola in 1975, I was involved in administration. Whatever role was offered to me, I did not consider it as a dominant or powerful position. For me, it was service to the people. When I was the Hostel Warden, I used to spend all my time with the students. I kept all my room windows and doors open and encouraged the students to meet me whenever they wanted to. I was an open book and my students loved me for that.

Whenever I was made a Principal or Director, I used to tell my staff and students that I do not want to be known as a best administrator, but instead as a just and humane person.

For me, marketing was not selling, but rather finding out what the needs of the people are and providing them with it. We need to first listen to their requirements and look from their point of view.

I would say that Priesthood has two roles— prophetic leadership and servant leadership. A Prophet thinks that he gets everything from God directly and passes it on. Whereas, a Servant Leader understands the needs of the people and provides—this is called ‘service to the people’. I may not be a good prophet or a good preacher, but I can do the latter role—Servant Leader—very well.

2. Shri. Chandrasekaran

“IT industry is uniquely positioned to leverage its core competencies to enable NGO partners to scale and sustain their social development programs.”

Shri. Chandrasekaran has over 25 years of experience in the global information technology industry. Currently, Chandrasekaran is the Group Chief Executive, Technology & Operations at Cognizant, which is a part of the NASDAQ 100 and S&P 500 indices, and the Fortune 500 list. His experience spans key



functions such as corporate strategy, customer relationship management, business development and operations management.

Chandrasekaran has been associated with Cognizant since its founding in 1994, propelling its growth into a global delivery organization, spearheading newer solutions and championing crucial process initiatives. As an Executive Officer at Cognizant, he drives the Company’s global delivery management, capacity growth and process initiatives, proactively nurturing key alliances and leveraging business partnerships. Prior to joining Cognizant, Chandrasekaran worked with Tata Consultancy Services, and was responsible for setting up its offices across the US and Europe.

Chandrasekaran has a Bachelor’s degree in Mechanical Engineering from Regional Engineering College in Trichy, and an MBA from the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore.

In an interview, Shri Chandrasekaran tells Marie Banu about two Corporate Social Responsibility arms of Cognizant that spearheads initiatives in the field of community service.

IT industry plays a major role in India’s financial economy. How do

you think it can contribute to the social economy and development?

Technology companies bring a huge employment potential not just within the IT industry but also create ancillary jobs. For every IT job there are three to four ancillary jobs created and with the expansion of IT companies into Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, they increasingly contribute to both the financial economy and social development in these areas. Every year when new entrants join us in our campus, we notice the profile of the graduates joining us changing – many of them are from rural/semi urban areas. We also see Parents accompany some of them and they are all proud that their wards have a bright future ahead of them.

IT industry is uniquely positioned to leverage its core competencies to enable NGO partners to scale and sustain their social development programs. They can bring their strong experience in program management and technology and help social programs drive larger societal impact.

Being a part of an industry with a vast pool of knowledge workers gives them immense opportunities to play a key role in these programs. Cognizant engages and leverages the passion, skill and experience of our associates such that their vast knowledge and technical and managerial skills add value to our CSR initiatives in Education, Digital Literacy and supporting technology-focused projects.

What is Cognizant's role in this?

At Cognizant, we firmly believe that corporate actions play a very important role in creating a climate of positive opinion and that giving back to the society is not only imperative to the company's growth, but also an earnest reflection of the values it stands for. Cognizant Foundation and Outreach are two Corporate Social Responsibility arms of Cognizant, spearheading our initiatives in the field of community service.

Cognizant Foundation (CF): Established with the objective of improving, guiding and inspiring the lives of underprivileged people, Cognizant Foundation focuses primarily on the areas of Education, Health care

and Livelihood. The prime objective of Cognizant Foundation is to reach out to the economically & socially backward sections of the Society and make a meaningful impact in their lives and in their quest for a better future. The Foundation supports deserving institutions/ organizations working in the focus areas of Education & Health care, through financial support towards equipment purchase & enhancement of infrastructure facilities. The project locations are spread across India, mostly in states where Cognizant has offices.

Cognizant Outreach: Towards the end of 2007 when Cognizant crossed the second billion dollar revenue mark, the Outreach program was launched to address the twin challenges that were prevalent : to improve the quality of education; and to provide an official and unified platform for interested Cognizant employees to participate in community service initiatives, focused entirely on education. The program was a perfect bridge between the employees of Cognizant who are passionate about giving back to society and the schools which are in need of a holistic support for the long-term towards improving the quality of education through sustained corporate partnerships.

Sound stewardship of natural resources is another pillar of Cognizant's CSR initiatives. Cognizant has successfully pursued a range of efforts to reduce impact on the environment to protect vital and irreplaceable resources and better manage climate change risks. Cognizant sustainability team "Go Green" also extends their expertise and passion in improving Cognizant's environmental practices around the communities we live and work to make a positive impact to the environment.

Campus Connect: Cognizant is committed to comprehensive professional development and training programs for the underprivileged through Campus Connect projects. Campus Connect mainly focuses on providing various skills to the underprivileged enabling them to seek employment opportunities.

Cognizant Outreach has set an amazing example for volunteerism amongst your associates. Can you share your experience with Outreach?

Since its inception, Outreach has partnered with over 140 schools in India, and has reached out to over 500,000 students; making a definitive impact on their academic performance, honing their talent in extra-curricular and sport activities, aiding them make informed career choices or improving the school infrastructure.

In 2014, 25,000 associates volunteered for various initiatives clocking 303,163 hours. Volunteers conduct regular coaching sessions in mathematics, computer science and English. Such sessions have enhanced the understanding and proficiency of the students in these subjects. Some of the schools reported a significant increase in the pass percentage levels of students. Apart from regular academic sessions our volunteers have career counselled 18,000+ students and trained 38,000 children to participate in Outreach's annual inter-school competition.

When we started this program we didn't realize how much we are going to get back in return. It is so gratifying to see the smiles on people's faces, sparkles in children's eyes. We have seen hope, that inspires us to move ahead and dream bigger.

With the government being more firm on foreign funding for NGOs, they will be now dependent on corporate funding for their projects. Your thoughts?

The new legislation will bring in a sizeable number of medium sized companies under its ambit. In general, the societal impact is expected to be positive with the added CSR participation of such mid-sized companies spread across the country. Even before the new legislation was introduced, large corporations were already driving CSR initiatives. Larger corporates who have built strength for implementing these programs can guide/ mentor others with their expertise in program selection, governance and in choosing the right partners to maximize the impact of their CSR spends. It is important to choose the right NGO partners with track record of legal and financial compliance and creating the right impact to the society.

You head / associated with Nasscom foundation. What social initiatives are they involved in and what is your contribution to society through Nasscom?

One of the key drivers for formation of Nasscom foundation is to promote social development through the application of ICT leveraging the strengths of its member companies. The Nasscom Foundation focuses on two functional program areas – Fostering ICT for development and promoting Business responsibility within the IT industry in India.

Nasscom acts as a catalyst capturing and disseminating best practices and encouraging the member companies to do more and as a channel partner for CSR activities of the member companies through its various programs such as Skills initiative to enable meaningful employment through ICT , Disability Initiative to build inclusive workplaces, Impact Sourcing to facilitate hiring from excluded communities, Nasscom Social Innovation Forum to nurture and promote technology innovations for inclusive growth etc.

National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) is one such initiative aligned to the Government of India’s vision of making one person in each and every household in the country digitally literate by 2020. NDLM is a platform created for digital literacy awareness and training programs in both rural and urban communities empowering them to fully participate and interact in an increasingly digital world. With the participation of Nasscom Member companies and their collective efforts to bring down the divisive digital wall will help India take a lead in shaping an inclusive global digital economy.

3. Smt. Geeta Ramaseshan

“More and more women are highly educated, well employed and pushing boundaries. Women have moved up in the socio economic ladder.”



Geeta Ramaseshan is a senior lawyer, practicing in the Madras High Court in the area of criminal law, constitutional law and family law, with specific emphasis on human rights and women’s human rights. She has also specialized in international human rights law and has conducted workshops on international human rights for the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, Bangkok and the International Women’s Rights Action Watch-Asia Pacific. She has been a consultant for UNICEF and UNDP on issues relating to child, women and the law. She is an adjunct faculty in Asian College of Journalism, where she teaches media law.

She has worked extensively in cases relating to discrimination, custodial violence, prisoners, juvenile children, sexual harassment, the rights of minorities, and the rights of persons living with HIV AIDS.

She has been a Heinz Fellow from the University of Pittsburgh and an Eisenhower Fellow on Human Rights, Public Interest litigation and Justice.

In an exclusive interview, Geeta Ramaseshan shares with Marie Banu about how lawyers can be made more socially responsible.

How can be lawyers be made more socially responsible?

Being socially responsible would be a requisite for all not just lawyers and needs to be inculcated during the stage of primary education and by the family. But, one way of understanding the complexities of the socio economic issues in the country could be when the educational

curricula for legal studies, inculcates a sense of social responsibility so that young lawyers get inspired to also take up issues that address socio economic change.

Is there any particular aspect of learning that you feel is much needed in the Bachelors in Law Curriculum?

Family law studied from a feminist perspective, criminal law from a constitutional and human rights perspective, property law from a socio economic perspective especially on matters pertaining to land, the list could go on and on! But ,primarily what would be of relevance is to consider the impact of law on people.

How can we tackle the issue of child trafficking in India?

Child trafficking has its roots in the socio-economic reality. Invariably, children who are trafficked come from marginalized communities. There would hardly be any cases of upper caste or upper class children who are trafficked. As there is a socio-economic component for this issue, it cannot be handled by criminal law alone which seeks to only punish the perpetrators (which is very important), but not transform the condition of the children. The law on juvenile justice seeks to address this issue, but lacks a sturdy support system.

Your thoughts on Honor killing?

As a society we do not believe in the right to choice of one's spouse or partner. The societal control is so strong that when there is any deviation from the norm, there is killing of young people which is an extreme form of violence. There are other situations also such as forced marriages, forcing a woman to stay in a marriage however violent the situation is, or compelling a person to break away from a relationship or marriage.

There are no easy ways to deal with this situation except in a systemic manner. I can elaborate on two aspects while there are many more dimensions to the problem. One is that the law looks at it as killing and there is no usage of the word honour in the statute. This has been constructed by some judgments of courts. Criminal laws however

cannot transform society but can only punish the perpetrator. After all, despite death penalty for serious offences the offences continue.

Basically, ours is a very discriminative society. We discriminate based on caste, class, religion, etc. When you have a scenario of this kind, there is a justification from within the larger community who don't see that the crime of killing a person for the sake of honour is wrong. Unless this attitude and approach of justification changes, unfortunately, these honour killings will continue.

The other problem is our refusal to understand and accept the sexuality of young people. Acceptance of this would help us deal with the problems of adolescent and young adults in a much more nuanced manner.

What are your views on the reality of Gender Equality?

Every situation cannot be taken by exception to the rule. Yes, more and more women are highly educated, well employed and pushing boundaries. Women have moved up in the socio economic ladder.

But, the average situation for the majority women in India remains bleak. The economic divide is increasing which always impacts women more. There is increasing violence against women. While we have made some success in changing laws especially after the case of Nirbhaya, the impact of such legislations have to be seen.



4. Smt. Girija Kumarbabu

“Just like how social work education has undergone change, social service has also undergone change.”

Mrs Girija Kumarbabu is the Secretary of Indian Council for Child Welfare, Tamil Nadu and has over 35 years’ experience in the social service sector. She serves as a Member in Juvenile Justice Board Chennai and is the Managing Director of Sankalp, a NGO in Chennai that is committed to the cause of promoting the rights of girl children.

She won the Best Social worker award 2009 from the Government of Tamil Nadu with Chief Minister’s Gold Medal and Citation. She was also awarded the Outstanding Woman of the year 2009-2010 by the Inner wheel club-Madras Cosmos.

She has evolved a guidebook for grass-root level workers for training adolescent children and has co-authored a research study on the Impact of legislation on the situation of child labour that was sponsored by

National Labour Institute. She serves as a trainer for UNICEF and trains DTERT members on Child rights and child protection.

In an exclusive interview Girija Kumarbabu shares with Marie Banu her experience and the change in the social work sector over the last 40 years.

Your first engagement as a social worker?

My introduction to the social service as such was during my undergraduate years in Stella Maris College. I was really captivated by the services rendered by one nun. She was in the department of Social work and was looking after Shanti Bhavan. She was the one who motivated me to pursue Masters in Social work.

My first placement was in the Artificial Limb Centre, now called Government Rehabilitation Centre. It was earlier part of Government Hospital. I am a basically a Medical and Psychiatry social worker and I worked as part of a research team. The idea was to see how we can completely rehabilitate an amputee. We were getting cases of people getting amputated, either for diabetic gangrene or accident reasons.

I took a break for a while, and then entered the field of child welfare. It has been more than 35 years in this field now.

Do you see any change in the social service sector when compared to what was 40 years ago?

Yes, I should say so. At that time, social work education itself was not very much sought after. But, now I see that it has really branched and this is a welcome sign. People are looking at it more as a profession. Earlier, we had to fight for our identity. Today, we have become more skilled and there are lot more openings for employment.

Just like social work education has undergone change, the area of social work or social service has also undergone change. 40 years ago, you had martyrs and builders in the field of social work. There were large funding bodies and people were doing yeomen work in building people and their capacity. They were not working for personal gains.

Only some of them were missionaries. Many were not missionaries, but worked with a missionary zeal and dedicated their entire lives working for people. That is the change that I see!

Being attached to a voluntary organisation, I find it very difficult to identify volunteers. Again, this is the change that has taken over! The more you say professional, immediately the word compensation gets into the background. You have trained people, but they do not have the time.

Life has become more complicated and the attitude of people have changed. We are not living in compartments but in an open society where every sphere of activity gets adjusted or accommodated to these changes. I suppose that in the field of social work also, we have become professional but the type of commitment and volunteering has taken a backseat.

How do we improvise this scenario?

You see more and more groups of young volunteers and professionals leaving their job to work for a cause. This is a good change and a welcome change. Because, we are also identifying new social issues related to the larger social context which calls for really committed leaders. They might not be professional social workers but are committed to the cause for which they want to work for.

What is good for social work – professionalism or passion?

Both are important! They are two sides of the coin. If you don't have the passion, you will be doing only clerical work. You may have the skills and work, but without your heart.

If you only have passion and not skills, you can learn the skills anytime. There are many opportunities to hone your skills.

Being a member of a Juvenile Justice Board, there must have been several cases that you might have dealt with. Can you share your experience?

I would say that the experience of being a member of the Juvenile Justice Board has been very revealing to understand how society functions and how the marginalised get marginalised by the system as a whole. That is a big learning!

Children come from broken families, some are pavement dwellers and from very difficult family where the father has a criminal record. So, the socio-culturisation of children themselves becomes a huge task and they fall victims to criminal behaviour without knowing that this is a wrong way of life. There is no one to correct their behaviour and there is inadequate support services.

On the one hand you have a group of positive factors that are working overtime and on the other hand there is a vacuum - in terms of services to extend to these children. Both combined, you have a very difficult situation.

The cases related to theft are more related to children from the under privileged background. We do come across children who belong to the upper class. There was a case where a child's father was a government servant and the mother was a nurse. When a child who commits an offence happens to hail from a poor family, the case is immediately reported by the police. Whereas, when it happens in an affluent family, the child is sent off with a warning and a case is not registered. It depends on the case on how heinous the crime is.

Can you share one case that was challenging to judge?

I had a case of a child who belonged to the fishermen community aged around 11. He was caught for a cell phone theft and had dropped out of school after fourth standard. He has been using drugs and been drinking and smoking. When questioned, he innocently narrates how he has access to drugs. I consider it more heinous to make drugs available for

children than the theft that he had committed. That is the way I look at it!

He has now gone on bail and the case will go on. He does not have anyone back home as he does not have a father and his mother lives with her other three children. They do not have a proper house to live in. What is going to happen to him?

Such children are most vulnerable. If you don't really save them from such situations, you are creating hard core criminals. That is the greatest challenge!

About the family structure today. Your thoughts?

It is really worrying. Most of the families today have only one child. The child growing up with two or three siblings has learning taking place within the family. They learn to adjust to rules, family rules, sharing secrets, and learn to give — all these are part of social learning which is not taking place now.

Today, there is only one child in a family. This child is indulged even though the parents are very strict. When the child comes to school and meets similar types of children —that becomes a problem as every child is trying to assert himself/herself.



5. Dr. C. Kumarbabu

“I feel that we do not have proper ‘Counseling’ in India, mostly it is only advising.”

Dr C.Kumarbabu MD; DPM; Ph.D has more than 30 years of experience in counselling. He held the post of Reader in Psychiatry at the Government Stanley Medical College and Hospital, Chennai. He is also a corporate consultant in Stress management, emotional Intelligence, value based goal setting and work life balance. His article on the management of Common Mental Disorders was published by the Oxford University Press in 2009.

In an exclusive interview Dr. Kumarbabu shares with Marie Banu the need for more awareness on mental wellbeing.

How can one improve and maintain his mental wellbeing?

The basic function of the mind is to protect the body. In this process, we start seeing threats where there are really no threats. That is what we call “Anxiety”. Many stimuli in the environment are seen as potentially

harmful. Thereby, we are constantly focused on threats and that is what we call negative thinking. So, whether the threat is real or not, the effect it would have on the body because the mind is thinking about the threat, is sufficient to cause all the reactions as if the stimuli are real.

For instance, a person is walking on the road and someone is following. Regardless whether he is really following him or not, he thinks: “someone is following me”. Then whatever bodily changes that would occur if someone is really following with malafide intent would happen. That would have been just another person who was simply walking on the road.

The mind cannot differentiate between what is real and what is powerfully imagined. So, people constantly imagine the wrong and unwanted outcomes and this affects the system. This is called worries, anxiety, tensions, or stress.

How does one overcome stress?

The bottom line is to see all potential threats as challenges. This will help us to develop and improve our coping skills.

The more scared you are, the more you will think negatively. The more negative you think, the more threatened you feel. The more threatened you feel, the more negative you feel. This is a vicious circle. We need to break this by developing coping mechanisms. What is the worst outcome possible? Can I survive it? If I can survive, why bother? This is the line of questioning. If it does not kill me then it will make me stronger. Remember the ancient Chinese saying: “smooth seas never made a good sailor”. Trials and tribulations make us stronger.

It is really essential to look at one’s belief systems. We will have to develop certain profound rational philosophies as a mental compass to guide our living.

People don’t want to experience any uneasiness and don’t want even a small thing to go wrong. During summer, we are morbidly worried if there would be a power cut even when there is power supply.

When you do something irrational, it creates a lot of negativity. We try to control people and environment. We can never really control them.

Clients come to me saying that they are afraid of death. When I ask them, what is it that you want to achieve? They say that they want to live. I then tell them: “Right now you are living, and you are not enjoying it!”

The paradox is: “In the process of pursuing happiness, we make ourselves extremely unhappy”.

Having traveled across the globe, what are your views about counseling in India when compared to other Countries?

I feel that we mostly do not have ‘Counseling’ in India. On many occasions it is only advising. The term ‘counsel’ is very difficult to translate in our regional languages. People talk about giving counseling. You cannot ‘give’ counseling.

Counseling is a process where we discuss with the person and explore possible solutions to a problem. In the process, we explore their strengths and weakness; their baggage from the past, their belief systems, and their cognitive distortions etc. The outcome should be to explore all possible solutions to the actual problem and agree to initiate one specific action towards solving the problem.

People who really require counseling are the very people who deny that they have a problem. Someone brings a patient without their knowledge and introduces the counselor as a common friend. There is a huge stigma around mental illness in our country.

How can we bring about more awareness on mental illness?

We can start working on positive psychology. We can create modules on the management of mind. We can make this subject as an optional course for 10th, 11th and 12th standard school students and also offer as an elective course for college students.

Can you give us some pointers on how we can achieve work life balance?

When someone offers you a huge salary, they expect you to deliver huge results. Unfortunately, many people are not capable of doing this. So, they go through stress because they know that they cannot meet the demand. When they come home they are not peaceful, as this fear keeps stalking them and they are preoccupied and worried.

In the private sector, there is a constant downsizing of staff as they can employ four people instead of one for the same salary because we keep churning out millions of “qualified” graduates. The term ‘cyber coolie’ captures the prevalent situation. Therefore, the companies undercut the salaries, extend the working hours, and make the job expectations very huge.

The effective way of managing is to be mentally very strong. People live on hopes of an expected future income. When a person earns a salary of one lakh rupees a month, he immediately buys on instalment a house for 60 lakhs and a car for 10 lakhs. But, when faced with a pink slip, the house and car are gone. He then jumps off from the sixth floor. Do not ever confuse a liability for an asset. Enroll for a financial education class and learn the fundamentals of money management.

Do not mix business and pleasure. Work place affairs can wreck your peace of mind. These two: financial failure and love failure are the common cause for suicide.

Make work ethic a fundamental value. The whole purpose of life is to be happy and contribute to others. That is the true north principle to guide your life.

6. Smt. Latha Pandiarajan

“Any organization does not sustain only on profits. It is much more than that.”

Latha Pandiarajan a Chartered Accountant is the co-founder of Ma Foi Management Consultants; India’s first and largest internationally acclaimed human resource Management Company, based out of Chennai. Ma Foi initially focused on placing middle level managers in the Middle East. It then started offering all the



businesses under HR Services which made them the No.1 HR services provider in India. In 2002 they partnered with the Dutch HR Company, Vedior which took a majority stakes in them. This helped them to expand in various countries and they had 70 offices in India and had their presence in 18 countries. In 2007 Randstad acquired Vedior for US\$5.14 billion and hence Ma Foi became a part of Randstad.

In an exclusive interview with Marie Banu, she shares Ma Foi programmes and her pleasant moments.

What was your vision when you launched Ma foi?

We started Ma Foi in 1992 when HR is not even an industry. It was more on personal management and there were only few recruitment companies. It wasn’t very professional as some used to take money from candidates to place. Looking at all this, we wanted to be in this space as there is lot more you can do here. My husband Mr. Pandiarajan belongs to this industry and I am a Chartered Accountant. Hence, we thought this combination would work well. I always had a passion to work for HR and to work with people. So, it blended well.

Ma Foi is a French word meaning “My Word”. I thought that it symbolised trust, what we really wanted to say in terms of integrity.

That's how we started. The vision was to make a change and we were pioneers in this industry. It was exciting and at the same time bearing the pioneers cross.

Right from day one we always believed in two things: institution has to be built on values and the institution will be run by people. We took people from different industries and trained them.

Initially, it had its own challenges. We started with only 60,000 rupees. Banks did not recognize us and they were not giving us over draft facilities. We kept growing and always had the drive to grow large because more than anything size matters as it is only then that people sit and listen to you.

I can really say from my own experience that this is very true. We struggled to get an overdraft of one lakh rupees and it is so ironical that when you become big the same bank assigns a relationship manager to handle your account and it is very easy to even get 100 crores from the bank.

About MaFoi and its charitable activities?

We donated 5000 rupees —our first profit from Ma Foi to Banyan. Initially we started supporting children in the Sivakasi belt. At the end of 1993, we launched the Trust. As the organization started growing, we had a lot of people helping us and wanting to do many things. Hence, in 1997 we started the Ma Foi Foundation. More employees started to volunteer and take part.

Any organization does not sustain only on profits. It is much more than that.

Can you tell us about your Projects?

We always wanted to look at our programmes holistically. Our focus was on education, health care and women empowerment for sustainable livelihoods. For education, we started the programme under the brand 'Disha' meaning 'showing the way'. Health care was carried out by Ekam. It was initially incubated by Ma Foi and when it started growing

large, we spun it off as a separate Trust. For women, we worked through Sornam Trust. Each of these Trusts help each other. We conduct medical camps for our children through Ekam, and for women who are poor and cannot afford their children's education – they are supported through Disha.

The idea was to look at a family as a whole so that people can move from one level to another. When you look at it holistically, it becomes easier to deal with.

You have been actively involved in the social sector for a few years. Can you share some memorable moments?

I have a lot of pleasant memories. What is very close to my heart is our project 'Gems of Disha'. This programme focuses on children who are not studying well.

We had initially supported children who were studying in eighth standard in corporation schools. We worked along with the respective School Principals and conducted weekend classes for the weak children.

One day, when we wanted to expand the project, we identified students who were not studying well and were abused and mocked at. We then decided to work with the last 10 students in eighth standard and mentor them. Instead of having teachers, we invited students who had passed out from the same corporation school and were studying in college to come in the evenings to teach these children. We asked them to first spend time listening to the children and then slowly start teaching. They could relate well and we paid them a pocket money of 1500 rupees a month. We took 60 children in the first batch and my greatest satisfaction was when 52 of them cleared the board examination. Most of them who used to get single digit marks are now in College.



7. Rev. Fr Michael Amaladoss

“I might feel that God has spoken to me. But, this does not imply that God has not spoken to you.”

Rev. Fr Michael Amaladoss is a Jesuit Priest in Tamil Nadu. He hails from Dindigul and pursued his graduation at St Joseph’s College, Trichy. He has done his Bachelors in Latin and has won the title ‘Sangeetha Vidwan’ from the Tamil Nadu College of Music in Chennai, which is now become a university..

Fr. Michael joined the Society of Jesus in 1953 and was ordained a Priest in 1968. He did his doctorate in Theology in Paris and on return taught at St. Paul’s Seminary at Trichy and then at Vidya Jyoti College of Theology, a Jesuit institution in New Delhi. He has served as Principal and Rector for this College and was also in-charge of the formation of Jesuits in the whole country. He was elected as one of the assistants of the Superior General of the Jesuits in 1983 and lived in Rome for 12 years.

A professional Theologian, he is also a writer and editor. He has written several books some of which have been translated into other

languages—French, German, Spanish, Italian Portuguese, Japanese, Vietnamese and Indonesian.

Fr. Michael is the Director of the Institute of Dialogue With Cultures And Religions. The Institute involves itself in research activities on conflicts between religions and cultures and on the ways of evolving conflict resolutions through dialogue and understanding.

In an exclusive interview, Fr. Michael Amaldoss shares with Marie Banu the need for acceptance of other religions amongst youth.

What is the purpose of launching IDCR?

I had a Guru —Fr. Ignatius Irudayam— whom I used to admire while I was studying. He was an expert in Shaiva Sidhantha. He established a Christian Ashram in Chennai and conducted regular morning and evening prayers and courses in Indian Christian spirituality. After his lifetime, I was transferred to Chennai to take over this institution. I converted this into a research Centre, affiliated to the Madras University in 2004, offering a PhD in multi-cultural and religious studies. The students can choose any theme in a culturally and religiously pluralistic contexts. So far 4 have got their PhD and 2 more will be submitting their thesis shortly.

We moved into the Loyola College Campus in 2005 to be near other educational and research institutions offering us a chance to interact with the staff and the students.

Can you tell us about the research projects coordinated by IDCR?

As a research institute we have our own research projects. The first was on inter-religious violence. We chose Coimbatore for the study as there was a Hindu-Muslim conflict some 15 years ago. We interviewed people from the different communities who were affected by this violence and enquired about the causes and the possibilities of peace making. A second topic for research was on inter-caste violence, choosing three villages in the districts of Villupuram and Tirunelveli. We recently completed a third project on inter-religious marriages. We

had four research scholars working from Hyderabad, Chennai, Trichy, and Tiruppur.

In our country, there is not much that we can do with regard to promote peace among religions. Some countries have had Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. One in South Africa was presided over by Bishop Desmond Tutu, who won the Nobel prize for peace. They have the support of the government, the police and the churches and could confront the people and promote forgiveness and reconciliation. The political situation in India would not permit this. We are also a small institute with limited resources. So we focus on research and on training students to live in harmony, respecting and accepting people of other religions and cultures.

What has IDCR done to reach out to the youth in this way?

We have a regular department for Value Education in all our colleges. Students learn about different religions. Texts from various religious traditions are also used during morning prayers. WE are trying to make it more experiential and also reach out to school children. So, helped by the initiative of Arun Fernandes, who was still a student in Loyola College, we launched the “Peace Rangers”. It brought together 40 to 50 students belonging to different religions from various colleges for three months during weekends. They talk to and discover each other as different but friendly, listen to lectures on different religions from experts and interact with them. They also visit together the holy places of the different religions. Such interaction dispels prejudice, promotes true knowledge and encourages the acceptance of the religious others leading to harmonious living.

What is the BLINK Foundation, housed here and supported by you? What is its focus?

Inspired by the programme of “Peace Rangers”, Blink Foundation seeks to educate the school children for inter-religious harmonious living. Specially chosen and trained Student volunteers from the different colleges will go to various schools to train the children of classes 6, 7, 8, 9 and 11. Understanding, accepting and collaborating with the religious

and cultural others, as people with human dignity and freedom, will be the focus.

I might feel that God has spoken to me. But, this does not imply that God has not spoken to you. I must listen to you. All religions believe in One God, though they may have various names for God: Brahman, Yahweh, Allah, etc. This is the dialogue that we are facilitating through the Blink Foundation. All religions also support common human and social values like love, trust, justice, and equality.

Blink is also launching a web-portal in which the young people can ask any question dealing with problems and values of life. They will be answered on line by a group of Knowledge Patrons whose help Blink has managed to secure. In this way, our outreach will transcend space and time!



8. Shri. S. Muthiah

“Charity needs to be more broad-based”

Subbiah Muthiah, writer, journalist, cartographer, amateur historian and heritage activist, is known for his writings on the history of Chennai. He is the founder of the fortnightly Madras Musings, one of the principal coordinators of the annual Madras Day celebrations, and helped found the Madras Book Club. Muthiah is a regular columnist for The Hindu, writing on Madras past and present. In 2002, Muthiah was awarded the MBE by the Queen of England for his work on heritage and environmental conservation.

In an exclusive interview, Shri Muthiah tells Marie Banu about his childhood, writings, and much more.

About your childhood and education?

I lived half my life in Ceylon. Those were the days when ethnicity was not an issue, all of us were Ceylonese.

I went to St. Thomas’ Preparatory School started by an Englishman, W.T. Keble. I was there from third standard to the sixth. Keble has been

the single most important influence in my life. He encouraged us to read, write, and take an interest in all that was going on around us. By the time I was 8 years old, I was reading, writing and hooked on history as Keble told it. I learnt my Ceylon history from the stories Keble related, not from text books. It made me a storyteller and a chronicler, not a historian.

I then did my Senior Cambridge at Montfort, Yercaud, and Inter at Lawrence in Murree in pre-partition Punjab (now in Pakistan). When I was 16 I left for the US, did a degree in Engineering, learnt nothing. But 40 percent of the subjects were Humanities. That was great! With those credits, I switched to International Affairs, did my BA and MA, thinking that I would join the Foreign Service. I had left both countries before they were independent, but on return to Colombo in 1951 faced a citizenship problem.

Can you share your experience working with *The Times of Ceylon*?

With the Foreign Service out of reach, I joined *The Times of Ceylon*, having in the US been involved with campus journalism and ‘stringing’ for the local daily as Campus Correspondent. I was the first Asian to be elected to Pi Delta Epsilon, the American honour society for campus journalism. I was with the *Times* till 1968. I was the first graduate to join the paper. Those days, the Senior Cambridge and London Matriculation standards were much higher than today’s Indian BA’s. My boss had only done his Senior Cambridge, his boss only his Inter. They were far more aware about what was happening in the world than me, were more widely read and wrote better, although I had three degrees to my name, I learnt a lot from them!

I started as Foreign News Editor, became Features Editor, then Editor of the *Sunday Times*, *The Times Annual* and the Group’s magazine publications. I developed a wide range of interests – from politics and international affairs to women’s fashion, the arts and sport. I wrote a sports column for 15 years as well as various political columns.

I also ‘stringed’ for leading British newspapers – the *News Chronicle*, *Daily Mail*, and *The SundayObserver* and its Foreign News Service

- and The Mail, Madras. As well as for three international feature services.

From working for a newspaper in Ceylon to writing History of Madras. Can you share your journey?

In 1968 I had to make a decision – India or Ceylon. I was due to become Editor of The Times, but it was insisted I be a citizen. By that time that was out of the question. For Indian citizenship I had better qualifications – so there I was, coming to Madras. There was an opening at TTK's, who had just set up a printing and publishing unit for maps, atlases and tourist guides. While in Ceylon, I had done a lot of work for their Tourism Department. And doing The Times Annual and magazines, I would go down to the press to see them printed the way I wanted. I got interested in printing.

While at MAPS, my first output was a map and guide to Madras. I did not know about Madras history then, though I knew where the Chepauk Stadium, the cinema theatres and the Racecourse were. For that first production, I read whatever I could on Madras. I discovered that many people who went on to fame, fortune, and notoriety began their lives here — Robert Clive, Warren Hastings, Thomas Pitt, Elihu Yale. This got me interested, not in Madras, but these people.

I joined MAPS for editorial work, but the German in-charge (it was an Indo-German company) left after three months. I was asked to take over and run it. And there I stayed till 1990. Then I became head of Corporate Communications at TTK's till 2010.

Your first book and your passion for writing?

Around 1972, Abraham Eraly, a History Lecturer at MCC, and who became a well-known author later, was feeling bored with teaching. He decided to moonlight producing house magazines. He printed these journals at MAPS. One day I told him that I had helped with a magazine in Ceylon which looked at Colombo only. He picked up the idea and decided to bring out a magazine on Madras, *Aside*, the first city magazine in India. It was an excellent magazine and I began to write for it on the historical aspects of Madras and on sport.

When my wife was cleaning house one Saraswati Pooja, she asked me to clear the piles of notes on Madras I had accumulated or do something with them. It was then that I wrote *MadrasDiscovered*. The first edition was 160 pages, it is more than three times bigger today.

At the time, N S Ramaswami, very knowledgeable about History, was with the Indian Express. He was asked by Parry & Co to write its history. He began researching on it, but in a few months he passed away. Parry's then asked me to complete the work. Once the book came out, it was much appreciated. The rest, now 35 books later, is history!

From Madras to Chennai – your views on the change?

Madras to Chennai has not been a major change. It is still pretty much a conservative city. There is a story I narrate tell anybody who asks me the question. One day at a party, there came this statuesque girl who was striking looking, wore a figure-hugging dress with the skirt four inches above the knee, and was well made up. Everybody thought she was a film star. Later in the party, I was discussing Madras heritage with a man whom I vaguely knew. When this girl came towards us and spoke in absolute Brahminical Tamil, I was floored! He introduced me to her as his wife. About a month later, at a wedding. I saw a tall girl in a nine-yard saree wearing flowers and jewellery. Up closer, I found it was the same girl. To me, that is Madras! You can switch from a past to modern and modern to past without losing anything of your own identity. We still draw kolams and we have more temples, churches, and mosques probably than any other city in India. We are a conservative city, but comfortable with the modern.

About charities and the mindsets of Madrasis?

A good deal of support today is given only to the religious. But more needs to be done for education, healthcare, the aged and the poor. I would like more support for heritage in all its forms and the environment. Organisations do help here and there, but it's not enough. 25 companies support Madras Musings, which is welcome. But so many other causes are crying for greater help. Charity needs to be more broad-based, and seen not as charity but as social responsibility. CSR may change the outlook at one level, but how about individuals who could help?

9. Shri. S. Pandian

“To impose a death penalty is similar to: “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” principle. It is like taking revenge!”

Shri. S. Pandian known as ThenPandian hails from a village called in Thenkarai village at Tirupattur Taluk, Sivangangai District in Tamil Nadu. His parents were engaged in agriculture. He studied at the Arumugam Pillai Government Higher Secondary school at Tirupattur; pursued his graduation and Post-graduation in Sociology at Annamalai University; and Law from Bangalore University.



He is the Founder Secretary of People for Human Rights Forum (PFHR) and a member of Campaign for Custodial Justice. He is also a member of Amnesty International and a Senior Asoka Fellow.

ThenPandian is spearheading a widespread movement in India to demand humane treatment for people subjected to police custodial care and interrogation. He organizes systematic education on human rights and legal issues for rural activists, common people, and police personnel. He is also building a sustained campaign, including a victims’ forum, to ensure custodial justice and human rights in rural areas and abolish torture in rural police stations, jails, and institutions.

Through an extensive volunteer network, grassroots research and fact-finding missions, Pandian is ensuring that no authority functions above the law.

In an exclusive interview S. Pandian shares with Marie Banu about his movement in India to demand humane treatment for people subjected to police custodial care and interrogation.

What influenced you to engage in human rights activism?

I noticed that the issue of untouchability was predominant in my village. I had many friends who belonged to the Dalit community. At school, we used to share our lunch and play together, but when we entered our village we chose to interact with people from our own caste.

Once my parents reprimanded me for having attended a Dalit's wedding. I also witnessed the policemen beating up Dalits who were participating in Amedkar's Event. These incidents led me to reflect on the issue of casteism in our country.

I started work as a human rights activist. In 1993, I led a demonstration of Ambattur estate wage labourers, got arrested without charge by the police, and was detained for over a month. This experience demonstrated the critical gaps in the criminal justice system between the victims, the charge-sheeted, and the authorities. Since then, I made it my life's mission to ensure that people are aware of their rights, and have the capacity to ensure that they do not get violated by the arms of the State.

Can you tell us about an issue for which you have campaigned for?

At Kelambakkam, there was a company by name White House Process Limited that was engaged in dye making. As they did not have a mechanism for waste water disposal, the ground water was polluted in the area. The farmers campaigned against this company which led to arrest of many and a young boy was severely beaten up by the police. I read about this incident in the papers and approached the Human Rights Commission to resolve this issue.

Justice Sambandam was very supportive as the reason for the campaign against the company was just. At first, we enabled disconnection of the electricity connection for the company and within three years of continuous effort we made the company close its operations at Kelambakkam and re-locate to Gujarat.

We also had a discussion with the police and the Human Rights Commission which led to compromise of both parties on this issue.

About your experience with Amnesty International?

I coordinated a campaign against death penalty along with K.Manoharan (S.V.Rajadurai), Writer and Senior Human Rights Activist; and Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer. Amnesty International approached us and asked us to be part of their programmes.

I liked Amnesty International as it is against capital punishment. I believe in Gandhian principles. To impose a death penalty is similar to: “An eye for an eye; and a tooth for a tooth” principle. It is like taking revenge! Whatever may be the crime, we should give an opportunity for the person to realise his mistake.

About your work for the rights of the women and children?

At every District Collectorate, there is a woman social welfare officer. I handle Domestic Violence cases that are being referred by them free of cost.

I have been working for the rights of children especially in line with Juvenile Justice Care and Protection Law. This law has two dimensions – conflict with law; and care and protection. I obtain bail from Juvenile Justice Board for juveniles who are accused of committing theft.

How were you able to muster volunteer support for your campaigns?

Dr. Ambedkar, Shri Kamaraj and Shri EVR (Periyar) have been my role models. I am much inspired by these personalities as they all led simple lives. When one leads a simple life and works for the cause of the society, he gains the confidence of the people.

I have the support of over thousands of volunteers across 24 districts of Tamil Nadu. In 2006, I organized a padayatra along with my volunteers for a distance of 1400 kms along the coast of Kanyakumari to Chennai in order to gather information from tsunami affected people about the relief and rehabilitation that has been offered, and the support they required.

I handed over my study findings to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Following this, the government allocated 1000 crores towards construction of permanent shelters for the affected victims.

What are the programmes that you are presently engaged in?

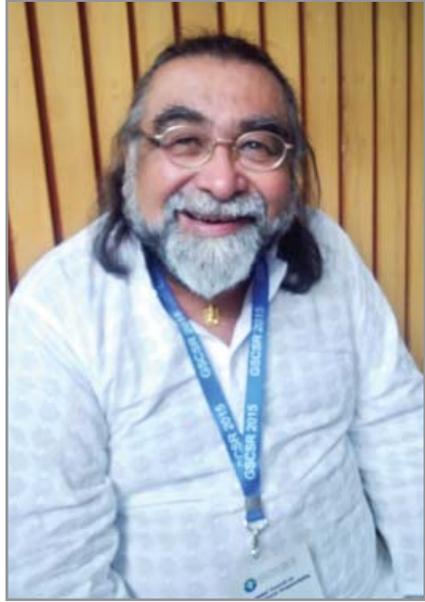
I am involved in a study on sustainable livelihood for Tribals living in Javadi hills and Sitheri hills located at Thiruvanamalai and Dharmapuri districts.

I am also lobbying with the Tamil Nadu Government to relocate 3600 Tamil Nadu coolie labourers who are now lodged in different jails in Andhra Pradesh to be relocated at prisons in Tamil Nadu.

10. Shri. Prahlad Kakkar

“CSR is the beginnings of ownership of the country.”

Prahlad Kakkar is a leading Indian ad film director. He is the founder and main director for Genesis Film Productions, one of India’s leading production houses, established in 1977. He did his initial schooling from St. Joseph’s Academy, Dehradun. In 1966, he passed out from Sainik School, Kunjpura, Karnal, and 1970, he graduated with Economics (Honors) from Fergusson College, Pune.



Prahlad Kakkar joined advertising in 1971, as an Accounts Executive at ASP (Delhi) and after a year, he was transferred to the company’s Bombay office. In 1972, he joined the renowned feature director, Shyam Benegal, as an Asst. Director for films such as Ankur, Manthan, and Bhumika.

He is renowned for his candid and outspoken nature. An avid scuba diver, in 1995 he set up ‘Lacadives’, a scuba-diving school, along with his wife Mitali Kakkar at Kadmat Island, in collaboration with the Govt. of Lakshadweep.

Prahlad Kakkar is the co-founder of ReefWatch Marine Conservation,[9] set up in 1994, which aims at creating marine-life awareness. Prahlad Kakkar supports and plays an important role as the Chief Advisor & Trustee of Natura Outdoor Education Trust.

In an exclusive interview, Prahlad Kakkar shares with Marie Banu his thoughts on CSR and how it will lead to social change.

How can CSR lead to social change?

CSR is to awaken within you; your conscience of belonging to not just your state, caste, or family, but to your country as a whole. Because of the vast country, there are many issues and problems. You need to take a certain degree of responsibility.

I realised this when Jack Daniels decided to make me their ambassador. Within a month, they sent me a certificate of ownership for one square meter plot of land in their distillery. They took a photograph of it, put my name on it, and sent it to me. I thought that they were crazy as one cannot even build a toilet in that space. But, to keep that ownership alive and the association with Jack Daniels continuing I used to get a letter every month either from a neighbor or someone else stating: “Our cattle are crossing your plot. Hope you don’t mind.” You start taking the ownership seriously as you wonder whether you should put a fence on that piece of land, else a gate. No one is going to claim that piece of land though, but this kind of approach gives a person something to own the brand. You have been included in their family!

CSR is the beginnings of ownership of the country. So, be part of a movement of a future, of the people, and take that responsibility, however small it might be. Don’t give that money with resentment and take it out of your mantle. Be proud that you have been given an opportunity not to send that money to Switzerland, but instead put it back into your country and belong to it. It is a conscience. You are allowed to be part of a larger conscience. It is a privilege!

About CSR been made mandatory. Your thoughts?

Two percent is only a beginning and will make some kind of difference. When you start giving, you realise that there is more pleasure in giving rather than taking. If you take a project, for instance you decide to adopting a village, it is an ongoing process. You will start to realize that two percent will not suffice, but still you will not stop supporting the project.

Use CSR as an opportunity to redeem yourself. To belong, and to have a stake.

Which of the social issues are most demanding?

Don't take the whole responsibility of the country. The Prime Minister is trying to do that badly. You just take one thing at a time and do it well.

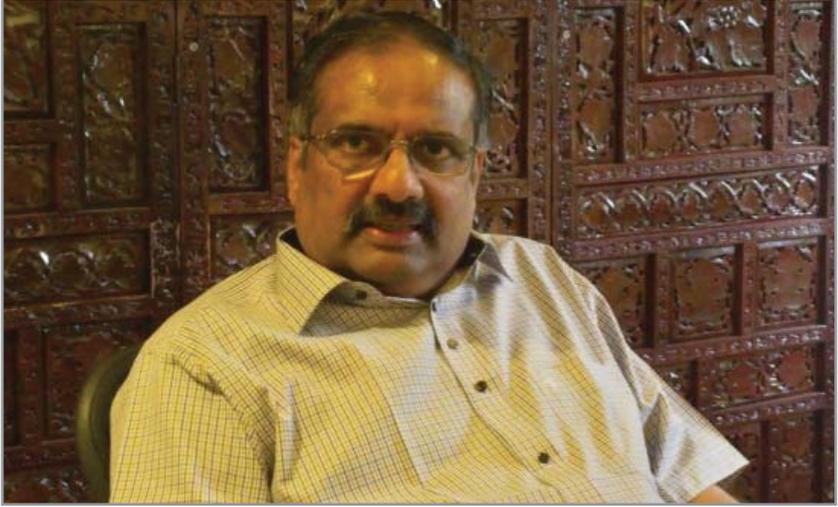
Poverty, water, recycling, rainwater harvesting, environment, heritage, women empowerment, etc.—all are equally important. See which of these issues grabs you with passion, realize what you feel strongly about, and go for it.

Will CSR add more value to employer-employee relationship?

Prior to CSR being made mandatory, many corporates were contributing to society at their own will. A lot of them were doing because people started questioning. For instance, Pepsi decided to recycle water as they were using 30,000 litres of ground water in India and so ensured to put back 100,000 litres. That became their CSR.

The spirit of the giving is to the implementation as well. Let's see how many corporates step up to the block and say: "here is the money."

What most corporates don't realize is that when employees are given the first right of refusal, to work on a project of their choice, and in fact CSR, you will be giving an opportunity in making the organization into a family. Employee-employer relationship becomes stronger as all are involved in the implementation of a social project. If it works, everyone takes credit.



11. Shri. S S. Rajsekar

“I did not know that history was in the making when my father converted the lawn into an agricultural field.”

Shri. S S. Rajsekar, the Managing Trustee of NAF, is an entrepreneur with over 30 years of experience in real estate promotion and trade. He is the son of former Union Minister C. Subramaniam and has been actively involved in the area of rural agriculture management and social and community development.

Shri. S. S. Rajsekar is a proactive Rotarian involved in several socially relevant projects in and around Tamilnadu. He has held leadership positions in many firms such as Oil & Natural Gas Company Ltd.

Mr. S S. Rajsekar was appointed the Hon. Lieutenant Governor of State of Alabama in May 2009. He is a Past President of Rotary Club of Madras East and held various offices at the district level. As a Rotarian, he helped his club organize a series of fairs, workshops and public education campaigns that were of supreme relevance to the improvement of quality of human life. He also promoted environmentally and socially sustainable development projects.

In an exclusive interview with Marie Banu and Latha Suresh, Shri S.S. Rajsekar talks about the importance of agriculture.

Your father Shri C Subramaniam was known as the real architect of the Green Revolution. What was the reason to launch National Agro Foundation?

My father felt that the first green revolution was predominantly aimed at improving the genetic potential with a concept of “Seed to Grain” whereas there was a need to address the challenges in agriculture in the context of changing global conditions. Moreover, the Indian farmers are predominantly small and marginal land holder; they face different sets of challenges and bringing them to the mainstream was the priority. Thus, National Agro Foundation was launched by my father —Shri C Subramaniam—on his 90th birthday in the year 2000 to bring about the second green revolution with special focus on small and marginal farmers. He termed this approach as “soil to market”. There was a need to address the issues of farm and farmers holistically so as to empower them and bring about rural prosperity.

NAF is involved in creating model village clusters wherein a multipronged approach of agriculture development is focused upon. It includes agriculture allied sector development, water and natural resource management, community empowerment, and training and capacity building—which we call 4E model (Education, Earning, Environment and Empowerment).

What are your thoughts about organic farming?

Organic farming is a growing science and has to be approached in its proper perspective. Organic farming, in its true sense, is readily applicable to large land holdings. But, under small farm holder conditions, it has to be a community approach wherein the farmers should adopt to conditions of organic farming collectively in order to prevent the “spill- over effect”.

Our farmers have to go a long way in adopting organic farming. However, NAF advocates “Lean Farming” wherein the excess use of agrochemicals is discouraged and the entire crop production process

is approached with a combination of organic, bio and inorganic ways which is need based. This reduces the dependency of farmers on external inputs.

Can you tell us about NAF’s training programmes?

Training to build the capacity of various stakeholders of rural development is of utmost importance for sustained benefits. NAF strongly believes in training the stakeholders like farmers, youth, women, skilled workers, bankers, agri-entrepreneurs. Its curriculum is two pronged viz., “Technology Oriented” and “Participant Oriented”. The training programs are designed in such a way that it brings about Change in Attitude (A), Builds the Skill (S) and enriches them with Knowledge (K) – “ASK”.

NAF closely works with agencies like NABARD, Government and Corporate houses in imparting farm sector skill training. The training center campus is spread over 5 acres consisting of classrooms, model farms, farm machinery workshop, residential block, and an open air theatre. Farmers from across the country as well as from Nepal, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh as well have undergone trainings at NAF.

As a boy, you had to give up playing cricket as the 5-acre land was converted to grow wheat. Can you share this memorable incident?

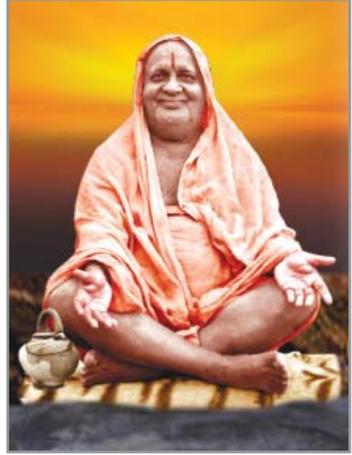
I was too young to understand as to what was happening in 1964 since I was just a 10 old boy. My father took up the challenge of solving India’s food problem when it was near a famine situation and the western world had written us off. Ship loads of wheat used to come from U.S and it was termed by my father as a “ship to mouth” existence.

In order to prove that new high yielding varieties would solve India’s food problem, he undertook demonstration plots in his own backyard in New Delhi which used to be my playground. This was converted into a farm overnight and Mexican and Indian wheat varieties were grown for comparison. I distinctly remember that my father himself used to measure the plant growth and observe for grain formation. At that stage I did not realize that history was in the making. Thus the Green Revolution transformed India’s Agriculture.

In the last 15-20 years of my father's lifetime he felt that there was a need to bring about a second green revolution and founded National Agro Foundation with a clear roadmap for us to follow. I am carrying forward his legacy and we have a long way to go.

12. Shri Sadguru Gnanananda

About five decades ago, Sadguru Gnanananda Giri Maharaj, a Himalayan sage chose a quiet spot on the northern bank of the river, South Pennar near Thirkoilur in Tamil Nadu in South India to be his Abode in 1951. Not much is known about the earlier life of the sage Gnanananda. He travelled all over India and had met many spiritual luminaries of the last two centuries. His teachings were pure Vedantha, the timeless message of the Upanishads. We share with you a few conversations he had with his disciples on a few topics.



About Gnana or wisdom

It is not possible to separate the shell, flesh and the seed of an unripe tamarind. But when it is ripe, the flesh can be easily separated from the shell and the seed from the flesh. This phenomenon underscores an essential truth in that to those who are afflicted by agnana, the body and the atma appear to be one; but when they gain true knowledge or gnana they would realize that they are not the body but the Self within and thereby live in eternal bliss.

Take a coconut. This is covered by dense coir strands and a hard shell. If you remove the coir strands and break the shell you witness a white limitless space. The enjoyment you feel in the limitless is akin to breaking a coconut. If you remove the dense coir which may be likened to Maya and intuit the Reality enclosed by the shell (the body), you will witness the Atma Swarupa (the Reality) and rejoice in it. Camphor when lighted casts a radiance all around but is itself consumed completely leaving no trace of it behind. Even so, is the nature of the mind which witnesses the effulgence spreading before it. To actualise the effulgence is gnana.

Worship

The rose is beautiful, fragrant and very soft to the touch. Everyone is fond of a rose because of the qualities it possesses. But the rose itself is surrounded by thorns. Even as one plucks the rose by carefully removing the thorns, one must learn to meet the trials and tribulations of the earthly existence with patience, and worship God with unflagging faith and conviction. One who wants to see God must be patient, loving, tender of heart, practise charity, think lofty thoughts, and cease making disparaging remarks about others.

It is only the sweetness of the sugar lump that matters and not its shape. Even so, the form in which we worship God is of no consequence but only the eternal principle of sweetness of the Lord permeating the form, which we ought to recognise. A log of wood conjures up different things to different people. To a housewife it is firewood, to a carpenter it is an article of furniture, to a sculptor a beautiful image. It is the principle of the wood that permeates the mind's eye in all these cases.

Attaining Peace within

The feeling of contentment is a very valuable possession. In keeping with a Tamil saying which conveys the idea one should feel over-joyed, by considering even the little one has, as an endowment of immense fortune, one must free oneself of all desires. It will be useful to recall continually to the mind the Tirumantiram verse which says that even if one is with God (who is the bestower of all riches), one should be without desire. By practicing right food habits, by undertaking fasts and vratas, one will be able to control desire even if it is, only for a time. These practices will not only endure to one's good physically, but also to the good of the heart; thus gradually leading one to conquer desire. In the state of desirelessness one will experience that one has transcended the feeling of Jiva-bheda, Jada-bheda and Iswara-bheda. One will then reach a stage of realization of oneness with all sentient beings, and be able to see God within oneself and in all God's creations. The sadhaka's inner vision will then open and he will reside in Shanti. Those who come in contact with such a sadhaka will also be benefitted by the peace emanating from his presence. It is the quality of Shantam that attracts like a magnet, the Divine.

Controlling your mind

Suppose I ask you to go round the temple holding a cup brimming with oil and hand the same over to me on return, and I adjure you that you will be victorious if you do not spill the oil, you will find that your thoughts are all directed to seeing that the oil does not spill. Think that the cup is your mind and the oil it holds are the thoughts. Just• as you ensure that the oil does not spill, you must see to it that your thoughts do not wander. After ensuring this you must engage yourself in dhyana, If you do this you will succeed. You must not abandon your dhyana in the middle even to attend to an important work.

A milkmaid comes along the road carrying on her head the milkpot brimming and frothing with milk. She walks with laughter in her eyes, without a care in the world and a passerby stands stupefied to see her walking along with a pot full of milk with such easy abandon and lilting gait as if she did not carry the precious burden on her head. The truth is that the milkmaid's attention is rivetted on her milk pot and she would not by any chance, let it slip. Even so, a Gnani who is immersed in Sahaja Samadhi, lives in God though outwardly he lives in the tantalising world.

Impurities

A man caught in a great flood would either like to reach the banks or swim along with the swift current. If he tries to stand still in the midst of the flood, people will think he is out of his mind. Even so, one must have a goal in life to the attainment of which one must strive. There are three impurities attaching to a man's life. These have their source in the body, world and the life principle. That which attaches to the body is 'Kama', while that which attaches to the world is 'Maya' and the third which attaches to the life principle is 'Ahankara'. One must cleanse oneself of these impurities. This is the chief merit in human life.

III. NGO PROFILE

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



1. Beginning with ‘ma’

As a nation that has many unresolved questions regarding the protection of child rights, attending to children with special needs, like autistic children, has a long way to go. Home to more than 10 million people with autism and one in every 66 children diagnosed with autism, there is certainly a need for extensive research on providing care for autistic children, who as experts say, can only be taught through their interests, which may seem trivial to any outsider.

Ms Shabina Ahmed, Founder Director and Managing Trustee of Assam Autism Foundation is a Developmental Paediatrician who has spent decades in demystifying the concept of autism for parents and medical practitioners. Drawing from her work experiences with the Indian Council for Child Welfare and World Vision, Shabina decided to focus on providing care for autistic children. With publications like ‘Understanding of Autism – first edition for physicians’, and ‘Demystifying Autism – for parents’, in English and Assamese to her credit, she has been regularly discussing autism in print and visual media.

Assam Autism Foundation was founded in 2003 as a Public Charitable Trust in Guwahati to help autistic children experience the process of learning, and then integrate them in normal schools. During her clinical practice as a paediatrician in 1996, Shabina came across a two and a half year old child who was autistic. Taken aback, she referred the child to NIMHANS in Bangalore, which she thought was the right place for such children. When the child came back to her own chamber after sometime, she was moved by the parents' perspective. "All they wanted from me was to help the child call her ma," she recalls.

For the first time, Shabina could see autism from the parents' point of view and decided to spend two to three hours of her clinical practice only for this child. As this child showed improvement, the word spread and many parents approached her seeking similar services. "This is when I realized that this mission needs long term commitment and service so that we can see the children from early learning process to adulthood. We, seven friends, came together and started this Trust," shares Shabina who was also instrumental in bringing out the 'Disaster preparedness for Disability' – first of its kind manual in pictorial form for the hearing impaired and autistic, and in braille form for the visually challenged.

As Shabina always advocated through AAF, learning process of autistic children is completely different from that of regular children. "Without the much needed help, they become school dropouts and parents bring them back to me. Autistic children appear to be themselves, directed by themselves, and in their own world. Therefore, they lack social and emotional bondage; language, communication. As a result, they do not make or have friends. As they do not initiate socialization, their play and learning process are also restricted. But, they are very interest driven," Shabina explains.

"During normal teaching such children may ignore what is told, but when we try to explain concepts through their interests, they love to engage in the process," says Shabina, adding that it is their specific interests that causes the deviance in growth patterns and hence autistic children won't be able to cope with general schooling.

While research continues to get closer to the cause for this developmental disorder, AAF attempts to provide vocational training and skill building programmes for its children so that they can function independently.

“My children are growing and they need skills to realize independence. As we have to follow a one-to-one approach, our progress in this endeavour will be dictated by how children take to these new efforts,” says Shabina. A child who likes vegetables is taught through vegetables while another who likes colors is taught through art. With such human intensive teaching process, AAF is now working with 12 children and 9 teachers.

Children who come here, whether at the age of 3 or 7, are untrained. The team headed by Shabina, who is also the Curriculum Head, ponders on where to begin and how much they can make up. As she elaborates, they are into ‘backward teaching’ – “we identify the subject of interest (for example: brinjal), then break down from the whole item, take them through drawing, coloring, labeling and then writing, which is the exact reverse of what happens in regular school.” Illustrating the need to enter the child’s world of learning, she refers to a child who completely refused to write and was very sensitive to new habits. On identifying that he loved red color, the team started using red colored objects, red sketch pens and then, he began to write. As she aptly puts it, “We have to spend quality time in learning the child and then to enter the child’s world. We cannot afford to hurry through the curriculum we have at hand. The child’s interest decides what he or she learns and also the pace of learning.” Essentially, what AAF tries to build is an atmosphere for inclusive education which calls for an inclination to reach every child, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities. Access to knowledge becomes critical in such an endeavour.

AAF has simultaneously embarked on the task of raising awareness on autism and research on how to educate autistic children. Recently, Shabina made a presentation at an International Conference in Turkey in 2014. Amidst all these efforts and key positions in many forums, awards are aplenty. Shabina is the recipient of many prestigious awards like the National Award for Child Welfare given by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2014), Community Leadership award given by DRD Assam (2013), Excellence in Social Initiatives given by Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhini Trust (2008) and Pioneer award given by the Indian Academy Paeditricians, east zone (2002).

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



2. GROWING AN IDEA

In 1991, Lakshmi Venkataraman Venkatesan, daughter of the Late President R Venkataraman set the ball rolling for the establishment of a trust. With the support of eminent industrialists JRD Tata and Rahul Bajaj, establishing the Bharatiya Yuva Shakti Trust (BYST) was a landmark that she helped achieve. Through the course of the next 24 years, BYST would go on to change the lives of India's youth. When the trust was formed in 1991, its purpose was simple: provide support to budding entrepreneurs and thereby aid in job creation. "We began by handing out a seed capital of Rs 50,000 per entrepreneur and helped his venture by way of providing him or her with able mentorship," says the head of the Tamil Nadu Circle of the Bharatiya Yuva Shakti Trust. For 16 years, BYST continued functioning through financial assistance and mentorship, with its singular goal more-or-less achieved.

In 2007, however, a turning point in BYST's journey would forever change the trust's approach towards entrepreneurship. After tying up with a number of nationalised banks, BYST soon began evolving its model. "These banks were willing to sanction loans of one lakh rupees to as much as fifty lakh rupees," says the Tamil Nadu Circle official. Incidentally, such loans were provided without demands of security or

collateral of any kind. BYST, however, still had an important role to play. It's a role that it plays even to this day: mentorship. "Our co-founder Lakshmi Venkatesan got the mentorship idea from Prince Charles," explains the official. "It has, since, been one of our favourite models of nurturing entrepreneurship." In keeping with the traditional Guru-Sishya Parampara model of mentorship, mentors often take budding entrepreneurs at BYST, under their fold. "Our mentors conduct due diligence as far the prospective candidate is concerned, his business idea, paper verification, and we help the shortlisted candidate secure a loan from the bank," explains the official. "Our mentors accompany the entrepreneur even while he is being interviewed by the bank. Once a loan is sanctioned and the money disbursed, a one-to-one mentorship model is introduced, and our prospective entrepreneur is hand-held through his entrepreneurship journey."

All mentors at BYST are volunteers. The one-on-one mentorship lasts for about 24 months. The role of a mentor is realized in areas where the entrepreneur lacks experience. "Although an entrepreneur may be technically sound, he may not know how to maintain accounts, or may not be well-versed in licensing or branding. That's where our voluntary mentors step up." Accordingly, BYST helps entrepreneurs organise trade shows in an attempt to provide market support to the entrepreneur. "But the bigger picture, the long-term plan is to create jobs," says the official. "We want job-seekers to turn into job-givers."

In the Tamil Nadu circle alone, BYST has so far launched 788 entrepreneurs (as of last year). Since its inception, the trust has launched nearly 4,500 entrepreneurs across India, while the last fiscal year alone saw 113 entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu. More than 500 entrepreneurs all India were launched in the last fiscal year alone. That year also saw the trust tie up with Assam's Entrepreneur Generation Mission (EGM) programme. "Just last year in Orissa, with the support of Tata steel, we launched a project in the State, as we did in Aurangabad with the help of Bajaj." The trust is now looking at expanding its Tamil Nadu Circle in the attempt to move beyond Chennai and Kanchipuram, where it has so far, established its presence.

However, not all who apply generally get the support they want. Since its inception, the trust has counselled more than 75,000 entrepreneurs,

while basic training has been imparted to nearly 10,000 to 15,000 entrepreneurs. “In Tamil Nadu alone, just last year, we counselled 1,400 entrepreneurs, and sent nearly 550 for training, while only 113 entrepreneurs were picked for the next stage.”

As long as it has been around, BYST has helped in a great manner. Part of its noble work includes creating success stories. The trust has also notched up some impressive employment numbers. “For every entrepreneur we train, we manage to get at least 10 people employed, with an average loan amount of Rs 5 lakh per entrepreneur.” BYST has its presence in some of India’s major cities like Chennai and Delhi. The aim now, is to get BYST all over India, while creating public awareness about the trust is also numero uno on its priority list. “Financial institutions also have no qualms supporting these entrepreneurs since our presence matters a lot. These banks trust us,” says the official. “We also have a non-performing asset of just 0.28%, which means that all our entrepreneurs are immediate success stories.”

One of the more interesting initiatives that the trust has launched is the ‘green box’. “A number of prospective entrepreneurs go to banks for assistance. Bankers don’t normally have the time for such business ideas. We managed to set up a green box at most of our partner banks,” says the official. “Whenever a prospective entrepreneur would visit a bank branch for financial support, he would be redirected to the green box, where he would drop in his contact details. We at BYST then get back to him and help him work out his financial requirements.” The goal now, BYST says is to reach one lakh entrepreneurs in the next five years. “That means, we also plan on having created 10 lakh jobs by 2020. That’s a target that we are keen on meeting. It will be a perfect conclusion to the years of work.



3. A Hand to Hold

Hand in Hand India is an NGO that aims at creating entrepreneurship through empowerment in order to alleviate poverty in the integrated communities. When it began its mission back in 2002, Hand in Hand's singular focus was to eliminate child labour. It incidentally started work in Tamil Nadu's Kanchipuram district, helping the district's children rewrite their stories — change narratives from those of industrial experiences to ones that they could call their own. With this singular focus, the NGO has today, branched out into several different verticals. "As we began our work, we also began to realize that poverty was the root cause of every problem we were contending with," says Dr Kalpana Sankar, Chairperson and Managing Trustee, Hand in Hand India, "Hence, the focus continues to lie in eliminating poverty. Poverty alleviation is quite simply at the core of our work." However, child labour continues to be part and parcel of Hand in Hand's list of "non-negotiables". Over a period of time, issues like self-help, microfinance, skill-development, health and environment have come to become an integral part of the work it does. From humble beginnings in just one district back till 2004, the NGO today has a presence in seven States and six countries outside India. "But there's work to be done," Dr Kalpana

admits, “The fact still remains that 65% of women are anaemic and 55% of children in India are malnourished. That needs to change.”

The management of Hand in Hand is divided into three verticals: Key Executives, Project Management and Trustees. Dr N Jayaseelan, Group CEO, heads the organization, with Dr Kalpana Sankar and Dr. Percy Barnevic who are Chairperson and Advisor, respectively. The NGO’s Project Management team is responsible for initiatives like solid waste management, village improvement and natural resource management. By her own admission, HIH India’s solid waste management programme is close to Dr Kalpana’s heart. “Sensitizing those we teach about the environment is also a priority,” she says, elaborating on the NGO’s five-pillar approach to poverty alleviation. “Education and Child Labour Elimination, Health,

Self-help Groups and Microfinance, Skill-training and Tech Centres and Environment are these five pillars,” Dr Kalpana continues, “Under the pillar of Environment, society at large needs to learn a fair bit about solid waste management. We help achieve that.”

Since its inception, Hand in Hand has helped form over 77,000 self-help groups, over one lakh self-help members, 38,236 microenterprises and just over 82,000 micro-beneficiaries. A chunk of this success owes its existence to the NGO’s unique Credit Plus programme. Utilizing social capital of self-help groups as collateral, the NGO has raised microfinance. Over the course of its work in these areas, the NGO has also scripted many a success story.

At the core of HIH India’s existence, is a commitment to sensitizing people through IT. “We manage to achieve that through our team of 3000,” says Dr Kalpana. Finding the right people for the job, though, continues to remain the challenge. Taking that challenge head-on is something HIH India actively engages in while training social entrepreneurs. “Here again, we look for passionate people and help them get their business models in place.”

Integrating some of its key work areas like skill-development, health, natural resources, solid-waste management and village improvement, Hand in Hand has been recognised for its contribution to society. The NGO won the Best NGO Award just last year for its contribution to promoting self-help, at the Inclusive Finance Summit. But its achievements don't end just there. Hand in Hand has also helped construct over 10,000 toilets, has helped over 489,000 patients through health camps, and fed over 7,000 children, nurturing them towards better health from malnutrition. Part of this process involved renovating Anganwadis at an average cost of Rs25,000 per centre. "We aimed to make these centres more child-friendly and thereby create a perfect environment for mother and child," says Dr Kalpana.

Perhaps one of the ways in which Hand in Hand stays a cut above other NGOs in the same space, is its contribution to preservation of natural resources. Adopting a conserve-develop-create model, the NGO has successfully managed to create jobs and encourage livelihood through conserving the environment. In doing this, Hand in Hand has planted over 538,000 trees, and generated close to 85,000 man days. The future looks set for the NGO, which now plans on a two-pronged approach encompassing job-creation and fighting poverty. As part of this mission, Hand in Hand hopes to create five million jobs by 2020. Another key programme that the NGO is currently engaged with is the process of training students at the university level. Students of science, finance, development studies, business, arts and medicine have applied for internships at Hand in Hand, even as the NGO continues to impart training to applicants. Volunteerism is also something the NGO is quite keen on encouraging at the basic level. Donations, however, play a crucial role in the functioning of such organizations, Hand in Hand included. Donations are accepted in the denominations of Rs 1,000 upto Rs 10,000.

With what it calls a "devoted" team of over 3000, Hand in Hand will now focus on the future. The future, it seems, lies in employment and the NGO's two-pronged approach to empowerment (through job-creation and poverty eradication). Even as it goes ahead with this plan,

child labour and women's empowerment remain key focus areas of the NGO. This, alongside other focus areas such as skill-development, natural resource management and solid-waste management, look all set to take Hand in Hand to the next level, even as the NGO looks forward to continuing its success story. "The aim is to create five million jobs by 2020," says Dr Kalpana as she signs off, "While this is a collective goal that we plan on achieving with our partners, we feel we can directly create over 3.5 million jobs in the same period."



4. Reviving Development

Everything in nature is inter-related, one complementing the other. In the absence of a complete understanding of the ecosystem, all developmental endeavours have complicated the cause-effect relationship between man and nature, thereby affecting every part of the eco system at different levels. Our own communities stand testimony to this. Consequently, any diagnosis of a social problem may not allow us to see an isolated cause easily.

Given such a premise, Help Foundation embarked on the task of course correction at each level by creating a platform that allowed like-minded and interested individuals to act appropriately. Founded by three friends in 2011, in Kollam district of Kerala, Help Foundation has put in place effective systems that can address the present crisis, and at the same time pave way for better planning in the coming days.

With an experience of 19 years in the telecom industry and abundant exposure to life in the developed countries like US and Europe, Mr Peter Pradeep, Co-Founder and Chairman of Help Foundation, had been

reflecting on the costs human kind pays for development. “I wanted to give back to the society, but acquaintances in the religious institutions disappointed me. Unreasonable restrictions limited the scope of work that could be done through them. That is when I decided to move on and start my own institution, with a value system that respected transparency, environment, and human rights on the same plane,” recalls Peter, who is well aware of the demographics of the district.

Peter values the significance of sustaining good work, which could be daunting without an organised set up. “How do you sustain your work without an organisation? No mobile application works without a platform like android or windows. Similarly, there must be a platform wherein all social organisations and socially inclined minds can come together to see the fruition of an idea that can impact many lives. That is what Help Foundation does,” he explains.

Peter’s knowledge of the region’s geography, the resultant lifestyle, and the consequences of development added to his passion for environment and the need to bring in local players to protect vulnerable ecosystems.

“Kerala is a land locked state. All wetlands and backwaters are polluted. The ecosystem that supported our water needs were shattered in our hurry to develop. No water recharging happened despite heavy rains and all catchments and forests will soon be gone completely. River is perennial; lake is shallow; and estuaries are blocked. Food security is in peril!,” warns Peter.

For example, Paravur lake in Kollam district, was about to die. Peter studied the lake and wrote a paper. Believing in the lowest arm of governance – Panchayat institutions, he decided to approach them. Accepting his paper, the Panchayats also agreed to work under his guidance. Thus was born one of the domains of work at Help Foundation – Empowering the Elected Representatives.

With all wetlands and water flow disturbed, scope for agriculture in Kerala reduced drastically. “Food was bought from other states, including milk. As paddy fields and water systems were affected, we had to depend on food from outside. Milk that was transported from Maharashtra were brought in inefficient containers and the long term

usage of this adulterated milk has caused kidney failures among the consumers. In some of villages it was shocking to note around 70 percent prevalence,” elaborates Peter, who networked through six hospitals in the district to facilitate dialysis procedures.

Help Foundation has supported around 1000 dialyses so far, through funds mobilised from friends and family members. Under Health domain, alongside the dialysis project, the foundation also runs the Santhwanam – a community based integrated family health care programme where members can avail emergency ambulance services, home medical service for those who need care after discharge from hospitals—all of these supported by a call centre.

The other domains of work for Health Foundation include food security, women empowerment, environment and child health. Mayyanad and Mukhathalla Panchayats have been capacitated to become child friendly Panchayats, creating space for availing all government schemes like establishment of home for girl children, etc. Beginning with a membership drive, a local project integration council have been set up with stake holders from the community who will take the responsibility to revive water bodies like the Paravur Lake and Ithikkara River. Bringing local government department officials, NGOs, community members and panchayats together in this endeavour has been a very successful and promising strategy that can sustain the work in the long run.

“I strongly believe in the ecological approach. All systems are intricate and interrelated. We cannot think of improving one at the cost of the other. Which is why it is essential to keep eco systems intact. If one water body dies, families around it are affected. No more cultivation can happen. Food security is in danger and the community’s health suffers. Aquatic life is endangered, leading to a swirl of other consequences,” says Peter who also undertook litigations against paddy land conversion and promoted jack fruit and paddy cultivation through Help Foundation. Strongly backed by his two other friends (Co-founders), Peter dreams of seeing Help Foundation become a pioneer in wetland conservation and strengthening the existing architecture within the organisation so that it can sustain its work and impact in the long run.

Having managed all these activities through personal resources, Peter is now more confident of sustaining the work as he has sought support of the Ministry of Environment and Forests as well as the World Wild Foundation.

“I am not worried about finances. The office runs in my ancestral home. It is a small team and the bulk of expenditure is incurred in travelling and project costs. We can manage it,” he smiles and signs off.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



5. Messages from Puppets

We are a generation where folk media does not seem relevant in our day-to-day lives. Yet, we would not mind sitting for a show if it talks about something relevant. Activists and other patrons who work to preserve these old art forms often mention that folk media can communicate with a crowd much better than the modern forms of entertainment. This is what Mr Kalaivanan, Founder of Kalai Trust in Chennai believes in.

Born to a lyricist, Muthukoothan, Kalaivanan has always had more exposure to arts than his counterparts. While other kids used to play during holidays, Kalaivanan got hooked into puppetry and wrote his own plays. “In fact summer holidays was my favourite time of the year. I used to invite kids from neighbourhood and stage shows at my home, charging 10 paise per ticket. It was all for sheer fun,” recalls Kalaivanan who has now completed 40 years in spreading the utility of folk art forms, more specifically, glove puppetry.

During one of those days, Kalaivanan’s father chanced upon his play and informed him that there was no voice modulation for different characters. This is when he started experimenting on mimicking the

voices of legendary actors like P.S.Balaiya and Suruli Rajan. He soon fell in love with this art form as it allowed him to grow as an all rounder.

The multi tasking that was required and the kind of coordination he had to keep with his team members engaged him completely. With this excitement, he also experimented different story lines with the help of his father, who always assisted him with the scripts and dialogues. This fun-filled activity soon became an identity for Kalaivanan.

“The person who used to sell snacks near my house came across an advertisement by CARE India in the paper which he used to wrap snacks. He shared this paper with me which informed about CARE India’s work to promote awareness on health and nutrition in slums. The advertisement had invited applicants who can do puppetry shows in slums on this theme. I immediately applied for the programme,” says Kalaivanan.

Even before he could realise the gravity of this task, representatives from CARE India came over to his place to discuss the details. “They were amused to see that I was only 14 years old then. The lady who came from CARE was actually searching for Kalaivanan Sir,” he smiles.

Kalaivanan visited CARE India’s office along with his father, where he was briefed about the project and what was expected of them through puppetry shows. This led to the father-son duo preparing scripts, puppets, and other aids to stage shows on health awareness in urban slums of Chennai. So far, Kalaivanan has staged 108 programmes for CARE India, and over 6000 shows across India.

Name a theme or topic and he has done a show on it! Whether it is women’s rights, child labour, child rights, disaster management, environment, AIDS, health, organic farming, human rights, life skills education or any other.

The Government of Tamil Nadu nominated Kalaivanan to Bihar on a cultural exchange programme where he performed shows on health awareness. Doordarshan Television telecasted 205 shows until 2005 and he recently completed 40 episodes on moral values for children on Vasanth Television.

Completely involved in glove puppetry, Kalaivanan established Kalai Trust in 1992 to use glove puppetry along with other art forms like the villupattu to educate the public on several issues concerning their day to day lives. This journey, he believes, educated him as a member of a community.

“I have completed only class 12. Studies never interested me. But, puppetry educated me. When someone approaches my Trust to organise a show, they just tell the theme which is no more than a phrase. The amount of reading about the theme and the information that we collect about our audience gives much more knowledge and exposure than what a school curriculum could do. This is the reason why I am determined to spread the use of folk media,” asserts Kalaivanan.

After his father’s demise in 2005, Kalaivanan forayed into script and dialogue writing. Today, he is the only person in Tamil Nadu who can organise glove puppetry shows with a complete team of 7 members. But, this does not make him proud or happy. He is anxious and apprehensive, for there is much more to be done to spread the knowledge of these art forms to the next generation.

“Our kids must be taught to express collective consciousness, and folk media is the best way to do it as it reaches audience easily. Glove puppetry is the easiest of all and will be more fun for children,” he says. Through Kalai Trust, Kalaivanan has offered training programmes to four colleges, 100 NGOs and also school teachers. More than 150 school teachers have been trained in using glove puppetry to develop learning aids and conduct classes.

“Use of such media keeps children attentive and makes them think on how all this is done. Provoking curiosity and being able to express oneself is the first step to successful education. No matter how much technology grows, kids will continue to like folk media. In my experience, I have seen children easily open up to puppets than teachers,” says Kalaivanan who does not feel threatened by modern means of communication and entertainment.

Along with his father, Kalai Trust organised only three training programmes for school teachers. The focus then was on conducting

shows. Now, the Trust intends to spend more time in organising such training programmes. Recently, the Childline (1098) officials approached the Trust to train their staff in glove puppetry. Trainees can either use it to conduct a puppet show or just use the aids to teach children. Over the years, NGOs working with children, and those running education centres find this method very useful.

Impact, according to Kalaivanan, is a very subjective term. “I have seen the impact even before I would leave the venues. Once, we organised a show for Hand in Hand NGO in Kancheepuram. The show tried to educate the government school girls on the importance of using toilets. That very evening, one of the girls went home and locked herself in her room, forcing her father to construct a toilet in her home. The father had to finally heed to his daughter. The next day, he went to school and enquired the reason behind his daughter’s behaviour. The school Head Master shared this incident with me. This is what an artist dies to see,” says Kalaivanan.

Having been in this field for over 40 years, the only challenge according to Kalaivanan is collecting updated, relevant, authentic information on themes that are given. “This is the challenge and this is what excites us,” he smiles.

With every show being an improvisation over the previous one in terms of context, dialogues, screenplay, lighting, stage usage, etc., Kalaivanan and team believes that they still have a long way to go in learning the nuances of this art and promoting its utility to the younger generation.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*

6. A 200-YEAR-OLD LEGACY OF HOPE

In Chennai, heritage walks often take place along the Northern parts of the city, and why not? Most of the city’s rich culture and glorious history can often be found carved into North Chennai’s walls. From the harbour and Fort St George, to the famed Madras High Court or Higginbotham’s bookstore, it’s the Indo-Saracenic architecture of the region that usually becomes the true champion of its back-story. It’s no wonder then that the city’s first charitable organisation should lie in the same geographical vicinity. In fact, it’s a rather well-known fact that Monegar Choultry near Chennai’s Stanley Medical College and Hospital, where it where it first started back in 1781.



Newspapers and historians testify that it all began during a severe famine in erstwhile Madras, one that lasted for three years, up to 1784. The years preceding the famine were ones of war between the British and the Nawabs of Mysore. The ensuing political instability led to the famine. But in the midst of the commotion and trouble, a choultry was started by a village headman (or a Maniakarar; and hence the name Monegar) who would serve a humble meal of Kanji to people who came to seek refuge from the scourge of famine. Over time, the choultry became shelter for the aged, who came to live out the twilight of their lives under its shelter. When the Stanley Medical College was established in 1799, the choultry moved locations but still remained in the vicinity. It shifted to the choultry of Raja Venkatagiri, nearby.

Two centuries have ensured that Monegar Choultry is well and truly the oldest charitable establishment in Chennai. Such was its significance

even back in the day, that during the war with Hyder Ali in 1782, establishments surrounding the choultry were ordered to be destroyed, while the choultry itself, was spared of the order. As word of its significance and work spread far and wide, the Nawab of Arcot came forward with a sizeable donation. From its early years, till date, some things have never changed about the choultry itself. Like its wooden columns and towering arches, reflective of the architecture of the 18th century: designs that stand the test of time, a reminder of its past. Even today, one look at the place is a reminder of Chennai's colonial past.

Back in the days, the choultry served those people who were abandoned by their families. The aged were taken in, treated, provided with palliative care if needed, and their needs were taken care of until they breathed their last. In most cases, the choultry even oversaw their final rites. From its humble beginnings, the choultry has today, come a long way. The number of its inmates has increased, its operations have assumed more competence, and donations have also flown in. Food and clothes make the majority of donations that the choultry receives. Today, a steady stream of supplies has also made it to the choultry. From newspapers and magazines, to television sets for each block, the choultry has done rather well for itself. A number of the inmates pray at a temple nearby, and those who run the choultry have begun celebrating festivals with its inmates. The objective, it seems, is to create an environment of family and belonging for those living within the choultry's walls. The home is also well-staffed with a cook to provide meals for its inhabitants — breakfast, lunch, dinner, tea and snacks. The women help in the kitchen, and the men at the choultry help out with the gardening.

The choultry's oldest hand, Bhavani, lives just across the road. For 33 years, Bhavani has tended to the needs of the choultry's inmates and is quite literally a shout away. Over the three decades that she's been around, the choultry has witnessed winds of change: from the arrangement of the beds and blocks, to the food that it serves, 33 years have seen it come a long way.

“There are many old age homes in Chennai. But, the reason people prefer to live here is because they get new clothes and their own plates. I was a geriatric assistant when I joined Monegar. I was trained by Red Cross and also studied typewriting,” says Bhavani.

The administration of Monegar Choultry falls on the shoulders of the Collector of Madras even till date. “There are 55 people living here now. We only enrol people who are orphaned, over 65 years of age, and are certified by the government health officer. We ensure that the inmates are capable of taking care of themselves as it is a challenge to source caretakers.”

The only rule that the choultry operates on, is simply the fact that on demise of its inmates, the mortal remains of the latter need to be sent to the Stanley Medical College to serve academic purposes. “I get full satisfaction working here and I want to end my life living here,” she signs off.



7. Organically Yours

Jaganathan Rajendran and Saravanan Santhanam studied together. But even before they met, their fathers were friends. And if there was one attribute that was perhaps a tad thicker than their friendship, it was their zeal to develop a social edge to their lives and work. Which is why ever since the duo graduated in the mid-1990s, they went about doing their bit for society, educating the inhabitants of a tiny rural hamlet called Pakkam located in Thiruvallur District. Part of their efforts included starting a weekend computer centre for the youth of the village. “But around the year 1999, Jagan happened to chance upon a family who had gone to bed one evening with no money to feed themselves,” recalls Saravanan, Co-founder, Nallasanthai Producer company, “On further enquiry, he realized it was because they were into agriculture, and business wasn’t good.” In many ways, that incident allowed Jagan — who would go on to co-found Nallasanthai Producer company with Saravanan — the kind of an impact agriculture made, to people of this village.

Neither of the two had a background in agriculture. But all it took was a simple survey to discover that nearly 60% of costs involved in agriculture went towards procurement and application of fertilizer,

insecticides and pesticide. “The big question was: how do we get around this,” says Saravanan, going back to what went into founding Farm to Consumer Private Limited (F2C) that the two of them run today. The answer was quite simple: organic farming.

While Nallasanthai Producer Company focused upon farmer networking and organic produce, Farm to Consumer Private Limited (F2C) was launched to market organic produce. “Nallakeerai” was the brand that was promoted through these companies.

One look at nallakeerai.com shows you how far Jagan and Saravanan have progressed in successfully marketing organic farming to the end-consumer. The website is, in fact, an extension of a process that began in the early 2000s. “Once we decided that organic farming was the way forward, we had to decide what kind of methodology we were going to adopt to get the farmer to adopt an organic approach to agriculture,” says Saravanan. “The first question we had to ask ourselves was: what kind of crops would be the most suitable for organic farming? We learned that leafy greens were the most suitable for organic farming given the kind of patronage that the crop enjoyed among consumers.” Thus began a series of research activity into the types of greens that farmers could produce. “We came up with nearly 45 varieties of the crop that would make good business sense,” says Saravanan.

Beyond this noble attempt to rehabilitate agriculture, there lay a far nobler reason to promote organic farming — public awareness about the dangers of pesticide and fertilizer. “Punjab bears the dubious distinction of having the most number of cancer cases in India. In Tamil Nadu, it’s Erode with the most number of cancer cases,” points out Saravanan, adding: “It’s the same State and district that also sees a great deal of agricultural activity in the country.” No doubt, the parallels between agricultural practices and the onset of cancer couldn’t be ignored. That led to the duo to actively promote organic farming in the minds of the public. “There has to be a holistic approach,” insists Saravanan, “Cultivating organic greens is a great way to start. But we need organic millets too. Organic farming and consumption of organic products needs to become part of our common lifestyle.” And that is exactly what nallakeerai.com sets out to achieve.

The last two years have seen the nallakeerai.com achieve great success locally, as it has grabbed the world of online retail by the horns. The business model is quite simple: Saravanan and Jagan encourage farmers to cultivate organic produce and go the extra mile in processing the crop. “We do this so as to eliminate, to an extent, the need for middle-men in selling these crops,” explains Saravanan. In keeping with this plan, the duo has helped farmers with the necessary machinery to process their crops, after which, the company purchases the processed produce from the farmer. “If the farmer makes, let’s say, 14 rupees for raw agricultural produce, he makes 24 rupees after he processes the crop himself thereby not losing out on that extra money to a middleman,” he explains, “So that means more money in the hands of the farmer and lesser middle-men involved in selling agricultural produce to the consumer.”

After F2C buys the processed produce from the farmer, the company sells the crops on nallakeerai.com pretty much like Flipkart and Amazon sell books, accessories and electronics. Keeping the sale of agricultural produce limited to a producer, retailer and consumer helps in restoring the organic nature of the produce itself. “After a great deal of research that we funded ourselves, we began selling on our website a couple of years ago,” says Saravanan. F2C hopes to tap nearly 1,000 customers across 20 locations in Chennai alone this year, even as it hopes to break even by the end of 2015. In doing that, the company could successfully manage to raise better awareness about eating organic, while restoring some sense of economic stability to farmers: a two-pronged approach to successful organic farming and consumption.



8. In perspective

Establishment of Trusts, Societies and Social Enterprises have given a structure to seeing one’s social intentions get manifested. But, the foundations laid by personal experiences and the resultant vision enable putting these intentions in perspective, creating space for the following actions or interventions to be more relevant and necessary. Ms Kumari Thanigachalam’s journey from her childhood to establishment of NEST – National Educational and Social Service Trust, in Arakonam, Vellore District, Tamil Nadu, is just the perfect instance in this context.

Kumari lost her parents early in life and was brought up by her grandmother. She had to discontinue studies beyond class 9, but kept herself associated with a number of small initiatives in her town near Arakonam. Her social skills soon gave her an opportunity to work as a Coordinator with a funding agency there. Unfortunately, Kumari was disappointed to learn the umpteen number of obstacles that restrained her from doing what she wanted to do for the needy families that were approaching the agency for assistance. “Hailing from a poor family, the way I conceived and associated with a situation in the field was completely different from the protocols that the agency had adopted,” recalls Kumari.

Kumari started her career with a salary of 500 rupees. Her passion for social work helped her delineate between what was being done and what was supposedly the best option available for the programme beneficiaries. “Women used to come to the centre for counselling services, legal assistance, etc. There were situations where they had to go to a police station, which I encouraged and also supported. I also had to get some women into Homes to ensure their safety and better standard of life,” shares Kumari.

Kumari had always insisted that interventions must be open to accommodating people’s real needs. “This marks the significant impact on a small scale. Overlooking real needs just because they do not fit into the realm of an organisation’s planned interventions is a serious threat,” says Kumari, who launched her own organisation to work according to what she thought was more appropriate for the families and communities that required assistance.

Kumari had always prioritised working for elderly and destitute women, especially those who could not afford caring for themselves. As the thoughts on NEST were taking roots, she also worked on focussing on these issues through specific actions. “I had known what women from poor families needed. I never approved of getting money in return for any services that my organisation would provide. Being an insider, I was also better positioned to analyse my options clearly,” she explains.

Beginning its journey in 2009, NEST currently works on three areas—women empowerment by promoting economic activities like tailoring, embroidery, painting and making of paper cups, assistance for marriages, scholarships for out of school children, and school drop outs. As a trainer of SHGs for almost a decade, Kumari was able to pool in women through these programmes and help them set up their own small scale enterprises. Recently, a group of women succeeded in starting a tiffin centre that also managed snacks making and packaging. Interestingly, Kumari has not raised any funds for the activities of NEST. She tries to connect women to the schemes under the Social Welfare Board and makes sure that a wide range of people like carpenters, painters, plumbers, etc., get to know and avail benefits under schemes designed exclusively for them.

NEST is also being prepared to focus on environmental education in schools at Arakonam. Alongside, NEST is streamlining its contact base to promote awareness on bonded labour and sensitise people from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities to raise voice against bonded labour. Focus on these two fronts came up as NEST began to realise the next level of needs among the people. “A sustained rapport with the people in the community has helped us decide our focus areas and the appropriate interventions that we can initiate,” asserts Kumari.

Given a job that cannot be constrained to eight hour timings as in conventional jobs, Kumari attributes her accomplishment to her family who have always understood, appreciated and prioritised her engagement in the field as and when required. Her trainees are now leaders of Panchayats, heads of federations in gram panchayats and also cluster coordinators of SHGs. Today, she is not only a role model for the women she has trained, but also to her own children.

Being the face of NEST, she is now actively doing her ground work for the future—establishment of a home for the aged and a crèche, both of which can have a significant impact on the lives of uncared senior citizens and women aspiring for economic independence. Guided by a clear perspective in mind, NEST desires for a long and eventful journey, addressing people’s real needs, one at a time.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



9. Education For All

Stories of social entrepreneurs are not new. Neither are such stories rare today. There are however only a few social entrepreneurs who can derive true inspiration for the path they choose. Sasikumar Thangamuthu is one of them, and educating the underprivileged was a path that he was truly inspired to take while he was still in college. In fact, when he was an undergrad student at the PSNA College of Engineering and Technology back in 2009, Sasikumar developed a spirit for volunteerism. As a member of his college's Rotaract club (he would later go on to become Vice-President), Sasikumar realized that he was quite passionate about volunteerism. That was also why when he graduated the same year, he decided that he would mould his career also in the same path. In many ways, that led to the formation of Our Home, an NGO that he runs today which focusses primarily on education for all. "We often witness how most orphanages don't quite have the right wherewithal to educate their wards, while in schools it's quite the opposite," says Sasikumar, "When I began Our Home, our primary aim was to address that situation. Our aim still remains 'education for all'." As he explains, the name 'Our Home' itself remains symbolic of the kind of care and belonging that the NGO wished to inspire in those children it would go on to teach and educate.

In fact, when Sasikumar began the NGO back in 2009, he did it all by himself. “I approached a few fellow-members of the Rotaract club, who promised to provide adequate support,” he says, recalling his journey to founding the NGO. In the last six years, the NGO has more than established itself as a key player in providing proper educational support to children across orphanages in Chennai and Dindigul. “We’ve tied up with close to eight orphanages in Chennai and three in Dindigul,” says Sasikumar. He continues: “In the last few years we’ve managed to mobilize a great deal of activity in educating the children we’ve come into contact with.” Our Home’s focus was broadly, on two types of children who were in need of education: visually challenged children and autistic children. A great degree of the NGO’s success owed itself to special teams of volunteers that were set up to handle each of these groups. “We have separate teams of volunteers who handle children with different educational needs. Our volunteers are well-equipped to handle these cases, and have done a great job in their limited time here,” recounts Sasikumar.

The last six years have also seen Our Home’s success move beyond merely educating children in orphanages. During this period, volunteers at the NGO have also done their bit in successfully encouraging a spirit of volunteerism among colleges. “Due credit for that has to go our initiative ‘Why Should I Care’, which has aimed to get students in colleges to go out and volunteer,” says Sasikumar. As part of the initiative, volunteers at Our Home visit colleges and orient students about the importance of lending a helping hand to society, on the education front. “In fact, our members successfully completed one of these sessions at Kodaikanal Christian College, and the students they helped orient have even managed to begin educating the tribal population in the surrounding forests,” he says. It was this initiative, which won Our Home, the Best Outstanding Project award instituted by Cognizant. During this period, the NGO also successfully adopted a village near Mahabalipuram, introducing them to education and creating the right kind of exposure for its inhabitants.

While the story of how a college graduate began doing his bit for society is in itself an inspiration, Sasikumar says that going about setting up his NGO was a bit of a challenge. “I did not quite know how

to go about doing what I wanted to do in terms of starting the NGO,” he says, recounting his formative days. “But we’ve managed to meet most expectations in the last six years. In fact, we formally registered ourselves in 2012.” He continues: “We’ve also received the right kind of help in many ways. One of our well-wishers, Dr John, who runs a clinic for specially-abled children, provided a great deal of help when we approached him on means to educate children with special abilities.” In fact, by his own admission, education of special children is one of the more challenging areas of the NGO’s activities. “Autistic children need special care and attention. You can’t treat them like other children and you have got to be a little watchful about the kind of contact you make with them.”

Going the extra mile, the NGO has also launched yet another initiative, MOVE which stands for ‘Make One Volunteer Everywhere’. “It’s a pre-placement programme, where outgoing students of a college are oriented about the importance of volunteerism, and are thus encouraged to volunteer and join social-service activities at their workplace. That way, we can help spread the importance of volunteerism beyond the college campus and into the workplace.”

As far as the future goes, Sasikumar has his priorities clear. “Our aim is to teach students to read, write and speak at least in one language,” he says, elaborating on the road ahead, for Our Home. That apart, the broader objective, he explains, is to fully educate every child the NGO takes under its fold. Hopefully, the quest to educate and teach India’s lesser-fortunate might have some light at the end of the tunnel with initiatives like Sasikumar’s slowly but surely growing in strength and numbers.

10. Lighting the Urban Slums

One fourth of the Indian population is said to be lacking access to electricity. Provision of electricity can be a daunting task and challenges multiply if one has to electrify rural and urban slums. Pollinate Energy, a social business enterprise that was initiated in Bangalore has used a unique model to electrify urban slums through solar lamps.

Initiated by a group of six friends in Australia, Pollinate Energy aims to promote access to sustainable energy solutions to communities that have been ridden with ‘energy poverty’.

One of the founders, did her research on ‘Access to Energy in Low Income Communities in India’. Further examination of stake holders in Bangalore and the processes involved in this front helped her realise that urban slum communities were growing huge and could hardly access any form of energy, especially electricity. As these communities were not recognised by the local authorities, and also lacked access to micro finance, or ration cards their energy needs was therefore never a priority for the local authorities. Pollinate Energy is now operating as a social enterprise for three years in Bangalore, and has reached self-sustainability. “We can now plan for our expansion,” quips Mr Pascal Meline, City Co-founder of Pollinate Energy in Hyderabad. Selling solar lighting systems through their ‘pollinators’ has proven to be a very successful model, allowing them to build on this strength. “That is precisely the advantage of a social enterprise. We can reach more urban communities by adapting the model,” says Pascal.



Pollinate Energy aims to make lives better by helping people access sustainable products. Children who were not able to study in the evenings are now able to spend longer hours on study and families are able to spend more time on their vocation. “Mothers no longer have to cut short their work timings to be able to cook when there is sun light. Accessing electricity has changed their lives for the better”, asserts Pascal. Hyderabad has been the first city where Pollinate Energy chose to expand, after Bangalore. Hyderabad’s success will allow Pollinate Energy to validate an expansion model that can drive growth, only in the interest of self-sustainability.

Pascal started as a volunteer in Hyderabad to set up Pollinate Energy operations in the city. Pollinate Energy runs the Young Professionals Programme every two months to invite ten international volunteers and five Indian fellows to join in their efforts in setting up operations in a new city.

“We have just arrived in Hyderabad. Our main strength is the manpower our volunteers provide. They undergo simultaneous workshops that allow them to see the opportunities in the development sector. In the field of sustainable energy, the number of households and communities that lack access to energy presents a huge business opportunity,” explains Pascal. Volunteers are trained and engaged in identifying potential communities that can benefit from this initiative. They map communities based on their energy needs and present access to let the group decide if they can begin operations in that community.

Once the clientele communities are identified, Pollinate Energy’s team establishes a network of local stakeholders who are then trained to become local staff. Once the local team is completely prepared to take over operations and maintenance, the volunteer programme is annulled and they move to set up base in another city to focus on addressing the issue of energy poverty there. “We are hoping and optimistic to see Hyderabad become self-sustainable in October 2015,” says Pascal. Interestingly, volunteers are also required to raise funds in the city where

they work. Every international volunteer raises \$2500 to \$3500 during the year. Pollinate Energy was initially supported by funds raised by the founders.

Solar lights from Greenlight Planet is the product that is now being promoted. This model has been very successful in Africa and Asia, and has been adapted to suit the tough living conditions in India's urban poor communities. Pollinate Energy has plans to diversify, looking at the options of introducing water filters and efficient cook stoves that can ease the energy burden of communities who have traditionally depended on non-renewable resources. "We also have plans to introduce menstruation cups for women, but that would also require educating women and communities, which is a bigger challenge," he says.

Pollinate Energy's strength lies in its distribution model that is survived by members from the local communities. Representatives from the communities who have high school level qualification are trained to become micro entrepreneurs. Along with the training they are also provided with a 'business bag' that comprises of transport allowances, guidelines on how to maintain relationship with community members, provide on time services for product maintenance, and introduce and sell the product. These micro entrepreneurs are rightly called the 'pollinators' as they are the point of contact between Pollinate Energy and the communities—and presenting the services at their doorstep.

"The pollinators are also provided a smart phone with a preloaded application that allows pollinators to track payment made by the clients. The payment for the products purchased are recovered from the clients in the form of weekly instalments (maximum 5 weeks) and the funds are deposited by the pollinators in a common bank account," elaborates Pascal, who also opines that only this can make sustainable energy accessible to low income communities.

Pollinators' engagement in the field and their levels of service builds trust in the communities, which ultimately leads to the enterprise's success. As Pascal puts it, "This is what NGOs lack as they cannot

pool in manpower at this scale. This is the strength of a social business enterprise that engages local communities in its process of expansion.”

With a mission to provide access to sustainable energy to urban slums by creating a cadre of micro entrepreneurs from and within the communities, Pollinate Energy follows the strategy of investing its profits in research and expansion in order to be able to reach out to more communities who are in need of a stable source of energy.

Long way to go, but with a promising model!

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



11. Bringing people closer to environment

Environmental studies is a subject that has garnered so much attention in the last four decades, thanks to the discovery of disturbing trends like the global warming, depletion of ozone layer, extinction of species, loss of biodiversity, etc. The hard truth is that every such isolated event is connected to a larger picture that scares the very existence of mother earth. Every individual needs to therefore play a role to reverse these effects to the possible limits. Alongside, we should also know that people must be aware of all these phenomena and relate them to their everyday lives, so that they can find ways of mitigating these effects at their own levels.

In Tamil Nadu, the efforts to educate the general public on environment and its pertinent literature, recognised the need to develop the subject’s vocabulary in the local language, Tamil. Thanks to Poovulagin Nanbargal meaning Friends of Environment, a large section of the society has now been educated on environment through simple literature.

Poovulagin Nanbargal was established 30 years ago by a group of friends —Nedunjelijan, a bank employee turned environmental activist;

and Purushothaman. Since then, the organisation evolved every decade, becoming more active and articulate.

In the first decade, a lot of time was spent in introducing the vocabulary and books related to the subject were translated, published and circulated among the public. International research on environmental studies was simultaneously made available in Tamil and the readership kept growing.

“We introduced Tamil literature on global warming 25 years ago. Discussion of the subject and its current developments in different gatherings and events became a regular aspect of our work,” says Devaneyan, presently a member of the core group.

The organisation’s ideology is that environmental action needs to be politicised for critical thinking be inculcated. “We want to influence people to question why their village has no water or electricity; why it is drought ridden while other villages in similar demographics has surplus production of crops. Globalisation, industrialisation and the corporate culture has spelled doom to so many villages, who now pay the price for comforts like electricity and water supply in the cities,” he laments.

The second decade saw outreach programmes to spread this kind of awareness and interest in the discourse. In the third decade, members came together to revive the organisation so that the impact of their work was sustainable. “We want people from all classes to learn the effects of environmental changes and categorically see how their lifestyle has contributed to it. Writing in magazines, newspapers, speaking at public events and participating in debates/declamations became more regular and organised. Our team had members from varied backgrounds, and therefore it was possible for us to strengthen every effort,” he says.

Poovulagin Nanbargal is therefore a collective action group that has no specific hierarchy. Members at Poovulagin Nanbargal are allowed to contribute in their own ways. Some write books and articles for popular magazines like the Ananda Vikatan while some lawyer members help fight law suits. The group also has members from the software industry who manage the website and email communication. “We are all not environmental activists. We are teachers, doctors, government

employees, bankers, engineers, journalists, lawyers, writers, film makers, etc who have come together for the sake of our environment. Interestingly, none of us are paid for our work. We all spend our time and strengths and sustain ourselves from revenue raised from the sale of our books, subscription costs, donations and fundraising events like the millet festival. We also receive support from the our awareness programme participants. As a policy, we do not accept contributions from corporates, nor do we approach them,” says Devaneyan categorically.

Poovulagin Nanbargal introduced an exclusive magazine on environment for children, called ‘Minmini’, the first of its kind. Soon, they also introduced a similar magazine for adults, titled ‘Poovulagu’. Real life stories that children and adults can relate to has helped create a healthy discourse on the subject. As the reach widened, the group began to move out to schools and colleges and conducted awareness workshops and seminars. With the increasing subscription of the magazines, the group was able to make new inroads in reaching out to new communities.

Poovulagin Nanbargal has led active campaigns against the introduction Bt Brinjal, Bt Cotton. “We have 45 varieties of brinjals, all local, healthy, unpolluted, tasty varieties. Why do we need Bt Brinjal at all?,” he asks.

The ground work done by Poovulagin Nanbargal group in Thanjavur and Thiruvarur on the ‘methane project’ has raised wide awareness and farmers are now questioning the rationale behind this project, that is likely to wipe off so many acres of fertile agricultural land. Kudankulam atomic power plant, according to Poovulagin Nanbargal does not have all the safety measures installed. “Atomic energy is expensive and highly unsafe. We have other alternate sources of energy. The same investment could be used to strengthen efforts towards solar energy, tidal energy, wind energy, hydro power and others. There is no macro perspective while deciding on these matters. Such issues disturbs us,” he says.

Devaneyan feels that investment in creating more power is not the only solution. In fact, it is only one part of the story. It is time that we also concentrated on other issues in the chain like the problems in distribution, losses due to transmission and others. There is technology

available to improve these fronts, and the government has to show inclination to try out these low cost solutions too.

Poovulagin Nanbargal have been fighting cases against sand mining, GM food, Elephant Corridor project and others at the High Court and Supreme Courts. Devaneyan is so disturbed about the lack of environmental friendly policies and guidelines that must decide the approval of any project, be it construction of a dam or a highway.

Poovulagin Nanbargal dreams of seeing an environmental friendly policy in place that proves the country's ability to choose what is suitable and sustainable for us, acknowledging our sovereignty in protecting our environment and biodiversity. To anybody who knows these friends, it has become their dream too!

— *Shanmuga Priya. T*



12. The Colours of Regenboog

The recent finding that 85 percent of our population does not have any kind of support to meet their medical expenditure is not much of a surprise. This could be due to increased privatisation of health services and the resultant increasing costs of health care that pushes many families below poverty line. Planners and social scientists rightly call this ‘catastrophic health expenditure’. With more than 50 percent of the population depending on private health care services, increasing costs force households to dig into their savings to access good quality health care. Worse is the case of families who do not possess any such back up that can come in handy during need. Mr Madhan Mohan, Founder of Regenboog India Foundation in Thiruvannamalai, knows this better.

Soon after his graduation in Physics, Madhan Mohan worked with a charity organisation in Thiruvannamalai, a town situated 185 km from Chennai. Disheartened with misappropriate utilisation of resources and planning of programmes, he left to gain experience in the corporate sector in the Finance and Administration units. Chennai and Bangalore, as metro cities, exposed Madhan Mohan to multiple possibilities within

and outside the corporate sector. As someone still figuring out his path, he took over Arunachala Village School Trust, a school for the poor children in Thiruvannamalai, initiated by a therapist from Switzerland. “As a young President of this organisation, all that mattered and also guided me was my father’s words – happiness comes from making others happy,” recalls Madhan Mohan.

Alongside all these developments in his life, his father’s health worsened as they could not access the necessary treatment. “There was no proper medical care available here. We were not able to help my father in anyway and, we lost him in 1998,” says Madhan Mohan who soon resolved to build a hospital in this town that would offer medical care for poor people. Thus, Regenboog India Foundation was founded in 2006. “Naming an organisation is as crucial as establishing it. In a town like ours, everything started with Lord Shiva’s name ‘Arunachala’. I wanted to give a name that aroused curiosity and made people listen to our thoughts. While we zeroed in on ‘rainbow’ we realised that there were many organisations with this name. So chose to use the Dutch word for rainbows. This was how our organisation got its name,” smiles Madhan Mohan.

In order to help people in remote areas access quality health care, Regenboog India Foundation started a mobile clinic that currently serves over 38,000 patients every year. ‘This mobile clinic visits remote rural villages five days a week (Monday to Friday) and is manned by a professionally qualified and well-experienced team that consists of a doctor, two nurses, a pharmacist, a lab technician and a driver cum social worker. The team examines the patients and offers treatments and medicines at the doorstep of villagers, free of cost.

The mobile clinic does not stop only with treatment, but also offers health education and counseling. The team raises awareness on various issues such as diabetes, hypertension, vitamin deficiencies, arthritis, and various kinds of air and waterborne diseases’. With consistent efforts to improve the reach of services, Regenboog has built its capacity to reach double the number of patients this year. When you see your initiative growing and creating a positive impact in many lives, you naturally begin to dream bigger. I also did. I felt the need to do much more in order to ensure some kind of support services to the poor people of

Thiruvannamalai,” says Madhan Mohan who wants to focus on the issue of abandoned girl children next.

With many children getting abandoned and those with single parents having to miss their childhood to add to the family’s earnings, there were many children, especially girls, who require extra care and protection to re-live their childhood. Moved by the plight of these girls, Regenboog India Foundation started ‘Sarasvathi Children’s Home’ to provide education along with life skills and extra-curricular activities. The girls are also taught yoga here. Completely solar powered and fed by an organic garden, the home serves as a landmark to the Vedyappanur village. Children are allowed to participate in planning, budgeting, admission of new girl children and also assist in resolving issues within the campus. This makes them realise their right to participation and become able decision makers.

As the work with children in this home progressed, Regenboog team observed many slum kids being out of school. “Parents in the slums hardly had time to introspect on the significance of education for their children. With inevitable apprehensions of economic pursuit, their children are left vulnerable to anti-social practices like child labour and child marriage. It was therefore crucial to start learning centres for such children that guaranteed education for all and left no room for school drop-outs,” recounts Madhan Mohan.

Evening schools engaged children after school hours, and during exams classes were conducted before school hours. “When teachers ask children how their day was, children have a whole lot of stories to narrate. They are happy when they are heard!” says Madhan Mohan.

While evening schools support over 550 children, Regenboog also became conscious of the distractions for children and decided to inculcate the habit of reading amongst rural children. The Mobile Library Project was initiated in 2010 to distribute books to children on a fortnightly basis. “This is a very cost effective initiative. We began with just a motorbike and few hundred books. We had to increase our capacity to keep up with the growing enthusiasm of the children,” says Madhan Mohan. Regenboog purchased an ACE vehicle in 2013 and equipped this mobile library with a power supply unit, adequate lighting

and storage spaces to display more than 3,000 books. The library will soon reach a subscription of 12,000 readers.

From a mobile medical clinic, Regenboog has morphed to provide what the poor needed. As cost effective initiatives, the programmes have been able to reach a wider audience and sustain the impact created. Still observant of the community's needs, Regenboog has many more colours to reveal!

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



13. Ostracisation on the basis of gender and sexuality?

Sometimes one feels that the word minority is used most often with reference to religion and caste in India. Due to this perception, many groups who actually fit the definition of ‘minority’, and that deserve special care & protection are left out. Transgenders and gay men are high on this list. Their vulnerability and stigma in society has not even allowed them to assert their identity upfront. This proves to be a significant obstacle to their health, psychosocial well-being, and to their obtaining legal protections in society.

To address these challenges, Sahodaran was established as a Community Based Organisation (CBO) working for MSM (Men having Sex with Men) since 1998. Ms Jaya, Sahodaran’s General Manager, begins by first explaining the difference between an NGO and a Community Based Organisation. “In an NGO, anybody can work for the beneficiary group while in the latter, the beneficiary group is equipped with capacities to facilitate their own development. They become the decision makers and actual actors in the field.”

Founded by a renowned LGBT activist - Mr Sunil Menon, based on the findings of a study led by him in 1992, Sahodaran is the first and largest Community Based Organization (CBO) run by and for the MSM community in South India. Given the challenging life they are forced to live, MSM often lack the self-respect and confidence to pursue their personal interests. "When sexual orientation is what defines you, the actual person is hardly ever seen. His or her capacities, talents and other strengths do not come to light. People are not willing to even associate themselves with us. We are ostracised," laments Jaya who is disappointed by the Supreme Court's decision to uphold IPC 377, a colonial-era law criminalizing all sex other penile-vaginal intercourse.

At its core, Sahodaran addresses the sexual and psychosocial health of the MSM community, offering a complete package of HIV/AIDS prevention and care services. Through their network of outreach workers and counselors, Sahodaran educates MSM about safer sex, condom use, HIV/AIDS prevention, and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), as well as counseling to help people address the larger family, workplace and legal crises in their lives. Jaya asserts immediately that HIV does not spread because of gay men. "It is a myth." Rather, because of isolation, shame and stigma, MSM community members struggle to assert their own needs for healthcare. "They think they are ridiculed because they are not normal. They take it upon themselves. And continuous abuse traumatises them, leaving them with very low self-esteem," says Jaya. Sahodaran's outreach programmes intend to bring about a behavioural change in the MSM so that they can lead normal healthy lives in their own ways. Jaya herself has benefitted from Sahodaran's programmes. "I understood the importance of regular testing for STI/STDs. It was explained that STIs increased the chances of acquiring HIV/AIDS by more than 10 times. Awareness has changed my life completely. And that is what I try to do other community members through Sahodaran," she adds.

In addition to empowering community members through sexual health services, counseling, and income generation, Sahodaran helps form supportive spaces for MSM, both within and outside the community. One of the key services provided by Sahodaran is the vibrant Drop-In Centre, intended to provide space for the community members to meet

and socialise on a regular basis without any fear of being ridiculed, harassed or beaten up. Developing a vibrant Drop-In Centre was an exercise in trust building, as it required the community members to openly admit their identities. Papers, books, novels, video entertainment, indoor games and other provisions are made available for the members to collectively engage with one another and find psychosocial support. As Sahodaran's network grew, they recognized the growing need for skill training to ensure basic livelihood options. Sahodaran runs various income generation training programmes in candle making, calendar making, pottery, tailoring, mobile pouches, etc. for community members to make and sell their products.

Counselling services are indispensable for this community. "When we refer to gay men, we must understand that there are two types. First, there are normal men who are interested in other men. Second, there are men that begin to realise feminine characteristics in themselves. They are the ones who are more likely to become transgenders. Families do not realise the extent of impact the hormonal changes can have on these persons. Sometimes, these men are forced to marry women. Transition from homosexual to heterosexual life is not easy for us. Unable to handle this pressure, many also attempt suicide," explains Jaya, who herself was a beneficiary of Sahodaran's programmes in the '90s.

Sahodaran provides holistic support for its beneficiaries, recognizing that sexual health is only one aspect of people's lives. Community members are vulnerable to continual harassment by families, police, and the general public. Because of punitive laws like Section 377 it is difficult for them to access the legal and medical support they need. Sahodaran fills this gap by operating a crisis helpline, where a variety of crises are handled within 24 hours. In the case of health-related crises, Sahodaran outreach workers follow up also with the concerned members' partners, so that infections are diagnosed and treated at the earliest.

Jaya and her team realize that these crisis interventions, critical as they are, are immediate fixes. Their long-term goal is to create a world where atrocities against sexual minorities are eliminated, and where such crises do not occur in the first place. To do its part towards forging this social change, Sahodaran conducts outreach and advocacy programmes

to educate the larger public on LGBT rights. ‘Public’, in their sense, includes a long chain of stakeholders ranging from doctors, paramedics and paralegal workers, to teachers and students, to land brokers refusing to give houses on rent for MSM. In addition, Sahodaran advocates through television and print media, promoting positive coverage of the community, “Without such advocacy our crisis intervention efforts are meaningless,” she adds. A doctor’s stigma could prevent a gay man from accessing health care,” she warns. To promote the visibility of the community, and enable members to showcase their talents, Sahodaran organises annual beauty pageants through which participants have received opportunities in the film industry and fashion shows.

Sahodaran’s successful track record is demonstrated by its long list of awards and honors. Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society (TNSACS) honored Sahodaran in 2010 by awarding them a new project in North Chennai: Sahodaran Unit II. “We always get an A+ grade from TNSACS,” says Jaya proudly. “Recognizing our success in Central and South Chennai, TNSACS exhorted us to empower and mobilize MSM and TGs in impoverished areas of North Chennai. We were also asked to conduct counselors orientation and experience sharing for other NGOs implementing interventions for MSM.” Recently, in 2014, Sahodaran was awarded the “Best Grassroots Level Award” from the Family Planning Association of India. They received a Solidarity award from the South India AIDS Action Programme for our work with the “Pehchan” project for MSM in 2011. They received National AIDS Control Organization’s Red Ribbon Express Cultural Troupe Award in 2010 for our dance and theatre-based advocacy. And in 2006, they were recipients of “Best Civil Society Award” from UNAIDS in 2006. And this is only a small selection from the awards they have received!

Community ownership, Jaya says, is the backbone and foundation of Sahodaran’s success. “The mark of a successful CBO is that it is able to create a non-judgmental atmosphere for community members. Since the Sahodaran Drop-In Centre is peopled and led entirely by MSM, we offer just such a space. If it was headed by a non-community member, the dynamic would be different.” Many MSM that began their careers at Sahodaran have become leaders in their own right, founding and running CBOs of their own. The vision and guidance provided by Sahodaran’s

Founder-Director and Board has also been crucial. However, she continues, there is still a long way to go. The re-criminalization of non-heterosexual relationships by the Supreme Court in 2013 was a huge setback for the community. “Thanks to the continuing hostile social and legal climate, only few of us have the confidence to openly admit our identity. There are very few self-identifying gay men such as our Founder Director. Following the 2013 judgment, even the few people active on social media have gone into hiding.”

Sahodaran’s team is now looking for new opportunities to continue connecting community members to broader sets of options by reaching out to the public. Readers interested to know more about Sahodaran can visit www.sahodaran.org .

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*



14. Serving Happiness

Happiness is the key to success in life. True! Every individual's notion or source of happiness could be different, yet the energy and impact happiness can have on whatever one does is magical. More than creating a positive environment for one to act, happiness drives one through the journey of establishing inner hope.

Globalisation and liberalization did have their own fall outs. 'Job' became critical to economic development and families disintegrated. The homogenous aspiration to move up the social ladder coupled with many other factors like lack of development of traditional livelihoods forced a large part of the population to look at cities as their respite. Thus, the cycle of poverty became vicious.

As the macro systems play out on the lives of our people, what is heartening are the efforts by some to make others' lives relatively easier and independent. This is the story of a Computer Engineer who graduated from IIIT, Bangalore and has worked with companies in Europe, Bangalore and also some start up companies.

Mr Nitin Kumar Kirtibhai Tailor, CEO and Founder of Serve Happiness Foundation, could not realize the happiness quotient in spite of

the material progress that he was part of. “Inner satisfaction brings happiness. That’s what Abdul Kalam taught us and I firmly believe in this,” shares Nitin who gave up his job and returned to his hometown, Bharuch, to work towards the health and educational needs of local communities through the HMP Foundation.

Embarking on a journey to inspire youth to contribute for the national development, Nitin established Serve Happiness Foundation in Bharuch. “Social anomalies need pragmatic solutions at the micro level. They have to be sustainable and scalable for replication. While there are many to suggest, there are very few who dare to go down that road. Serve Happiness Foundation wishes to be the platform for those crusaders,” he explains.

Connecting youth is the trend that Nitin wanted to emulate, but by creating opportunities that facilitated self-realization and triggered the entrepreneurs in them. Through his initiative, youth were able to venture into the communities, spend time with the people and work with them, thereby putting their skill sets to productive use.

Drawing inspiration from Jagruti Yatra and Yuva Purna Yatra, Nitin initiated the Narmada Purna Yatra in 2013. A four day bus journey in the Bharuch-Narmada region, the programme intended to expose the youth, who were selected through an application based process, to rural challenges and potential opportunities to create sustainable social enterprises. Facilitators and Mentors engaged in this programme added value to the experience by allowing the youth interact with change makers. “It was a tough task to select 20 participants from over 100 applications from seven states,” exclaims Nitin, who felt that such field interactions from the yatra must be supported by entrepreneurship programmes as it will further strengthen the competency of the youth to progress with this vision.

August 2015 saw the third edition of Narmada Purna Yatra and Serve Happiness Foundation is definitely more than happy with the enthusiasm shown by the youth across the country. “Three of our yatris have started their own projects. One of them is working on a model for developing mobile blood donation banks,” says Nitin.

This happiness was still not complete. Serve Happiness Foundation wanted to reach out to more rural youth who can be brought under urban mentors. Thus evolved ‘Gramin Yuva Yatra’ that was launched in the presence of late Shri APJ Abdul Kalam. Collaboration with the Centre for Entrepreneurship Development, Government of Gujarat helped the youth gain knowledge on dairy technology, agriculture, food processing and other areas which brought in development of the communities along with creating new livelihood opportunities.

Nitin, pleased with the foundation’s work and it’s reception, is not very keen to develop this into a business model. “We are happy. Fee from the yatra participants and the earnings from workshops allow us to indulge in our intentions satisfactorily. What more do we need to look for?,” smiles Nitin who has received many awards like the Entrepreneur of the year from IIT Bangalore and winner at the Startup Weekend, NASSCOM, organized by IIM Ahmedabad. Serve Happiness Foundation’s resounding success in a short span also got Nitin an invite to be a part of the World Happiness Consortium organized by United Nations in March 2014.

There are now plans to launch the Tapi Purna Yatra in Surat city. While details are being worked out, Nitin also engages in designing and conducting social entrepreneurship programmes. He was invited to be the speaker at the Agripreneurship Development Programme organized by CED in September 2015. Alongside, the foundation has also revived the traditional sujani looms through exhibitions in Gujarat and Delhi. There are also regular awareness programmes organized for rural youth in partnership with institutions like SEWA Rural, Jhagadia Bharuch, CED and others.

New initiatives, new inroads to promote entrepreneurship and thus new found happiness among the passionate youth and the needy communities. Let’s wish them success and more happiness!

— *Shanmuga Priya . T*



15. ‘Listening To Someone Is Respecting Them’

Counselling has, for several years, been the ideal approach to ensuring mental wellbeing. But here in India, it remains a social stigma. Eliminating this stigma is one of the aims of Hyderabad-based NGO, Seva, which has engaged in effective and in-depth counselling services for the last 21 years. With 40 counsellors and 3 centres, the NGO has spearheaded the cause of mental well-being through counselling. “A World Health Organisation report has fully endorsed the possibility of suicide being preventable. In a sense, that’s what we at Seva work towards... a reinstatement of self-worth,” explains Thiagarajan Arunachalam, Director, Seva. With a background in IT, but zeal to truly make a difference, Thiagarajan has played a key role in Seva’s counselling services. “We’ve counselled nearly 400 people in the last six months alone,” he says, “And that’s only including those who’ve opted to approach us for counselling sessions.”

At Seva, free counselling sessions are carried out in the pursuit of better mental health. “The most common problem that people come to us with is low self-esteem and feelings of no worth. We aim to eliminate that,” Thiagarajan explains. Adopting its novel AAA rule (AAA is

the acronym for Seva's working principle of Ask, Assist, Approach), Seva has successfully managed to do its bit in helping society cope with several issues that require professional, effective counselling. "Help beings only when you ask for it. Assistance is then an invaluable component in helping the person who's in need of it; that's what we do here at Seva," says Thiagarajan. "Approach, however, is a key area in ensuring that help is at hand. "We can help you only when we're approached," he adds. Through its endeavours in counselling itself, Seva has adopted a more human touch to its methodology. "We don't refer to the people who approach us as clients, we call them callers," says Thiagarajan. "One of the main aspects of counselling that society has to understand is simply the fact that counselling itself isn't advice. The main purpose of engaging in counselling is to listen rather than speak." He elaborates on how the key component of good counselling lies in a caller-centric approach. "The person is more important than the problem," he says, "A number of the people who approach us, are filled with emotion. Our aim is to get that emotion out."

On an average, a caller is counselled for close three or four sessions. Sometimes, counselling could go on for about 10 sessions. But the most important rule that Seva's counsellors follow religiously, is confidentiality. "It's one of the most imperative rules that we all follow without any compromise," Thiagarajan explains. "We also take care to maintain and sustain that confidentiality. Even after counselling ends, and I happen to see a caller at a supermarket, I pretend to not know the person. That's something that's critical to good counselling." Of course, in the course of the counselling itself, Seva's counsellors also learn to fine-tune techniques in the attempt to stay effective and result-oriented.

Seva's work moves beyond merely organising counselling sessions on a regular basis. One of the highlights of its work is Seva Mela where the NGO attempts to reach out to other organisations and assist in tackling issues on a broader level. Seva also organises life-skill training modules in the pursuit of life-skill empowerment. This of course, is in addition to also introducing innovative counselling techniques as part of its bigger mission. "One of our more successful introductory techniques is the attachment-based family therapy, which has been worked on by psychologist Pravin Israel," says Thiagarajan. The technique, he

explains, involves counselling the entire family when attempting to intervene in the life of a youngster who is in need of counselling.

“A great deal of credit for Seva’s success has to go to the founder, Sharada Gopalakrishnan,” says Thiagarajan, “Most of us learnt some basic lessons from her.” In fact, one of the more important lessons for everyone to take home, Thiagarajan says, is the importance of listening. “That’s something most of us forget,” he explains, “When you hear a discussion or an argument, the one thing that you always hear is someone who keeps exclaiming ‘listen to me!’. That’s something we need to pay attention to: the fact that all people want, is to be listened to. So, it’s about time we stop merely hearing someone, but listening to them. Just listening to someone is the best way to respect them.”

The importance of counselling almost goes understated today, although the imperative need to have good counselling services is for all to see. “We all have a mind that keeps bothering us from time to time,” says Thiagarajan. It is this importance that has prompted the need to expand. It is this need for expansion that has Thiagarajan aiming to open more Seva centres in the near and distant future. “It is my dream that we have several more centres with many more volunteers,” he says, “Before I retire, I am to open at least a hundred more centres.” Thiagarajan also says that focussing on conducting more seminars and conference is also an extension of this need to strive towards better mental wellbeing. In the long run, there is little doubt that a sensitive, sensible and confidential towards helping people live could well be the future of stigma-free counselling. Seva, one might think, is well and truly on the right track.



16. Awareness Overhaul

For the larger part of the last two decades, awareness about several deadly diseases and illnesses has gained significant momentum. Among these are killer diseases such as diabetes, cancer, AIDS and heart disease. But when Dr Georgi Abraham established the Tamilnadu Kidney Research Foundation in 1993, he decided to take on a killer disease that hadn't yet made a name among the more fatal ones. Abbreviated to read 'TANKER', the NGO's mission lay in detecting and preventing kidney disease in order to achieve its mission of good healthcare and medical facilities. In the course of its near 22-year-long existence, the NGO has established dialysis centres in Ambattur, Kilpauk (which later combined to streamline the NGO's Chennai operations), Coimbatore and Madurai. "The foundation remains as a means to get around the lack of proper awareness on non-communicable diseases," says Rajalakshmi Ravi, who currently heads the Prevention and Awareness wing of TANKER Foundation. "For the longest time, there has been so much focus on communicable diseases like malaria that awareness on non-communicable diseases hasn't quite been met with the same zeal. When TANKER was formed in 1993, we hoped we could change that."

According to Rajalakshmi, the main challenge that India continues to contend with is the lack of proper primary healthcare when it comes to tackling disease like H1N1, pre-natal care and night-blindness. And that is also why the focus on non-communicable diseases like kidney disease and heart ailments is has come into being, only recently. “There are two ways we can look at tackling these illnesses,” she explains. “The first of course, is to work towards treating it, and thereby cater to those who suffer from it. But the second and more important step is to work towards their prevention.” She explains how several people — the elite and educated included — aren’t aware of kidney disease and what it is all about.

With the aim to correct the worrying trend, TANKER has so far taken an aggressive stance in fighting kidney disease. With nearly 224 patients currently undergoing treatment in its units, the NGO has so far conducted 157,179 free, and subsidized dialysis for over 850 patients. When it began in the 1990s, the NGO also actively looked at one-time contributions to help patients in need, pay for expensive treatment. “Even today, the average medical fee per transplant at a government hospital is close to 25,000 to 30,000 rupees,” Rajalakshmi explains, “The procedure like transplants or dialysis per-se is free of cost, but the cost incurred for the disposables in these hospitals, is quite high. We do our best to help patients in need, foot this bill.” A patient who receives help usually falls below the income category of Rs 10,000 per month.

Over time, one of the key approaches the NGO has taken towards spreading better awareness when it comes to kidney disease, lies in educating school children. “I believe that if we spread awareness among a hundred children, we are in effect, reaching out to 200 adults,” says Rajalakshmi, “That is exactly why we feel the need to spread awareness to not just high-end or corporate schools, but also take the message of awareness of kidney disease to children in corporation schools as well.” With a total of 397 awareness programmes conducted exclusively for students, TANKER foundation’s data claims to have reached out to just fewer than 83,000 youngsters. This of course, is complemented by a similar awareness drive for adults, which has benefited more than 22,700 people by way of 266 projects.

“Personally, the reason why I’ve managed to take such a keen interest in the cause is because somebody close to me was afflicted by kidney disease,” Rajalakshmi explains. “Since the year 2001, I’ve been a part of TANKER Foundation.” By her own admission, she did not understand much about terms like ‘dialysis’ and ‘transplant’ back then: “Dr Georgi sat down and patiently explained what this was all about. Ever since then, I understood the need to spread the same learning that I imbibed to society, which was even more in need of it.”

Out of the 1697 dialysis procedures the TANKER Foundation conducts a month, 1,528 are free of cost. The NGO is funded purely by donations and up until 2013, has provided financial help for over 1,588 patients to the tune of just under one crore rupees. Going into the future, Rajalakshmi believes that more awareness on kidney disease has to be worked on, to battle the disease itself. “People must be aware that the two major causes of kidney disease is high diabetes and high blood pressure,” she explains, “Just knowledge of that and appropriate changes to lifestyle can go a long way in helping fight the disease.”



17. Strengthening social capital

Successful growth of a nation is a direct function of its capacity to create jobs for its populace. Unfortunately, this relationship has inbuilt layers that often hinder the achievement. Given a country like ours, inequality in the quality of education, access to opportunities or alternative livelihood options, affordability, and access to information have always ensured that not all those who go to school or attend extra-curricular programmes are skilled enough to deal with the growing demands of job market.

More worrisome is the state of differently abled who are not even recognised as valuable social capital for the nation. This perception is slowly changing and evolving, with the understanding of market needs, rationalisation of the capabilities of persons with disability and significantly, emphasis on rights based approach in the government and NGO spheres.

Ms Meera Shenoy was chosen by the Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh, to set up the very first employment mission of the country. “There was no National Rural Livelihood Mission then. Employment Generation and Marketing Mission (EGMM) was developed as a model that designed skilled practices to suit the market needs in order to ensure placement for the skilled persons,” says Meera, who headed the mission for six years.

Under EGMM, she introduced– English Work Readiness and Computer Academy that taught rural and tribal youth English, computer and soft skills. Complemented by an IT architecture that maintained records of all trained persons and demands in the job market, the model led to the launch of 200 centres within six years. “The model was so successful that anyone who was working on a pilot or a skill based initiative would come to Andhra Pradesh to study our model,” shares Meera.

Meera soon left this mission to establish ‘Youth4Jobs’, along with four of her friends who were also her colleagues at EGMM. Determined not to repeat the work of the mission and address other challenges in strengthening social capital of the nation, Meera saw a huge opportunity in providing skills to differently abled youth. “The country needs to see its alternative labour pool. They are all human resources, definitely not any less. In fact, youth with disabilities living in rural and tribal areas are much more vulnerable,” she insists. On one hand there are NGOs who work towards providing skill to youth despite its poor infrastructural facilities; and on the other hand there are government agencies that trains youth in large numbers and are not concerned or involved in placing the trained youth in jobs. With no emphasis on placements, it always happened that the training programmes lost its relevance and soon began to see dropouts, disinterest among the youth. Meera became very much aware of this challenge, and thus began focussing on differently abled youth from rural areas.

Youth4Jobs started with rural youth who had locomotive disabilities and then began to focus on those who had speech or hearing impairment. “Work was much more difficult than earlier. The mindset of companies and end users of services was too hard to face. People were ignorant of inherent talents in youth with disabilities. Some companies even questioned about their ability to work in an organised set up,” recounts Meera, who engaged in several advocacy efforts along with her team. Recognising the need to make all companies understand the abilities of differently abled persons, Youth4Jobs started the Interactive Company Sensitisation Programme for officers from different cadres. More focus were on those who were involved in placing these youngsters and supervising them at work. Youth4Jobs also studied many types of industries in order to have a thorough understanding of where these

youth could be placed. “We had to be very clear of all possibilities to be able to convince stake holders during advocacy.”

We can observe that youth with hearing problems are often engaged in cleaning jobs through housekeeping agencies. Youth4Jobs strived to bring them to frontline jobs in the organised sector. Retail, IT, media and animation, hospitality, finance, tourism, telecom, healthcare, textiles and manufacturing are some of the sectors where the youth were trained and placed.

Youth4Jobs was very categorical about the objective to place all trainees in the organised sector so that they get to interact with the wider society. With more space for interaction, it was hoped that the larger society will also get sensitised about the capabilities of differently abled people. In a span of four years, Youth4Jobs has trained 6,100 youth and about 70 percent of the trainees have already been placed in the organised sector. With 18 centres across nine states, Youth4Jobs is evolving as a social enterprise. Structured programmes for parents, companies, community members and also government staff have helped create the atmosphere that promoted employment for the differently abled in the organised sector. In order to widen the impact amongst the trainees, and also to reinforce their confidence, Youth4Jobs established the country’s first ever Centre for Persons with disability Livelihoods (CPDL) in Andhra Pradesh that encourages successful trainees to identify and motivate other youth in the villages to join training programmes.

All these achievements led Meera to share her experience at the TEDx Berkeley in 2015. Youth4Jobs’ success has been recognised by awards like Bihar Innovation Forum II award in skill training category, NCPEDP-Shell Helen Keller Award 2011 for increasing employment opportunities for the disabled and Fetzer Foundation USA award for ‘Business and Community’ in 2012-2013 amongst others.

As a result of the efforts, Youth4Jobs deserves credit for having brought 100 companies on board to employ persons with disabilities for the first time. And the gender parity in this feat, is that around 40 percent of those trained and placed are girls.

— *Shanmuga Priya.T*

IV. POSITIVE ENERGY

Ms. Bhuvaneshwari Ravi is trainer, facilitator and coach of the Positive Energy (PE) program. She is a spiritual seeker with a vision of transforming her own energy state from surviving to being.

In this journey she has gathered deep insights and is continuously working towards creating a pathway for more seekers. With years of exposure to spiritual practices like yoga, reiki, and personal development interventions like coaching, she is working in the Organization Development and Leadership Development space.



1. Holding the Space

“If you think of holding space as being in the center of the wheel, it’s being in the center and holding the energy of what’s both inside the bounds and outside; it’s magnetic – you draw in what’s most coherent to the intention.” Margo Adair

In the last two weeks I have repeatedly experienced the power of “holding the space”. This happened in an hour of silence in an ‘Awakin Circle’ and later in a workshop on Non-violent Communication.

The energy of silence and the energy of empathy moved me beyond bounds. I could see how non-judgmental, unconditional love and being present to the moment produces a harmonious and refined energy field. In such an energy field the heart opens to all emotions—be it love, pain, anxiousness, peace and so on.

I also remembered another learning I had several years ago—‘the dance of insight’—the ‘aha moment’ where a new learning and a realization sets-in in the space that one holds in a coaching engagement.

In the book “The Intuitive Body” the author Wendy Palmer refers to the feminine energy having the attribute of holding the space. It is the capacity to be, without doing---we accept life exactly how it is. The feminine energy has an element of spaciousness in which there is room for all kinds of things to occur. The ability to hold the space, to be, to not do, is the power of the feminine.

Another way to look at it is that holding space for someone means staying engaged and present with them while they undergo a process of self-inquiry and discovery of truth. When we hold the space for someone we are just present, and listening. We aren't judging, giving advice or offering a solution. We are just there, in the present moment, holding their pain, their anguish, their joy, their space.

By holding the space we experience Presence---an important non-verbal capacity to affect and influence the situation and the environment. It is an acceptance and affirmation of our emotions, from our pain to our bliss. It is a waiting and a stillness that quietly holds our dreams and hopes.

An analogy, which beautifully embodies the meaning of ‘holding the space’, is how a mother offers space to her child when she is hurt. Perhaps the mother is not offering any medicine, not even words of assurance, but in her silent, loving presence, the child feels warmth, acceptance and trust that everything will be fine. Such is the power of ‘holding the space’.

Put together, one can hold the space in meditation for oneself and also hold the space for others by deep listening and by providing a container that holds any overwhelming feelings emerging from others. The holding of space is an embodiment of love. It holds the potential to be life changing, healing and transformative.



2. Positive Living – Mindful Living!

Oftentimes I have been asked the question, “How can one follow spiritual practices when they are laden with worldly duties and responsibilities?” The following story amply illustrates the same.

Once, a single mother with three children, who was keenly interested in pursuing the spiritual path, made time to go for a 3-day spiritual retreat. She diligently practiced all that was taught and thoroughly enjoyed her time there. On the last day, as all the participants were preparing to leave, the Lama at the retreat encouraged all of them to continue to meditate for at least an hour every day, after they return to their regular lives. At this, the lady informed the Lama that her routine would not allow her to meditate regularly for an hour. She tried to explain the details of her busy routine, but the Lama insisted that each one, no matter what their life was like, could make time for meditation, if they so desired. After going back and forth with this discussion, the lady went silent. Later, as she left the retreat, she invited the Lama to come and stay at her house for a few days when he passes by that city. The next time when Lama was going by that city, he chose to go and stay with this lady’s family for a few days. During his time here, he saw that she woke up really early in the morning, did all the house work, left for work, got back home before her children returned from school, took care of their needs through the evening, and rounded off the day by cleaning up the kitchen and arranging things for the next day. On the day before he was to leave, he confessed to her that she was right about her routine and that he noticed how it truly didn’t leave her much time to do anything else. However, he also told her that he would teach her how to pursue the spiritual practices through mindfulness. He spent

that whole day with her and taught her to be mindful when she did her dishes, laundry, cooking, cleaning, etc. Also, her house layout was such that she had to cross a small hallway each time she moved from one part of the house to another. He suggested she walk mindfully each time she enters the room until she exits it. He taught her mindful walking. Having done his duty, he left on his journey the next day. This lady diligently continued all the mindful practices embedded into her routine and the mindful walking through the hallway. She did this for many years thereafter, as the children grew to become young adults. Once the children left home to pursue their dreams, she decided to go back to the retreat. This time, she was in no rush to return to her regular life. To her great surprise, she noticed that she slipped into a deep trance every time she sat down to meditate. The Lama then told her that as she lived each day of her life mindfully, she had become adept at calming her mind and brining all of her focus to the current moment. In this way, her mindful living had primed her sufficiently for the meditative practices. She had all along been pursuing the spiritual path, even as she fulfilled her duties and responsibilities, without waiting for that one day, when she would be free to go live in a retreat.

Mindful living pervades all aspects of life; we can walk mindfully, talk mindfully, eat mindfully, perform all our tasks mindfully, and so on. Simply put, mindfulness is ***living in the present moment***. This practice balances all our energies – body, mind, emotions, and spirit, and keeps us healthy, content, energizing, and joyful.



3. We all seed each other: The Value of Presence

“Our mind is like a piece of land planted with many different kinds of seeds: seeds of joy, peace, mindfulness, understanding, and love; seeds of craving, anger, fear, hate, and forgetfulness. These wholesome and unwholesome seeds are always there, sleeping in the soil of your mind. The quality of your life depends on the seeds you water. If you plant tomato seeds in your gardens, tomatoes will grow. Just so, if you water a seed of peace in your mind, peace will grow. When the seeds of happiness in you are watered, you will become happy. When the seed of anger in you is watered, you will become angry. The seeds that are watered frequently are those that will grow strong.

— Thich Nhat Hanh

In each one of us there is a teacher and a learner. We share and we also receive. When we live our life with this awareness, we will be attentive about our actions. In all relationships, seeding each other happens, either consciously or unconsciously. We seed each other through our thoughts, our actions and our views of life.

How can we engage with life being present to this aspect “We all seed each other”?

The seeding we do to each other shapes our lives and that of others too. A first step towards ushering in Positive Energy is to be aware of it and how we experience it. And then stop “external” seeding, however, good the intention of the seed may be. The external process of seeding each other does not give us an inside view to life. Some of the seeds received from outside become beliefs, some pass off as thoughts and words. All of these start impacting our lives!

An empowering way of going about engaging in a relationship and also seeding consciously..... is to seed an inquiry, a question that can lead to self-discovery!

Therefore, it is important to be in relationships that nurture the seeds within us through self-inquiry and do not impose beliefs.

We know, in nature, the seed is in the plant itself. Likewise, our “seeds” are within us. When we move towards self-inquiry, we nourish the “seeds” within us.

A powerful way of living is to nurture these seeds through self-direction and compassion. Though we receive a number of seeds from the external environment, those that blossom and have fragrance are the ones within us. The external ones become restrictive and unexplainable as we continue possessing it unconsciously.

One of the most effective ways of seeding is to offer one’s Presence. *For example: Sri Bhagavan (Ramana Maharishi) was intensely active and yet so concealed was his activity that casual visitors and those who failed to perceive believed that he gave no upadesa at all or that he was indifferent to the needs of seekers.*

When asked whether he gave initiation Sri Bhagavan always avoided a direct answer. But the initiation by look was a very real thing. Sri Bhagavan would turn to the devotee, his eyes fixed upon him with blazing intentness. The luminosity, the power of his eyes pierced into one, breaking down the thought-process. Sometimes it was as though an electric current was passing through one, sometimes a vast peace, a flood of light.

The idea that Presence offers is to just Be. The Being then emerges and spreads its radiance. There is no lasting value in thinking, imposing one's thoughts on the other and advising, all of which amount to seeding from the outside. All of these go against Presence.

Now is the time, begin seeding through Presence!

“Whenever you meet anyone, no matter how briefly, do you acknowledge their being by giving them your full attention? Or do you reduce them to a means to an end, a mere function or role? A moment of attention is enough. You are no longer acting out a script, you become real.”- Eckhart Tolle



4. Be a Candle and a Mirror!

There are two ways of spreading light: Being the candle or the mirror that reflects it --Edith Wharton

It has been observed that human beings, at large, desire to spread light all around them. There is an innate desire to be the candle and the mirror, that light up the paths of others.

In order to feel better, people gravitate towards light. However, when we also become a mirror, we reflect the light inherent in the other person as well. In other words, we make them aware of being a candle too.

As a candle, you are light and are lighting up the lives of all who cross your path, knowingly or otherwise. Being a mirror, your ability to reflect light and energy can be constantly enhanced with a steady cleansing of the mirror thereby amplifying its intrinsic ability to reflect.

The essence of spreading light is:

- can you help people sense love within themselves
- can they break out of despair and sense the beauty of their life
- can you be the source of positive energy that is contagious

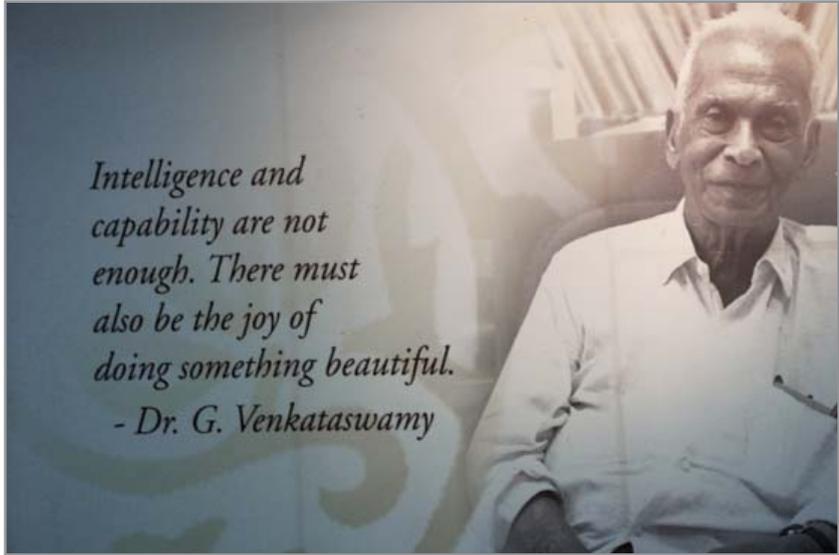
“Ego” keeps us trapped in perceiving every life situation as personal and serious. However, to spread and reflect light, one has to penetrate through the veils of ego. Beneath the ego is a mirror that is clear and transparent and perceives life without any distortions. And all of us have this mirror within us.

There are many who walk the path of life with limited awareness of how their own ways may be sabotaging their lives. They even think that all this talk about ego is meaningless. For such people neither the candle, nor the mirror is likely to create a stir. But there are those who are waking up to becoming aware and are able to see the ‘drama’ of the ego. To these, the candle and the mirror, both mean a lot. Oftentimes, such people are candles or mirrors, helping themselves and others, in their environments.

But what is most heartening is that there is a growing population who are beginning to be consciousness. In other words, these people are candles and mirrors, always. In this awakened state, the light within them makes them glow as candles. And when they come in contact with others, their own light passes through the veil of ‘ego’ and reaches the mirror deep within and reflects the light in others.

Being a candle, we are in a state of self-awareness. The spotlight is on the self. But as we progress in this journey and begin to experience oneness with all around, we become a mirror as well. Here the boundaries of the self and other begin to blur and the light from all around reflects in wondrous ways, creating divine panoramas.

With practices such as, the Positive Energy rituals, such as, meditation, acts of kindness, mindfulness, mirror exercise, affirmations, and deep inquiry, there is a promise for aware individuals, being candles and mirrors, to live consciously, with happier and compassionate outcomes for families and societies.



5. The work of Aravind Eye Hospitals is a perfect example of pursuing a cause larger than oneself.

In our daily work, not very often we come in touch with the deeper meaning of our existence and our contribution to the world. I urge you to take a mindful moment, reflect on Dr V's legacy and draw your energy to create a future that you have a calling for!

Dr. G. Venkataswamy or 'Dr. V' as he is affectionately called is the founder- chairman of Aravind. The mission of Aravind is to prevent needless blindness.

Dr V, a legendary eye surgeon, did not do what he did by chance. It was his deepest calling to be of service, to remove needless suffering. We have lessons from his leadership. Growing beyond conventional limitations, Dr V's transformational journey gave millions the boon to "see" the world. *His journey is a powerful example of pursuing a cause much larger than oneself!*

I am fascinated with the manner in which Dr V went about setting-up this magnificent institution. Starting the hospital in 1977, after his retirement, Dr V scaled-up the institution from an eleven-bed hospital

to one of the largest facilities in the world for eye care. Supported by a team of leaders, low-cost technology and efficient means of handling surgeries and patient care, Aravind is globally acknowledged for their innovation and services in eyecare.

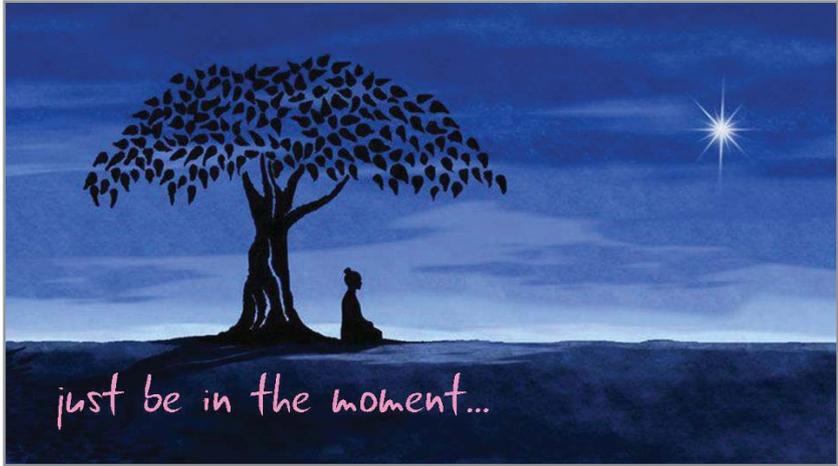
Aravind revolutionised eye care by innovating the production of high quality, low cost ophthalmic products, which make cataract operations affordable. Aravind started manufacturing Intra Ocular Lenses (IOL), driving the price down globally from \$150 to \$10. It now makes 7% of all IOL's in the world.

An Aravind surgeon conducts an average of 2,000 cataract surgeries a year, far above the typical Indian surgeon's average of 400 and the typical U.S. surgeon's average of 200, thus making eye care accessible and affordable. The organisation has the benefit of reaching out to 3 million patients each year, two-thirds of them for free.

Aravind keeps the needs of patients central to their way of working. *Infinite Vision*, a book that captures Dr V's life story of triumph over unthinkable odds, presents how Aravind is, the world's greatest business case for compassion. I recall, in a heart-warming, award-winning documentary with the same name, Dr V narrates how the simplicity of his patient's soul leaves him deeply connected with her. His experience of oneness, from such moments, has spread in the entire organisation, making the staff and leaders care for every single patient, irrespective of whether they pay for the services or get it free.

I am inspired by Dr V's journey of inner transformation, which to me appears as a critical ingredient in the way Aravind developed as an organisation. Though not trained in management methods, Dr V brought together a perfect recipe of care and success.

You can see the documentary on Dr V at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MA5Dzlf7JEE>



6. Habit Energy - How it keeps us in the same place

Habit Energy in a person creates a state of rush, a state of compulsive doingness, something that does not allow us to settle. It creates a push-pull effect and pushes us to do what we do not want to do, to say what we do not want to say. It is constantly dictating our behavior. We should recognize this habit energy every time it manifests. This is a story narrated by Thich Nhat Hanh, which shows how habit energy traps us in an auto behavior mode and does not allow us to realize that we have and can move on.

“I remember one day when I was sitting on the bus in India, with a friend, visiting untouchable communities. I was there to help bring Buddhist practice to our friends who belong to the Ambedkar Society. I remembered that one day in Nagpur, five hundred thousand untouchables formally received the Five Mindfulness Trainings, because they wanted to liberate themselves from their situation of being oppressed, and they needed spiritual strength, spiritual practice. But after their leader, Dr. Ambedkar, died, the movement did not go on with energy. So I tried to come and help.

That friend of mine was sitting on my right on the bus. We went to many states in India to offer days of mindfulness and public lectures and retreats. The landscape was beautiful, with palm trees, temples, buffaloes, rice fields, and I was enjoying what I saw from my window.

When I looked at him, I saw that he looked very tense, and was not enjoying it as I did. He was struggling. I said, “My dear friend, there is nothing for you to worry about now. I know that your concern is to make my trip pleasant, and to make me happy, but you know, I am happy right now, so enjoy yourself. Sit back, smile. The landscape is very beautiful.” He was very tense. He said, “Okay,” and he sat back. But just two minutes later, when I looked back at him, he was as tense as before. He was still struggling, struggling and struggling. He was not capable of letting go of the struggle, that struggle that has been going on for many thousands of years. He was not capable of dwelling in the present moment and touching life deeply in that moment, which was my practice, and still is my practice. He was an untouchable himself. Now he has a family, a beautiful apartment to live in, a good job, and he does not look like an untouchable, but he is still one, because he still carries all the energies, the suffering of all his ancestors in the past many thousands of years. They struggle during the day, they struggle during the night, even in dreams, and they are not capable of letting go and relaxing.”

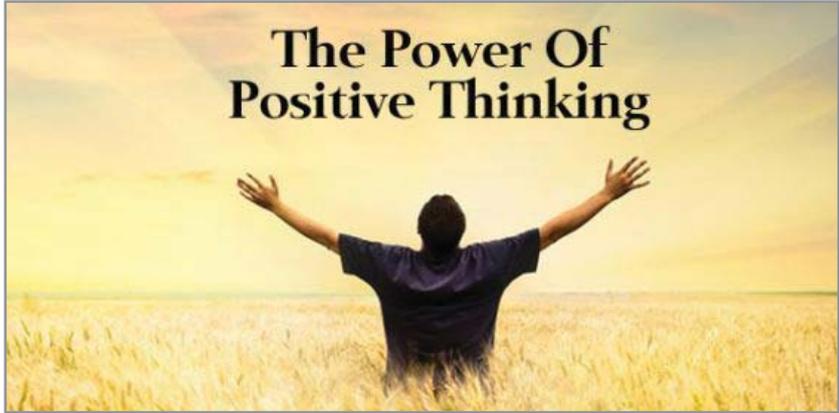
The contrast of habit energy is ‘To BE’, where you allow your energies to channelize consciously and in a deliberate manner and not get into familiar path always. We have often heard the term ‘slowing down’. In other words, it means letting-go of habit energies. When we are willing to gain new experiences, new practices, then the intensity of negative habit energies will reduce. The solution to dissolve habit energies is to first dilute them with new stories from your new and creative experiences. The other way of reducing the impact of habit energies is to be mindful. Look deeply whenever the auto pilot starts, where you are likely to respond in the same ways that did not work for you in the past; pause and ask yourself the question – will this habit energy bring results for me and for members in my environment?

When we embark on a self-deepening journey, we will confront our habit energies. These energies will make us remain where we are – our comfort zone. One of the most significant steps in the deepening journey is to allow life to unfold in creative, new ways. But habit energies numb us and tend to keep us on the path where we repeatedly do what

we have always been doing, thus stopping us from experiencing the wondrous unfolding of life.

Do you want to be in the same place, or do you desire to expand your energies? To expand your energies and constantly experience wondrous growth, you need to practice mindfulness

– JUST BE IN THE MOMENT!!



7. Is it world or is it you?

Often times we hear statements such as, “He does not care for me”, “She does not respect me”, “They are always finding ways to mock at me”, “I am looked down upon by all my team mates”, and so on. No wonder then, we come to believe that this world is an unkind and cruel place and everyone around us are just trying to get us. But is this really true?

If this is true then some obvious pre conditions are that our life is only dependent on others and we have no control on how it shapes up, behaves, or feels and that everyone is living their life for others - to hurt them, to criticize them, to demean them, etc. Are these two pre conditions true? Do they hold adequate evidence in the world, as we experience it around us? Well if we accept that these conditions are true, we are giving up control of our lives to all those ‘others’ we meet in life. Therefore, the critical questions begging an answer are – Am I in control of my life? Would I like to take total control of my life? Are humans not focussed on themselves and their own growth and evolution?

Once we take responsibility for our self and decide that we will take control of our life and shape it and drive it as we would like to, then the real beautiful journey of life begins. Having made such a this decision, one tends to think, feel, and act in alignment with the core being and its deepest desires. Even while the environment, people, circumstances,

etc. remain the same, one learns to manoeuvre one's way through life, towards one's goals just like a stream of water manoeuvres its way across hills, forests, ridges, etc. and meanders along, over, below hurdles, to finally reach the ocean. Each of us can live life like a stream, in flow, working our way to our goals. Living thus, one never complains of the constraints but always has an eye on the ways to get through, regardless of the circumstances around.

Our purpose in life, as wise men say, is self-realization. In this pursuit, we require to unlearn and learn many things from all our experiences and constantly evaluate our values and beliefs and strengthen our core. As we are constantly cleansing our self in the fire of life and its circumstances, we experience fear, inadequateness, remorse, , love, hate, anger (with our self and others), etc. Under the influence of these emotions, our words and actions take on different manifestations. These are then directed at everyone who comes in close range of it. Therefore, in the journey of life, as we criss-cross our paths, we hurl these emotions at each other and create pleasant and unpleasant circumstances around us. These circumstances are merely projections of one's stage in their life journey. These circumstances have not been crafted purely for the other.

Bottom-line is that if each of us works on ourselves and contain the unpleasant projections and manifestations as they continuously morph their way through, then the world will become a happier place. We should, however, project the pleasantness around us, multiplying the positive ions in the environment.

In our positive energy journey, some of the things we can do to make our journey more enjoyable, while also contributing to the journey of others, are:

- a. Keep your life moving in a 'flow' – cardinal principle, keep moving things forward, even if only a bit
- b. Live in the moment- do not dwell too much in your past or worry about the future

- c. Be in the company of people who contribute positively to your journey – ‘satsang’
- d. Stay away, even if temporarily, from people who make you feel unworthy, inadequate, or helpless
- e. Build a strong core, which includes values and beliefs stemming from your own experience
- f. Always go back to your core, when in doubt or fear or confusion, pause or hibernate there before moving into action again
- g. Keep your eyes on the goal and also enjoy the journey- both are equally nourishing to the soul
- h. As you journey through life, build and practice rituals that renew all four dimensions of energy (physical energy, mental energy, emotional energy, spiritual energy)
- i. Pursue a hobby that nourishes your deepest self - the soul

8. Peace Begins With Me

Life is not fair, he doesn't understand me, this is my destiny, what can I do, why does she treat me so badly, and such other phrases are common laments, heard by us several times a day. Most of us are so outwardly focused that we believe the root of all our issues is in the external environment. With such external tuning we believe that the outside is a reflection of our inner environment, which constitutes our beliefs, feelings, thoughts, anxieties, prejudices, fears, hopes, trust, etc. However, it is the exact opposite – our external environment is a reflection of our inner environment.

As we reflect on this phrase, what stands out for us is to take 100% responsibility for finding the source of peace within. In today's world, responsibility is defined more by the external pursuits undertaken by us and not as much what we do within. However, in this context, responsibility is about clearing the clutter within so that our experience of the outer is an outflow of the inner ecosystem.

Peace begins with me urges us to bring our attention back to who we are as individuals; to become aware of our deepest beliefs, thoughts, and feelings. So, when we seek Peace in our environment, we need to seek this from within and not blame the external environment for lack of our peace.

While many of us may know this principle theoretically, we don't really get around to beginning this journey from within. This may be because when we turn inward we encounter guilt and rarely progress to taking responsibility. In this inward path we first come across the ego, which distracts us from looking deeply and beyond, by firing up the blame-game; encouraging us to be judgmental, rationalizing, and so on.

A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person.

A peaceful person makes a peaceful family.

A peaceful family makes a peaceful community.

A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation.

A peaceful nation makes a peaceful world.

— Maha Ghosananda

For most us, the above guidance translates as.....

When I have a peaceful world, I will experience a peaceful nation

When I have a peaceful nation, I will experience a peaceful community

When I have a peaceful community, I will experience a peaceful family

When I have peaceful family, I will be a peaceful person

When I am a peaceful person, I will have a peaceful heart

In this case, we have transferred the responsibility of having a peaceful heart to everything outside of us! Now is the time to ‘create peace within’ and not seek it from outside.

A long time ago, there lived three brothers. All of them studied medicine and became doctors, but only one – the youngest – ever became famous. His name was known far and wide as a miracle worker; patients who seemed to be beyond all hope would go to him and be cured. One day, someone asked him, “Why are you the only famous one among your brothers?” His reply was, “I can cure people even at the point of death, so everyone knows me. My older brother can detect and cure sickness before it grows too serious, so there are few who know him. And my eldest brother takes such good care of people’s health that they rarely get sick at all, so he remains unknown outside of his village.

“Working on Peace within is somewhat like the work of the eldest brother, where he was not very well known but was truly contributing to good health. When we work on ourselves, the others may not see it or even talk about it immediately, but it is the single most important ingredient in creating a peaceful world.

“PEACE BEGINS WITH ME. RECONCILIATION BEGINS WITH ME. HEALING BEGINS WITH ME. SO WHEN YOU PRACTICE DEEP BREATHING AND SMILING TO THE PAIN IN YOU, AND VOW TO BEGIN ANEW, WHEN YOU PRACTICE LOVING KINDNESS, TAKING CARE OF YOUR PAIN AND SUFFERING, YOU ARE ALREADY PRACTICING TAKING CARE OF THE OTHER PERSON.”

— Thich Nhat Hanh

MAN IN THE MIRROR

Michael Jackson

I'm gonna make a change
For once in my life
It's gonna feel real good
Gonna make a difference
Gonna make it right

As I, turn up the collar on
My favorite winter coat
This wind is blowing my mind
I see the kids in the streets
With not enough to eat
Who am I to be blind?
Pretending not to see their needs

A summer's disregard, a broken bottle top
And one man's soul (and a one man's soul)
They follow each other on the wind ya' know
'Cause they got nowhere to go
That's why I want you to know

I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you want to make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change

I've been a victim of a selfish kind of love
It's time that I realize
That there are some with no home, not a nickel to loan
Could it be really mean, pretending that they're not alone?

A willow deeply scarred, somebody's broken heart
And a washed-out dream
They follow the pattern of the wind ya' see
'Cause they got no place to be
That's why I'm starting with me

I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you want to make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change

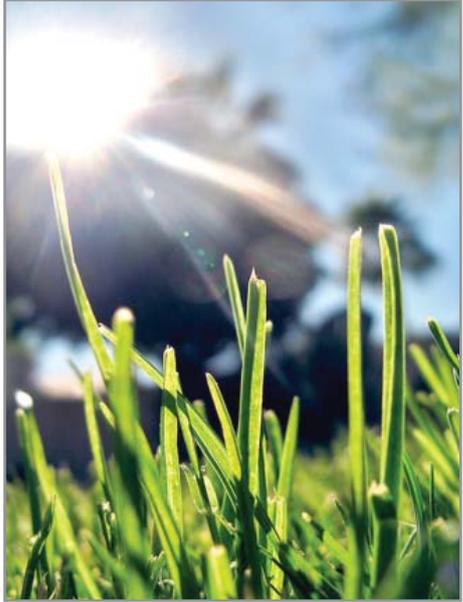
I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you want to make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself and then make that
Change!

9. Say thank you, instead of Sorry

We often say, sorry to the person who has offered us a favour. A favour that has come-up unexpectedly.

For example, I made somebody wait because I was on the phone. Now, after my call is over, I immediately say I'm sorry.....instead can I say Thank you for waiting.

The change in language provides ingredients to build a relationship with the other individual.



When we say Thank you, we register gratitude and responsibility. Whenever we experience gratitude as a choice, automatically responsibility towards the relationship gets triggered.

When we say I'm sorry we register guilt inside us and we also create a power differential between us and other. It also burdens the other to reassure you.

We need to certainly apologize where the situation demands it. However, we often say sorry from an automatic response, failing to look at the graciousness of the other.

In acquaintances and in relationships, I find that when we genuinely say thank you, we keep the spirit and bridge of generosity alive. It leaves us with further opportunities to get back together.

I realized, when I say sorry for taking unexpected favors, I limit the number of times I can go back to the other person. Now having shifted to saying thank you, I know I have countless opportunities to be in communication with the other person.

As Buddha teaches...

A Generous Heart Is The Source of Happiness

It tears down walls.

It connects you to others.

“There is a story about a scorpion and a frog. One day, the scorpion needs to cross a pond. So the scorpion tells the frog, “Frog, my friend, would you please take me across the pond?” The frog replies, “Well, I want to be helpful to you, but what if you sting me midway? I will die.” The scorpion says, “Why would I do that? If I sting you, you’ll die and I’ll die too.” The frog feels reassured, so it says, “Okay, that is reasonable. I do not mind carrying you across the pond. You can jump up.” The scorpion jumps on the back of the frog, and the frog gets into the water and begins to swim. Everything is going well until, halfway across the pond, the scorpion stings the frog. The frog is in deep pain, and as it is drowning, it cries out to the scorpion, “Why did you sting me? Now I’ll die, and you are going to die, too.” The scorpion replies, “I know that, but I cannot help myself. It is my scorpion nature.”

Like the scorpion, we do say sorry from our habit energy, in place of thank you.

It is time we transform our habit energy to usher “Thank you” in our relationships in return for unexpected grace.



10. The Path Ahead: Seeing clearly through Positive Energy Lens

New beginnings always bring new opportunities - not just to earn more money or acquire more possessions, but to enrich our inner energies; to renew and transform.

So what stops us from renewing our energies? Most often, we measure our success through material acquisitions and enhanced status. We are also settled in our comfort zones, seeing obstacles and difficulties, and fostering new fears.

Let this New Year help each one of us ‘see clearly’. By renewing our energies in the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of our life, we are able to drop our bad feelings and perceptions around obstacles. The renewal of energies enables us perceive and experience life with a clearer vision. With a clear vision we see things as they are, without any distortions, fears, or and judgments. We experience life in every moment, without any worries of the past or future. We begin to live more mindfully; we enjoy every wonder of nature; we see the marvels of life unfold in every moment of our existence. Living becomes a joy!

At the onset of new year, it is once again time to walk on this path with renewed energies and move ahead with the rhythm of life, with trust.

Here is a short song, which captures the essence of what will happen to one's life, when we see clearly.

I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,
 I can see all obstacles in my way
 Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind
 It's gonna be a bright (bright), bright (bright) Sun-Shiny day.
 I think I can make it now,
 the pain is gone
 All of the bad feelings have disappeared
 Here is the rainbow I've been prayin for
 It's gonna be a bright (bright), bright (bright) Sun-Shiny day.

Look all around, there's nothin but blue skies
 Look straight ahead, nothin but blue skies
 I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,
 I can see all obstacles in my way
 Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind
 It's gonna be a bright (bright), bright (bright) Sun-Shiny day.
 Johnny Nash, I Can See Clearly Now

What does seeing clearly through a Positive Energy lens mean entail -

Becoming aware of and **addressing limiting beliefs** (such as gloominess, bad feelings, obstacles, judgments, fears, etc.)

Seeing things the way they are and not allowing the mind to add filters of assumptions and biases

Living life in a 'flow' - flowing with life and not resisting the miraculous unfolding of life in each moment

Becoming aware of the positive energies operating through each one of us, and continuously renewing and enriching our energies to live in complete trust and surrender

LIVE AND EXPERIENCE A JOYOUS ABSORPTION IN THE EXPERIENCE OF LIVING!



11. The Energizing Pause

It's not only moving that creates new starting points. Sometimes all it takes is a subtle shift in perspective, an opening of the mind, an intentional pause and reset, or a new route to start to see new options and new possibilities.

Kristin Armstrong

In life, a pause can make all the difference!

Today, the world around us demands that we constantly do, do, do, and then do some more. There is a fear built around a pause. Pause – a brief break from the work on hand, a pause in thinking about a new strategy, a week-long retreat, a break from work to pursue further education or take care of pressing family needs, or caring for one's child, etc. Pauses are associated with loss of time that could be used productively. The popular notion is that we think we are making progress when we are in motion — as in moving forward, towards our goal.

However, in reality, oftentimes, the most progress is made when we pause. History is proof enough of how many discoveries were made during a pause. The best insights come when we stop working on something and let it be. Inspiration and insights cannot be reached solely through continuous mental focus, thought, and reasoning. They are accessed when the mind is in a relaxed state. In such a state, creativity flows and newer vistas open up and come to our awareness.

Pauses refresh and renew us and actually enhance our productivity. More importantly, they bring balance and rhythm to our lives. Pauses are built into the way our body functions – be it the pause of sleep or the tiny pause between two breaths. And this tiny pause between breaths are the most relaxing, these pauses are when we experience the oneness with the universal consciousness.

Pauses give us life. Then why don't we honor these pauses and allow ourselves to relaxing slip into them completely? After a pause, plunging back into work can be more fun and energizing.

We hear our life breath during the silent pauses. In music, pauses make the rhythms and allow the notes to settle in and reverberate in our ears and hearts. While thinking, the pauses help assimilate, synthesize, and notice new connections and patterns. That is how innovations and discoveries happen. While engaged in physical work, the pauses help renew our energy for another round of work.

Pauses are energizing! Pauses create life, they provide continuity, they increase productivity, vigor, and focus. Pauses bring you in touch with your 'being' state – which is your true existence. So, welcome pauses in your life; do not wait for that one long holiday, or the end of the week, or for that special place to relax. Pauses have potential energy and can cause progress, even without movement. Invite, enjoy, and cherish the energizing pause!

Few ways to pause are:

Meditation, a practice for a spiritual pause that brings peace

Psychologist K. Anders Ericsson points out top performers tend to work in approximately 90-minute cycles and then take a break. We are designed to pulse and Pulsing is the simplest, easiest, most immediate way to build breaks into your day.

It's very important that we re-learn the art of resting and relaxing. Not only does it help prevent the onset of many illnesses that develop through chronic tension and worrying; it allows us to clear our minds, focus, and find creative solutions to problems.

— Thich Nhat Hanh

V. TRENDSETTERS



1. In The Pursuit of Identity

The Blink Foundation turns one, this month. For the NGO's founder Arun Fernandez, though, nearly a decade has gone into the making of his organisation that in his own words, aims to "celebrate differences". It all began of course, when Arun began taking a paper for Loyola College's Foundation Courses Department, where he mooted the formation of the Peace Rangers, an organisation whose sole aim was to sell the concept, idea and practice of peace in society at large. The CSIM alumnus left no stone unturned in developing and culturing his new organisation, so much so that it slowly became part of his DNA. "After my short teaching career at Loyola College, I even considered working at a private firm," he admits, "The salary was good, and it was a great opportunity. But despite all that, I knew that my calling lay elsewhere." Arun was right. What he really wanted to do, by his own admission, was make a difference. His passion lay in teaching, leadership, thinking and working with the youth. What Arun really wanted to do was continue his mission of celebrating differences and embracing identities. In many ways, it was this that led to the formation of the Blink Foundation.

Blink was established only a year ago, in October 2014. But in the last year, under Arun's leadership, the organisation has successfully carved a niche for itself in society and academic circles. "Our mission is to embrace identities and celebrate our differences," he reiterates, before going on to elaborate: "When we're born, we're all just a sheet of white paper. We don't have an identity attached to ourselves. But as we grow up, our identity is what makes us who we are. At Blink, we want to celebrate the diversity that exists in these identities, and emphasize on the peaceful coexistence of these many identities." And that was when the idea of the Blink Foundation was born within Loyola's walls. "It was the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions (IDCR) that helped with us our initial funding," recounts Arun, "The institute helped us with a handy sum of 12,400 Euros that we used to get started." But that wasn't all; support for Blink came from near and far. The Jesuit Provincial in Madurai parted with a few lakh rupees to support the organisation, while Arun's father, a businessman, also helped him with the loan. "The IDCR funding was used to develop our web presence and set up our office," Arun says.

In the last 12 months, Blink has made its presence felt in elementary schooling. The organisation has reached out to 5 schools and 1,200 students through a team of 120 volunteers. "Our volunteers are called change agents, and engage with school students on a very personal level," Arun says. "The five schools include a rural school as well. "Our network of schools is divided into three categories: private schools, government schools and rural camps," he explains, "Two of our volunteers are trained to reach out to as many as 210 students, across urban and rural schools." Behind the legwork however, is a dedicated nine-member core team, headed by Arun himself. Out of the five schools that Blink engages with, two private schools have roped in the organisation to provide services on a regular basis. As part of its five-year plan, Blink hopes to engage with 5 more schools on a regular basis.

For an organisation so evidently young, ambitious planning is the hallmark of its work. Arun says that Blink will continue to impart its message of cultural identity, peace and peaceful coexistence for the years to come. "Our aim is to promote the concept that differences exist, and teach children that it's okay to be different from each other," he

explains, “A simple is example is how fish is considered non-vegetarian in some places, while some countries and even North Eastern Indian States, it’s looked at as not necessarily non-vegetarian.” He continues, “Who’s to say what’s right or what’s wrong? The key is to accept and acknowledge both points of view. That’s exactly what we at Blink aim to achieve.” Peace, peaceful living and religious coexistence are some of the areas that Blink will continue to focus on, in pursuit of these goals. The organisation plans on bringing nearly 7,000 school children under its fold by the end of next year. “That’s a very practical goal,” Arun explains, “If we manage to extend our services to a school like Velammal, for instance, that immediately means nearly 35,000 students in one go. So, 7,000 students isn’t much of a challenge.” Through its team of 120 change agents, Blink will now set its sights on the future in the hope that it can well and truly bring about change in the minds and lives of several thousand students.



2. Mainstreaming Traditional Knowledge

By now, most of us agree that the education system in India needs a major revamp. While the system and its eminences work on it, there are others who are experimenting on new approaches towards teaching and are attempting to scale their reach based on the success of initial phase. Among these players, there are sub groups. While some advocate for changes in the syllabus, there are others who promote new approaches to teach the present syllabus. *Samacheer Kalvi* in Tamil Nadu and *Nalikali, Kalikayatna* in Karnataka are a few examples.

Given the magnitude of the system's responsibility in this context, as Mr Ashish, Co Founder of Sahaj Foundation in Bir, Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh argues, the attention on traditional knowledge has been lost. While there are other controversies around gender perspectives and historical contexts described in text books, Ashish opines that it is important to preserve our traditional knowledge and the best way to do that is to build them in during schooling itself.

Hailing from Solan District of Himachal Pradesh, Ashish moved to Chandigarh to continue his studies post class 10. He then pursued Electrical Engineering from IIT Roorkee, which landed him a corporate job with a Consultancy Firm on Climate Change in Ahmedabad. While working, Ashish also volunteered with an NGO that was working in the field of inclusive education, in a village 20 kilometers from Ahmedabad. “The present generation is very lucky in that it has good access to opportunities that can expose them to the challenges that India is facing and build sustainable solutions that do not compromise ESC (Economic, Social and Cultural) rights of the people. Tata Jagruti Yatra was one,” explains Ashish, who participated in the 2010 Yatra along with his wife, Ms Divya.

Ashish and Divya were intrigued about people not following their heart, in spite of knowing that it is right and why they resorted to behave like the crowd. They were uncomfortable with this homogeneity imposed by globalisation and feared that this could distance indigenous populations from their traditional knowledge. They decided not to do so. “We decided to work with people in a peaceful environment and settle down in a Himalayan village,” says Ashish who also gained work experience in rural development from IIT in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh. Soon after marriage, they established Sahaj Foundation in November 2013 to work in Bir in the field of education.

Sahaj Foundation’s central objective is to connect children with their roots. Lamenting that the modern system of education takes them away from their tradition, encouraging them to migrate to the cities, the couple resolved to establish simple mechanisms and structures to facilitate children learn about their own traditions from the community members. “We wanted to promote inquisitiveness. We wanted to see the process inculcate an inquiry building attitude and the value of cooperation in executing multi stake holder decisions,” explains Ashish.

Before establishing the activities with children, the couple realized that there were more teachers in private schools than in government schools. So, instead of going through the schools, they decided to start a community centre where children can come in after school hours. With the help of the local Gram Panchayat they established the centre, in the place given by a Ward member who also helped in bringing

children together for this programme. Initially, they used the regular teaching methods to assess the learning levels among the children, who were a mixed group from different classes. Soon after, they introduced activities like storytelling, writing, math puzzles, games, word puzzles, etc. that the children were free to choose from.

Through the activities were chosen by the children, specific themes were taught and children were engaged in evolving the whole discussion around the theme during those activities. “Provoking their curiosity always worked for us,” he adds.

As the group came to a good shape, Ashish and Divya introduced a simple questionnaire and taught the children how to conduct surveys. These surveys were intended to help children learn traditional knowledge from their communities on various topics – flora, fauna, food, ayurveda, traditional remedies/medicines, etc. Ashish and Divya were convinced that surveys were the best way to introduce children to the rich traditional knowledge, as the whole process was driven by curiosity and inquiry building attitude.

Of late, they have introduced the *Prashn Vikas Ka (Meaning – Question of Development)* programme in a local school(not a government school) under which children are introduced to concepts like agriculture, housing, health care, etc and the continuum of methods used in each, as they had evolved from the beginning to modern times. In housing for example, children are facilitated to learn the evolution from mud houses to concrete buildings and the reason behind these developments. As they proceed, the whole discussion comes around the relevance of these in the present context. So, they not only know what happened, but also know why the changes came up and how their communities took to them. In the case of building roads, which we all think is a sign of development in the villages, there have been undesired consequences in many cases. “So, inquiry building will lead them to understand the whole picture,” he says.

Taking children through all that is not seen in their text books, Ashish feels that the process has actually caused changes in their lives too. “When we serve, we get to know more of ourselves,” says Ashish, who wants to create a cadre of young minds who can challenge the tide of

mainstreaming, whose force is very strong and imposing. For, they know that these minds will be able to critically reflect on the community decisions. “Sustenance and survival of the fittest seems to govern most of the decision making at household and community level. Although many youngsters want to do something else, which they know is the right thing to do, they do not go for it. Gandhiji said that in order to be happy there must be harmony between what we think, what we feel and what we do, otherwise there is no integration of multilevel decisions. This is why we believe in inculcating values, inquiry building and life skills – all of which can make our children happy about what they want to/are doing. This, only this happiness at heart can drive them to think for their communities,” asserts Ashish.

— *Shanmuga Priya. T*

3. Back to Communities For A New Beginning

Do studies define the intelligence of an individual? Is social work really perceived to be an option for those who cannot excel in professional fields? Why isn't the inner drive to work for the 'people of my community' not valued as much as any job with an assured monthly income? With the number of students accessing higher education growing each year, why hasn't a strong voice been raised against the inequity in the system? These are the questions many have had to ponder with.



Mr Sandeep Mehto, Co Founder of Bharat Calling, a Youth Initiative under Shri Ramesh Prakash Samajik Sansthan, in Pathrota village, Itarsi district in Madhya Pradesh also went through this phase. Soon, he was able to figure out how to contribute in addressing this lacuna in the system, helping students, at least, who were from his village.

Having hailed from this very place and being the youngest among three brothers, Sandeep was able to clearly observe his upbringing. “We were a big family. My parents had eight siblings each. While all their families migrated to urban areas after education and sought employment in the organized sector, my father was particular that we stayed back in the village itself. As we lived here, our relatives had very low social expectations from us,” recounts Sandeep. Very much observant of the ‘relay race’ attitude in middle class families to educate their children one after another so each could settle down with a good job near the city, Sandeep was inspired by his father’s words – “Education must not be commodified.”

Sandeep had the privilege of studying in an elite boarding school after class V. “The way my father spent on our education was always

criticised. As if all the negative vibes began to concentrate, the financial situation in our family worsened and my father had to take loans to meet my school expenses. People who kept commenting on our way of life continued to do so when I scored less in my high school.

We are in a country where one has to pursue medicine or engineering to prove his/her intelligence. I also wanted to prove myself,” shares Sandeep who then took up Bachelors in Electrical Engineering. Even before the course concluded, Sandeep was clear that Engineering was not his calling.

Sandeep always imagined his parents chatting over a cup of tea peacefully and wanted to see this happening, for they have struggled all along in helping their children access good opportunities. However, his father’s demise during his final year came in as a big shock to him. “In spite of being a college topper, I did not want to become an engineer. Everything that my father had used seemed to be all around, along with the good wishes from all those he had helped. This thought, which once frustrated me so much, suddenly took me into introspection. I decided to follow my father’s footsteps. I wanted to train myself professionally to work with the communities,” says a reminiscient Sandeep who joined the Masters programme in Social Entrepreneurship with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai.

The first day at TISS answered a lot of questions in Sandeep’s mind and the course he had taken answered many more. Besides exposing him to the stark reality of inequity in access to educational opportunities, the course encouraged him to do something for those who could not pursue higher education. “Higher education can bring generations out of poverty,” and so in 2009, Sandeep and his friend John decided to visit tribal schools near his village. Although discouraged by the teachers in those schools, they managed to organize an interaction with the children.

Sandeep is surprised even now of what he learnt there. He says: “Children were so sharp, they had scored well in their examinations. They were creative too. But, they did not know how to go ahead in planning their career. They did not even know how to apply for colleges that taught subjects of their interest.” Deeply disturbed, John

and Sandeep promised the children that they would come back to help them find good colleges. While in TISS, Mumbai, they filled the college application forms for these children.

In the very following year, they organized a camp for two months to facilitate this process in midst of students and 30 of them secured admissions in reputed national educational institutions. Sandeep is reminded of a boy who failed class 12 twice, but is now a sports teacher in an international school after completing Bachelor of Physical Education. “Nobody thought we would come back. We know this is a small step, but it is a necessary step to break the stereotypes. Why should incomes decide children’s choice of courses?” he quips.

Named after Sandeep’s parents, the society took this initiative to 142 schools in Hoshangabad district. Starting with one school they have now reached out to every high/higher secondary school in Hoshangabad district. The two friends, from the beginning, were very determined not to run this as a parallel system. They engaged volunteers through internships and summer fellowships and trained them to conduct the exposure programmes in the villages. “We just want to show the way. Inspired by these efforts, many of the volunteers have started their own initiatives back in their communities,” says a contented Sandeep.

On the other hand, Sandeep’s family has different thoughts. “My family struggles to explain what I am doing. So, I am taking them to Chennai for the MSDS National Awards Event. May be then, they will realise why I came back to my village,” he smiles.

— *Shanmuga Priya. T*



4. Impacting lives of Tribal through Rubber in North East India

Agriculture in the North Eastern states has been subject to various social and institutional constraints, the most obvious being the land holding pattern. Nearly three-fourths of all operational holdings are either ‘marginal’ or ‘small’. The small farm size limits the scope for commercial farming. Apart from this, another social / institutional issue affecting the North-Eastern states is the prevalence of Jhum or shifting cultivation wherein the forest land is temporarily utilized for agriculture purpose. This activity is repeated after a certain number of years. Such practices not only affects the forest cover adversely but also reduces its productivity and increases soil erosion.

Understanding these agricultural realities and enabling the tribal communities in the North East to lead sustainable livelihoods, the Rubber Board - a statutory body of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, introduced rubber farming in North Eastern India. After establishing a few trial farms in association with the Forest and Soil Conservation Department, the Rubber Board established its presence in

North East India, and has successfully influences many small farmers to engage in rubber cultivation.

Rubber farms have created an enormous socio-economic impact for farmers and have transformed the conditions of subsistence for farmers, who have now emerged as entrepreneurial farmers in the region. The rising demand of rubber in the national and international markets is good news for farmers in the Northeast. It has helped them boost their economies and improve their living standards. North East contributes nearly 15% of India's rubber production. Today, 103,500 hectares of land is under rubber cultivation in North Eastern states including Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland, producing 46,000 tonnes of rubber annually.

Role of the Rubber Board

To meet the growing demands of rubber growers in India and to cater to the interests of the rubber industry, the Indian government passed the Rubber Production and Marketing Act in April 1947, and the Indian Rubber Board was constituted forthwith. The Rubber Board is instrumental for the overall development of the rubber industry across the country. The functions of the Board, as defined by the Act, is to promote measures that it thinks fit for the development of the rubber industry. To cater to the increasing demands of rubber products in India and across the globe, the Board is actively involved in introducing rubber farming in non-traditional areas where rubber has never been grown before.

One of the unique features of the Rubber Act is that it caters to all the main components of agriculture and offers the following services to rubber farmers:

Production —ensure good quality seedlings and cultivation

Extension services —offer advice, technical support and a package of best practices to be followed

Value addition —enable processing at farm level and in groups and provide technical support to large processors

Research — develop location specific clones

Marketing — Formation of Rubber Processing Societies with market linkages

The Rubber Board Officials handle all the above components with great efficiency and technical officers are available in all the new growing areas. These officials handhold the rubber farmers from planting to production and provide them with market linkages. This holistic approach of the Rubber Board has resulted in many states adopting Rubber farming as in the North Eastern states, Jharkhand, Bihar, etc.

By encouraging direct sale of rubber to the cooperatives and linking cooperatives with the buyers directly, each rubber farmer earns 90 to 95 percent of the farm gate price. This is a positive shift in rubber trading when compared to a coffee grower in Uganda who earns 14 cents for one kilo of coffee beans produced at his farm but sold by Starbucks in UK for 47 dollars.

Traditionally, rubber has mainly grown in Kerala and adjoining districts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. As the traditional rubber growing tracts in India has reached the saturation level, Rubber Board has identified states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and North East for expansion of the rubber crop cultivation. Tripura, Assam, lower reaches of hills of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh in the North East India have been identified as areas that are marginally or fully suitable for rubber cultivation. Around 450,000 hectares of land has been identified for rubber farming in the North Eastern states.

Since 1980s, the Rubber Board Extension Officers at the North East have been instrumental in influencing many small farmers and Jhum farmers to switch to rubber farming. These officers have braved their way into the hearts of these farmers despite the insurgency in the North East during the 80s and 90s.

The arrival of the rubber industry in the tribal areas of Assam and Meghalaya has been instrumental in the socio-economic development of the communities living here. It has brought about significant social change, particularly for the marginalized tribal societies, who were

otherwise living impoverished lives and were not mainstreamed into society.

Rubber Board also influenced the marginal farmers to organize themselves into groups and form cooperatives or producer companies to help them generate surpluses and sell their yield at comparative prices. Another feather in the cap for the Rubber Board!

— *Latha Suresh*

5. Rubber & Rabha

Rabha is one of the important tribe of Assam largely concentrated in Goalpara district of Assam. The traditional economy of the Rabhas in general, is based on agriculture, forest based activities and weaving. In the past, the Rabhas used to practice shifting cultivation. Later they took up the job of settled cultivation and started cultivation with plough. Besides cultivation, hunting was also an old practice of Rabha people. Weaving was a traditional occupation of the Rabha women. Known for their unique skill of hunting, trapping and fishing activities, they use different varieties of bamboo species and local wood to meet their livelihood.



In the early 90's most of the Rabha men were involved in major insurgent activities and the area was always in a state of unrest. When rubber was introduced to the Rabha tribes by the Rubber Board officers, many were apprehensive about it but a few like Gigen Rabha and Joma Ram Rabha of Ghangamari village decided to go ahead and cultivate rubber in the small holdings that they had. On seeing the economic gains it yielded 7 years later, many other Rabhas joined in rubber cultivation. Today Gigen, 60 years old, is the President of the Ronggiri Rubber Producers Society and has 56 rubber farmers enrolled as members.

“Ten years ago, we used to go only for rice cultivation and work as laborers. Now, after my planting rubber, we have our own secure livelihood and have a steady income. I have 4 sons and have sent all of them to colleges and they are all very educated. I am very proud of this and I am sure the life for my grandson who is one year old is secure. He

will not see the hardships that we faced when we were young” says an 82 year old energetic Rabha.

‘Rubber has changed our lives. There were days when we went hungry for two to three days straight but today we are have two square meals a day. We are all economically better and have bank accounts and some little savings today. We have also stopped drinking alcohol as we now are aware of its ill-effects and we are unable to concentrate while tapping rubber’, says Joma Ram Rabha.

“My work at the Rubber Board is very fulfilling. When I meet these tribal and interact with them, it gives me a great sense of satisfaction. The regard they have for the Board is immense and they follow all that has been told to them. The quality of rubber that is produced by these tribals is of the highest quality and they fetch them a good price. I appreciate their sincerity and commitment to their work and derive a lot of inspiration from them” says Priyanka, the Extension Officer at Rubber Board in Agia.

“If not for Rubber we would have all been part of the insurgent groups in this area and I cannot imagine how and where our families would be. Rubber gave us all a positive diversion. There is work every day in a rubber farm. We have to ensure that rubber is tapped every day, processed and sold. We had no time to get involved with any of the militant forces who were plaguing our areas. Our hard work has paid off and today we are all proud to say that we have a secure livelihood and or lives are also safe. Our children are all going to schools and colleges and we are proud to be part of the mainstream society in Assam. Though we live a little far away from the city, we do go to the cities and towns once in a while and experience urban culture too”, says a very humble Gigen. He is a role model for the Rabhas of the surrounding villages in Bardamal area of Goalpara district of Assam.

‘I am very happy to see the transformation in our village over the last decade. We used to live in dilapidated houses and were having a hand to mouth existence. We also had restricted access to the nearby places like Agia the nearest town as there were no vehicles for commuting. Today, rubber has brought in prosperity amongst us and the scene has changed. We were all able to re-build our houses and our standard of

living has improved. I am happy to see the next generation children zooming around in their two wheelers and there is happiness and cheer in all the families. Rubber has not only enabled individual farmers to prosper but has brought in prosperity in our society. Our initial days of hard work have paid and we envision a bright future for our children,' says a Kalpana Rabha, the woman Executive Secretary of the Society.

Most of the Rabha villages in this region are now easily approachable. Inter village pacca roads are moving their villages with electricity, small markets and communication towers. The new generations are coming up in the mainstream and take part in the development process of the State. The young Rabhas have also become very eligible bachelors in the area as they have all come out of their impoverished conditions and are able to provide a better quality of life to their families. The one crop that made this possible is Rubber!!!

— *Latha Suresh*



6. Walking beyond token activism

With his long, unruly greying hair Bangalore-based activist Pushpanath Krishnamurthy has no trouble grabbing eyeballs. And for over twenty years he has been finding newer ways to channelise that attention towards the issues he is passionate about: overcoming poverty, climate change, and fair trade as linked to poverty.

Step-up for Climate Change

A Gandhian by principles, Pushpanath’s walks for climate change have captured the imagination of people across the globe. His use of walking as a means to raise awareness on climate change began in the bitter winter of 2009.

“Gandhi’s Dandi march was a huge inspiration for my decision to walk.”

Pushpanath, affectionally known as ‘Push’, walked from Oxford to Copenhagen—that year’s venue for the Conference of Parties, climate summit—making international headlines.

“Gandhi’s Dandi march was a huge inspiration for my decision to walk. It was the same distance—550 kilometres—and the idea of walking for climate change appealed to me,” he explains. The point was to reach Copenhagen with the smallest carbon footprint.

“I also chose to walk because it is something anyone can do and was happy to learn that people around the world were walking (in their own neighbourhoods) with me,” he adds. Pushpanath says he took no money with him on the journey and experienced several acts of kindness from the people he met en route.

Today, in his work with the Centre for Social Markets, he draws deeply from the many years he spent working with people affected by poverty, their stories of survival and his own tryst with poverty in childhood.

The Oxfam Angle

His long experience, as one of UK-based Oxfam’s global campaigner, has helped Pushpanath discern the undercurrents that tie poverty, fair trade and climate change together.

“Without any insurance the poor lose what took them nearly a decade to accumulate whenever disaster strikes.”

“Poverty takes generations to overcome and almost always the poor (especially women) lack a voice.” says Pushpanath. It’s now more difficult than ever to overcome poverty with millions of people around the world still struggling to access basic necessities, leave alone education. In his experience that spans three continents the erstwhile bank employee has witnessed how the poor get further impoverished every time there is a natural disaster. “Without any insurance the poor lose what took them nearly a decade to accumulate whenever disaster strikes.”

Compounding their situation is the lack of fair trade, according to Pushpanath. “Fair trade unlike free trade promotes sustainable growth and brings to the forefront the small-scale farmer,” he explains. To sum up, an already poor farmer striving to find a foothold in free trade driven

markets gets dealt the hardest blow when a natural disaster occurs. And that cements his poverty for generations to come.

Pushpanath has spent multiple years working closely with impoverished communities in places like Southern Africa (Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa), India, Vietnam and Bosnia to name a few. “I was involved with popular mobilization against issues like double standards in trade and rigged rules that were affecting small agriculturists,” recalls Pushpanath.

Stemming from Oxfam’s ‘Make Trade Fair’ campaign, the ‘Climate Justice’ campaign catapulted Pushpanath into the realm of climate change activism.

Since then he has taken part in several climate hearings held across the world. “At every place my interactions with the affected communities provided me with the intense real life stories I used to propagate the message,” says Pushpanath. These stories have helped him show, rather than simply tell, audiences that climate change was making serious impact on human lives across the world.

Coffee Walk

All the interest and attention that his first walk for climate change generated gave him the impetus to champion the cause of coffee growers in Karnataka. “Between 2001 and 2006, I worked with several small time farmers who were growing coffee, the most traded commodity in the world after oil,” he recalls. The growers were at the mercy of vagaries dictated by free trade and through Oxfam Trade Campaign, Pushpanath, along with many other actors, was able to bring the stakeholders in the coffee trade in Karnataka to global stakeholder discussions for an agreement on pricing.

“Some of the biggest names in the coffee industry came together after we put together 20 million signatures and mobilised a petition from 4 million coffee growers,” says Pushpanath. The outcome was a favorable stabilization of coffee prices.

But in 2011, when he revisited the coffee growers in Karnataka, he realised that it was climate change that was wreaking havoc in their lives now. “Coffee is a very sensitive crop and the farmers were facing higher wind speeds and increasingly unpredictable rain patterns that were ruining the crop,” he explains. This led to his decision to set out on his second walk for climate change—this time from Baba Budan Giri in Chikmagalur to Mysore.

“My walk happened parallel to that year’s climate summit held in Durban,” he says adding that in the 15 days it took him to complete his journey, he met close to 30,000 people. During the course of his journey, Pushpanath says he was pleasantly surprised to see that local farmers were experimenting with methods of organic cultivation, soil and water conservation, and co-existing with animals.

His second walk resulted in a report titled ‘Coffee to Go?’ funded by stakeholders from both the government and the private sector. “The goal was to come up with plans for climate adaptation in coffee cultivation and an improved supply chain management that would minimise risks,” he says.

Having been an activist for over two decades now, Pushpanath has the vantage of seeing how much social media has transformed the way causes are championed today. “Most of the people I work with are not part of the social network and direct contact is still a huge part of the process,” he says. However, he realises that social media has heightened the clamour for attention because of the immense potential it packs. He also feels that social networks have made it possible for people to go beyond token gestures.

The extra mile

“Today social media raises awareness about issues, collects funds and recruits champions,” he says. Noting that everyday there are newer methods being developed to raise awareness and get involved, he says open platforms like Brigge can help people be innovative. “People using such apps can connect with others who have vowed to only cycle to work or with those who take a pledge to buy only fair trade products,” he says.

Agreeing that social media has the power to mobilise youngsters like nothing before, he says that if enough people buy fair trade products, the prices that seem steep now would eventually go down; and that governments will also begin patronising fair trade products. “Gradually, the environment will begin to thrive once again thanks to the sustainable methods used in the making of fair trade products,” he opines.

At the moment, Pushpanath is involved with setting up a Fair Trade City in India, the first of its kind in the country. “Through this venture we hope to promote sincere stories of sustainable growth, which in turn favourably affect climate.”

What You Can Do

Talking about those who contest the idea of climate change, Push says that there are three types of such people: the skeptical, the cynical and the indifferent. While he knows he cannot change the minds of those who are cynical, he feels more hopeful about proving to the skeptics that climate change does exist and it hurts the most vulnerable who have not caused it. “All we need to do is show them scientific proof that climate change is real and that it is happening now.” For those who are indifferent, he wants them to interact with the things they feel indifferent about.

“Working with children is the way forward. But preaching to them will only alienate them. Sharing stories, on the other hand, can help them see the consequences of our actions. They must make their own choices.”

So, who are you? Have you always felt disconnected with the whole climate change dialogue? Then, you could join Pushpanath in November, 2015 on his next walk for climate change. “It could become a movement of its own if everyone in each of our friends list were to walk in their own neighbourhoods. We could count the total number of steps we took towards change or sum up the collective distance we walked!” he says sounding excited.

Winding up, he says India has an enviable population of youth and a large chunk of that population is still in its formative years. “Working with children is the way forward. But preaching to them will only

alienate them. Sharing stories, on the other hand, can help them see the consequences of our actions. They must make their own choices.” he emphasizes. Youngsters, according to him, can become potent ambassadors of positive change.

Profile

Pushpanath Krishnamurthy is presently Director, Programme and Advocacy, Centre for Social Markets. He continues to keep alive his connection with Oxfam and is a trainer and motivational speaker. Follow his work at his website www.gopushgo.com and his Facebook page, Pushpanath Empowerment Consultancy.

— *Aruna V Iyer*

7. We Could Be Heroes

A week of tragedy — one unlike anything Chennai had ever seen before — had undoubtedly brought out the best in the city. Even as flood waters wreaked havoc on homes, household appliances and even human lives, December 2015 will be remembered for Chennai’s heroes, but unlike the kind we are used to. These heroes were just like anybody else, and their heroism was driven by just one factor: the need to make a difference.



On December 2, amateur danseuse Supriyaa Ananthanarayanan, was watching with despair as her television kept beaming visuals of a sinking city. “Just the thought that a lot of people were stranded overnight, and that there wasn’t enough help or voices raised, was enough to tell me that help was needed soon,” she says. It was day one of what would soon become the worst floods to hit Chennai in a century. Nearly 36,000 cusecs of water had just been released from the Chembarambakkam Reservoir, and low-lying settlements by the Adyar River and the Cooum were slowly witnessing water levels rising. Soon enough, these homes were flooded. This, even as localities like Velachery and Madipakkam, built on erstwhile lakes and bunds, were also beginning to feel the wrath of mother nature. “I began with the intention of helping out a few friends who I hadn’t heard from — people who lived in Velachery,” Supriyaa concedes, “Soon enough, when we were out on the streets, we realized that the scale of the tragedy was beyond imagination. We saw how bad it was.” Supriyaa then teamed up with her brother’s theatre group and began by distributing food, to those who lost their homes overnight. The team also put up a bunch of numbers on social media, spreading the word that they were out there to help. “Chennai Live and Radio Mirchi had read our posts on Facebook and announced a couple of our phone numbers on air,” she says, “That caused a lot of people

to call us and donate relief material to the cause.” But Supriyaa was merely one of several youngsters whose bravest avatars came to the fore when Chennai saw its worst tragedy in a while.

In another corner of the city, 18-year-old Loyola College student Adrian David was enjoying his rain break when he realized that it would be a while before the break ended. As news of flooding began streaming in on television, he took his bicycle to survey the areas around him. “MMDA Colony, Chooleimedu and Saidapet were the worst-affected, and I felt the need to help in any way I could,” he says. With the help of two like-minded friends, the trio began supplying food packets to these areas, after getting a rough estimate of population count from locals. Similarly, several others — mostly youngsters — began doing their bit for a city in need. From organising relief control centres, to setting up relief camps, to volunteering in relief camps or driving SUVs with relief material for distribution, the Chennai floods saw Gen-Next in action. Chennai’s spirit was there for all to see.

Several corporate houses: the Polaris Group, Sangam Cinemas and Cognizant Technology Solutions to name a few, also pitched in with monetary contributions and relief distribution. Overnight, blankets, food packets, sanitary napkins, mosquito repellents, candles and clothes reached several thousand people stranded in different pockets of the city: from Pulianthope to Alandur and even some of the worst-affected areas like Porur. “A lot of the people involved in volunteering were also affected by the floods in some way,” Supriyaa says, “But they were able to get out safe without having to bear with too much damage, and that must have also been a trigger to reach out and help those who weren’t quite as fortunate.” While most volunteering groups began by distributing food, they soon realized that food was being distributed in large measure by relief centres. The focus, as Supriyaa recalls, would not have to shift to other necessities: “like blankets, sanitary pads, and innerwear for women, clothes for children.” Supriyaa continues: “We then put together a care kit, which included a blanket, brush, paste, soap, a pain balm, a mosquito coil, a biscuit pack and a bottle of water.”

A lot of the volunteering also happened on social media platforms. “I was passing verified information on Facebook: if I knew of people going somewhere on rescue missions, and if there was something needed there

or anywhere else, I made sure I told them about it,” says photographer, Swetha Joyson. “There were a lot of people from Chennai but not necessarily in Chennai, who were doing just that.” Even as this was in progress, institutes like Loyola College and Ethiraj College threw open their doors to the homeless, and became makeshift relief camps. Nearly 1,500 people took shelter at Loyola College even as NGOs like the Bhumika Trust also did their bit to help. “This flood brought us all together,” says Adrian, “The power of social media manifested itself in helping us connect with each other and reach out to those in need of help.”

In due course, the rains stopped. But relief work still continued. Several thousands of people were homeless and needed basic supplies. And for that very reason, even after a week of wet weather had ended, Chennai’s spirit of volunteerism lived on. And it’s that spirit that has defined the city in its hour of crisis.



8. Living the Dream

Dreams are not just a series of mental images or emotions that occur during sleep, but maybe more. For many, living the dream is one's own desire of their life time, but very few see beyond this. They reach out to others, although not physically every time, in actions that would benefit others. In other words, they reach out as 'Angels' to those who are in need and are not mindful of their own trials or tribulations.

It was inspiring to meet Ms. Beena and watch her whole hearted work for the poor. It was also a lesson on how good quality of life could be.

Beena is the second daughter in her family with three other siblings. While she was young, her family faced a lot of hardships. Her father, the sole bread winner of the family, was a watch mechanic and ran a watch repair shop.

Right from childhood Beena had an interest in painting, which later became her profession. After schooling, Beena gradually developed an interest to work with the cine industry. Her first income was 100 rupees that she earned for her drawing in Thazhampoo incense sticks.

A very particular incident had made a dreadful impact in her life. In 2000, when Beena was sitting beside her son who was hospitalised, she met a mother with her child. She observed this mother carrying her child in her arms all the time. When she enquired about the child's health, the mother broke down and stated that her child was suffering from blood cancer.

Beena offered the child a pack of biscuits, and the child immediately accepted it. The mother cried again saying that her child had been asking her for biscuits for the past two days and she did not have money to buy them.

Moved by this incident, Beena got determined to work for the care of such children and this led to the blossoming of Raksha.

Beena launched Raksha Art Foundation, a Charitable Trust, in 2003, and focused upon working for the welfare of cancer patients. The Trust also rehabilitates children from drug abuse and educates people on the harmful effects of drug addiction

For the past 12 years, Beena has engaged herself in social work and has carried out several activities. She has worked with students studying in government schools, conducted blood donation camps to benefit cancer affected children, and organised awareness programmes on child abuse and drug addiction.

“Cancer at the early stages is curable. Being ignorant about the disease makes treatment difficult,” she says. A large number of college students are now teaming up with Beena to bring about cancer awareness in the society.

Beena's hard work and perseverance brought her to a better position. She also earned the fame of being the only lady banner artist in Tamil Nadu. In 2005 she had the opportunity to sell her oil painting to Maharaja Royal Club, for one lakh rupees, out of which she donated 40,000 rupees for the welfare of cancer-affected children.

Our society needs a balanced development and cannot improve if a section of its people continue to be discriminated.

The well-being of the society means the well-being of its individual. Beena is living her dream and no doubt is a role model for us all. Let us follow her foot steps to build a better society!

— *Leena*



9. Change is in the Chennai Air

Chennai-based publisher, Vincent D’Souza, likes to call himself one of the “catalysts” of Madras Day. He is after all, one of the brains behind the initiative from when it began in 2004. A true-blue Chennaiite, he’s also seen the city change in all aspects — from the sleepy little seashores of Mylapore, to the bustling metropolis that Chennai is, today. This year, like all years, Vincent and a few like-minded Chennaiites will ring in Madras Day celebrations. But by his own admission, there’s nothing special about Madras Day, this year. “It’s all about youngsters getting out there and doing their bit to commemorate the city’s big day,” he says, “It’s all about building an eco-system. There’s no method to it all. Madras Day is about the youth of the city doing what they can for the city, like they have been doing year after year.”

Vincent’s nonchalance notwithstanding, Madras Week this year, is replete with fun activities that have come to become part and parcel of the annual celebrations. From walks and talks, to exhibitions and tours, the week has it all. In fact, the celebrations this year promises to remain as informative as ever with talks on communities like the early Armenian settlers, food trails on Mint Street, Chennai and its undying love for cricket and photo-walks by the dozen. But this mishmash of

lifestyle, history and heritage is honed onto one objective — the need to provide Chennai’s youth with a platform to get more active. “More youngsters in the city need to get out there and engage in healthy activism for their city,” he says. No talk about Chennai can end without discussing heritage, and Vincent is himself, a self-proclaimed lover of Chennai’s old-world charm. Is there enough being done to conserve the city’s heritage buildings? “The situation is better today, than it was before,” he replies. Is there more that can be done? He agrees. The need to keep preserving the city’s heritage is evidently a big part of any commemorative event surrounding the city and its history.

Speaking of history, Madras Day is perhaps one of the oldest commemorative events that pays tribute to the spirit of Chennai. As Vincent’s website, themadrasday.in says, “a city deserves to celebrate its birthday... and Chennai certainly deserves it”. Madras Day is an occasion that marks the formal founding of erstwhile Madras back in 1639, when the English East India Company built Fort St George on a small parcel of land and gradually developed little towns around it. The integration of these hamlets around the fort, became known as the city of Madras. The concept of a celebration however was ideated only as late as 2004, when Vincent was joined by historian S Muthiah and senior journalist Sashi Nair. Gradually, the celebrations became bigger and the concept of Madras Week was thus born. This year, Madras Week will be commemorated between August 16 and August 23, while Madras Day continues to remain August 22, year after next.

Madras Day celebrations this year, will be supported by a host of home-grown businesses in Chennai. These include establishments like Amethyst, Alliance Francais of Madras, Chamiers Cafe, Madras University and Queen Mary’s College. Added to this list, are establishments that have adopted the city as their home, like ITC Grand Chola, The Park hotel, and Hyatt Regency. All in the attempt to make Chennai sit and take note of its glorious past, even as it makes a push to what Vincent calls a more “activised city”. He adds: “It’s the youngsters who will have to come out and make that change and become more active. Chennai’s youth have to take greater part in the civics, politics and policies of this city.” Could social media become a catalyst towards achieving that? “It could but it’s not the only tool towards achieving

this,” Vincent says, “I get the feeling that social media quickly turns into a medium where a lot of us crib about the state of affairs around us, instead of going out there and making a difference. I want Chennai’s youngsters to get their hands dirty even as they strive to bring about this change. You need to be pro-active and political.”

Any talk about a city in the process of change can only lead to the most visible aspect of changing Chennai, and that’s the image of the city itself. When Chennai’s image is discussed, one can’t help but refer to the metro rail as perhaps this city’s most visible infrastructural landmark. Is Chennai on the fast-track to growth, transit-and-infrastructure-wise? Vincent agrees. “There is indeed a great improvement in the city’s transit and connectivity.” But he’s quick to caution against over-estimating these changes. “You have to realize, however, that transit modes like the metro rail are merely showpiece projects. At the end of the day a lot of your success as a transit hub depends on the quality of your roads or how equipped your traffic management systems are. That certainly matters too.”

In a nutshell, Madras Day is all about remembering the old and welcoming the new. However, a host of events that in a sense, celebrate Madras, has ensured that the city’s rich heritage and culture won’t be forgotten in a hurry. This, even as the city gears up usher in a new era of change — one that promises to allure and direct the people of this city into a brighter and more meaningful future.

A beacon is seen as a guiding light. This volume is bubbling with inspiring conversations, motivational talks and positive energizers of such unsung beacons. Every conversation has a learning to offer and every experience shared has a lesson to remember.

Experience is the best teacher and life's lessons from these renowned people instill a lot of hope in people who want to begin afresh.

A sparkling idea, a helping hand, a step towards peace and positivity all around is the common thread running through the book.

Dr. Lalitha Balakrishnan

Principal

MOP Vaishnav College for Women
Chennai



CSIM

to learn • to help • to raise

CSIM Publications

391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar,
Alapakkam, Chennai 600 116.

Phone : (91-44) 42805365. Website: www.csim.in