

UNSUNG BEACONS



Volume VIII

Stories of people for whom humanity matters

A compilation of articles featured in
Conversations Today - 2017

**CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INITIATIVE
AND MANAGEMENT**

UNSUNG BEACONS

Volume VIII

*Stories of people for
whom humanity matters*

*A compilation of articles featured in
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Foreword

I am extremely delighted to know that volume VIII of *Unsung Beacons* is coming to the hands of the eagerly waiting readers. I have been a regular reader of the ‘Conversations Today’ and hence know that the readers of this book ‘Unsung Beacons’ will have a lot of takeaways and lessons to learn from.

The stories featured here are interesting and are real facts grouped into Alumni Talk, Inspiring Conversations, NGO profile, Positive Energy and Trend setters. Every article is unique and has a different message to convey. I am particularly impressed with the brevity with which every episode is penned and edited, so that the reader can complete one message in a few minutes.

I would simply describe this book as ‘Light from many lamps’. I am sure that many people will draw inspiration from this book and inspire many more people.

My best wishes to CSIM. You are doing a good service!

Dr. Sylendrababu.IPS

Add. Director General of Police



Editor's Note

I am delighted to present the eighth edition of *Unsung Beacons*.

While growing up, we have, of course, heard many stories that inspired us. This book is a compilation of enthusing stories of changemakers featured in *Conversations Today 2017*. Our choice of title: 'Unsung Beacons' is in itself a reflection of strong personalities who have been chosen for this publication.



I would like to thank all those who agreed to give me an interview. Each of them were distinctive in their work and their insights have been fulfilling. My warmest thanks and appreciation to my fellow writers Shanmuga Priya and JS who ensured that their stories were presented in a positive tone, however difficult the issue might be.

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

My most sincere thanks to my parents and children for their love and understanding.

This book is a gift for all of us who have the opportunity to read it. I hope it inspires you to pursue your own dreams.

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

I. ALUMNI TALK

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

Writer: Shanmuga Priya. T



1. A.Arulkumar

Empowering livelihoods

Globalisation and liberalisation ushered in a new era of development, and also affected the course of traditional livelihoods. While this also had an impact on occupational diversity, rendering some of them redundant exacerbated the divide between haves and have-nots. Growing aspirations, emerging opportunities in dominant sectors, new patterns of migration in both rural and urban areas continue to question the relevance of some traditional livelihoods even today. “Allowing our people to give up on traditional forms of livelihoods for new vocations in demand is a dangerous predicament. Livelihoods patterns must evolve over a continuum. If not revive, it will be wiser to explore new applications of traditional knowledge; else we stand to lose a complete generation of knowledge and skills,” warns Mr.A.Arulkumar, founder of Shine India Educational Trust in Tindivanam, Tamil Nadu.

A native of this district, Arulkumar completed his schooling in Chennai. After graduating in Mechanical Engineering and Business Administration, he decided to establish his own business venture in order to plan his time between career, social activities, and personal life. “I always had my priorities set. Empowering the downtrodden was a moral responsibility that I felt since my school days. I owe it to my

school that imbibed these values in me. I still examine every issue based on these values,” he says, emphasising the need for every individual to relate themselves to social issues and rationalise their actions. That does sound ideal and utopian, but according to Arulkumar it is this relatability that can inculcate values of social responsibility.

Content with the performance of his hardware and electronics business, he also spent significant time in volunteering for local NGOs. Every time he volunteered for an organisation, he got to examine a new dimension of poverty that was invariably a function of sustainable livelihood. With every new organisation he worked for, he made new friends and attended different training programmes. “I got a sense of the interventions being done in Tindivanam district and the graph of social inequity bemused me. While some programmes seemed to work with a long-term vision, others seemed to be pocketed due to spatial and project biases,” he says. Determined to improve the lives of the marginalised population from his perspective, he founded Shine India Educational Trust in 2015. The Trust began operations by organising simple health camps and the community interactions alongside these camps helped him study the communities from the lens of an insider.

Entry into the communities exposed him to those dimensions of poverty which were only observations until now. He was disappointed to learn that the linkage between formal education and revival of local economy was absolutely missing. “The more evident this became, I wanted to explore the potential education per se could have in building new livelihoods. But, where does the cycle of impact start? This is when my friends and I realised the power of social entrepreneurship,” explains Arulkumar.

CSIM’s Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management encouraged Arulkumar to explore social entrepreneurship within the context of his work. “I was surprised to learn that goal setting was a skill in itself. The journey from vision to issue based intervention then followed, requiring you to exhaustively analyse all dimensions of the issue concerned in order to identify the suitable path for change. I felt reassured,” smiles Arulkumar.

The art of pottery was losing its relevance and the local potters' community led a miserable life. Having dismissed the scope for revival of pottery, he set on to match the skill base with new opportunities. This is when CSIM enabled a collaboration with IIT Madras. Students from IIT Jodhpur and traditional potters had developed an indigenous water filter called the G-Filter that can provide clean drinking water to rural households at a low cost. The prototype was a success and was capable of providing one litre of clean drinking water at a cost of 50 rupees, thereby making it affordable and accessible. Produced by baked clay technology it was also an opportunity for the potters to upgrade their skills.

Shine India Educational Trust has so far trained 40 potters from four villages in Tindivanam district to manufacture these G-Filters for IIT Madras. "Potters were introduced to a new form of livelihood. As information travelled, local demand for these filters also grew. G-Filters emerged to be a low cost solution besides providing a local skilling opportunity with numerous benefits," says Arulkumar, overwhelmed by the role of technology in establishing social equity. "I initially thought they were two ends of a spectrum but now, I have learnt that the onus is on us to bring them together with a vision," he says.

With the G-Filters keeping the potters occupied, the Trust has embarked on a new mission to establish a website that can promote online sale of products manufactured by the social enterprises and non-profit organisations in the State of Tamil Nadu. "No matter how good a product is, unless it reaches the end consumer all its social and economic values will stand annulled. As the Trust intends to build new livelihoods, it is only necessary that we establish a platform such as this to route sustainable revenue to the trust," he asserts.



2. Arulmozhi

Reviving rural lives

Fast paced urbanisation and now its reconceptualization ‘rurbanisation’ has created hopes for rural youth who are desperately looking for reliable work opportunities. With rural livelihoods facing their own challenges, penetration of education has helped prepare the rural youth for this perennial predicament. In this conversation, Mr Arulmozhi, Founder of Anisha Education & Charitable Trust in Arur, Tamil Nadu, shares how he equipped himself with all possible skills and resources to face this predicament and has resolved to educate children from his village and enable youth obtain respectable jobs.

Urbanisation led to migration into peripheral areas where rural youth found solace in entry level jobs, unable to survive with returns from traditional livelihoods. “This was a result of changes on both rural and urban front. Foot loose migrations managed to address both sides. Unless things improved in rural areas for the better, enduring poor standards of living and the uncertainty in survival will only lead to multi-generational poverty. I realised the difference education could make and wanted to use this as the vehicle for social change,” explains Arulmozhi, recounting worse situations in some of the neighbouring villages.

Having struggled hard to complete his schooling and unable to pursue higher education, Arulmozhi took advantage of every opportunity he had in order to study. Informed by the developments in his village near Arur, he did a diploma in short hand and secured a job at Kaalai Kathir, a popular local magazine. Soon, he became a reporter and the ensuing movement between villages allowed him to understand different dimensions of poverty. “The more I was drawn to the cause, I strongly felt that I must do something. Experience from the press also helped me see the huge gap between resources and schemes from government, their relevance and rate of utilisation,” says Arulmozhi who volunteered with different organisations to learn the basics of social work.

“I used to visit orphanages and distribute aids for hearing/speech impaired children. The little information I could gather during these visits helped me to rationalise my decisions. Now, I know the impact that organised work can do on a large scale,” he smiles.

Arulmozhi always had to face a volley of questions whenever his experience was discussed. “I narrated my life every time and the incidents that have shaped my vision. That is all I knew and fortunately, my intent was clear,” he recalls.

Arulmozhi launched Anisha Education Charitable Trust and Anisha Nursing Home in 2013 to redefine the scope of education and vocational training for village youth. Nursing Courses were organised in two different formats. Passing class five was the minimum qualification required to enrol in the courses. According to the minimum qualification that the candidates possessed, they were trained to become lab technicians, cleaners, PHC administrators, hygiene inspectors, etc., at the local primary health centres, hospitals and nursing homes. Practical training was offered at the Nursing Home. Medical camps were organised every year to expose and sensitise candidates on health issues.

“Hospitals in our villages are not fully equipped and there is lack of basic awareness amongst people. It is not easy for outsiders to influence the health seeking behaviour of villagers. Hence, the trust decided to build a cadre of professionals from the village who will not only influence health seeking behaviour, but also assist during emergency situations. As people saw the need for medical attention and the impact

of short term courses, significance of education was recognised,” says Arulmozhi who is encouraged by the developments in the education and health sectors. As the Trust also utilised government schemes in enrolment and placement, the village youth were kept informed of their entitlements.

For Arulmozhi, the Trust’s biggest achievement is the change in mindset amongst the girls. Girls in the villages are relatively less exposed than boys and early marriages results in higher dropout rates. However, girls who received education through the Trust ensured that their siblings attended school regularly. “Our girls are confident in making household decisions. They are rational and ambitious. I am happy with this change. They will show us the way,” says a content Arulmozhi. The Trust also supports the education of orphans and children of widowed/divorced parents.

The Social Entrepreneurship Outlook programme (SEOP) at CSIM helped Arulmozhi validate his own experience. While he was able to re-assess the management of his Trust according to principles that he learnt at CSIM, he feels that his own experience helped him shape the Trust further. “The CSIM course reminded me that this was just the beginning and that developments in my village will show me the way forward,” says a proud Arulmozhi, who looks forward to establish a school in his village.

“This is my dream. I want to see children mentored from their formative years. I want to see the next generation taking bold decisions that will revive the glory of rural life,” he says.



3. Dhananjayan

Agriculture and Livelihood

The implications of rural development programmes on agriculture and livelihood prospects in rural areas have been profound. More than anything, Mr. Dhananjayan, Founder of READ Trust in Thiruvannamalai, believes that they have had a strong influence on the decision making patterns of farmers. “Farmers have for long resorted to chemical farming to sustain their incomes from agriculture. It is the external factors that has helped to create an ecosystem to support the transition to organic farming. READ intends to be one such potential influence,” he adds.

Dhananjayan hails from Paramanandal village in Thiruvannamalai district. On completing his schooling, he joined the Electricity Board as a contract labourer. While his father thought this would lead him to secure a Government job, the issue of exploitation of contract labourers urged Dhananjayan to pursue his higher education.

Lost in thoughts of uncertainty, he learnt typewriting, as suggested by his senior colleagues. Later, he graduated in Botany and developed interest in teaching. It was during his college days that he discovered

the orator and a theatre artist in him. “As friends and staff appreciated my eloquence and performances, I began to realise the impact one can make while communicating awareness messages to the larger public. I felt curious and motivated,” he reminisces.

After B.Ed, Dhananjayan was recruited as a teacher in his village’s high school. “I studied in a Matriculation School. I could not learn English and had no confidence nor any career aspirations. In fact, I did not even try to seek opportunities in other schools in my district,” says Dhananjayan, who was forced to look out for another job after four years of teaching due to his temporary posting.

He then worked as a Cane Assistant in the sugar factory at Polur. It was during these days that he observed agricultural labour and the patterns in rural livelihood. His next job was as a Farm Manager for an INGO which allowed him to understand the framework of sustainable rural livelihoods.

“I knew nothing more than fertilisers and pesticides to get good yield of crops. I was introduced to concepts of soil health, preservation of biodiversity and organic fertilisers, pesticides, etc. The complete chain of benefits from organic farming to organic feed for animals amused me. I visited many farms to learn about organic farming and even trained farmers here,” he shares.

Soon, Dhananjayan decided to establish his own Trust to build support systems that can assist farmers in their transition to organic farming. “I wanted to go beyond conducting training programmes and channelise livelihood options in such a way that ensured sustainability in the villages. It was important to help people identify local opportunities so that there are no foot loose migrations, nor disinterest in farming. Striking a balance between prioritising organic farming and other opportunities with scant resources was very challenging,” he admits.

Rural Education and Agricultural Development Trust was founded in 2000 and the need for resources required Dhananjayan to submit proposals to different agencies. Dhananjayan took the help of a local consultant to prepare his proposals. “It was the trend then. Proposals was the first phase of relationship between a non-profit organisation

like READ and a funding organisation. I would go and narrate my ideas to any party who was ready to develop a proposal for us”, shares Dhananjayan, reiterating the apprehensions he had gone through. Fortunately, he developed communication skills during his work as a Farm Manager and this gave him the confidence to pursue formal training in managing his Trust.

The possibility of getting trained in writing his own proposals allured him. “A friend had mentioned about CSIM and their SEOP programme and this was just what I was looking for. I was surprised with the use of Vision and Mission statements in operationalising strategies. The analogy of a problem tree not only gave me clarity, but also helped me articulate READ’s objectives in resonance with the interests of different funding organisations. I began to see how important my story was, to them,” he says.

Gradually, Dhananjayan used his expertise in organic farming to develop modules and training materials for farmers’ training. Having completed a Diploma in Production of Bio-Fertilisers and Bio-Pesticides from Annamalai University, he was able to structure the training programmes and group meetings corresponding to the needs of the farmers concerned.

READ also focusses on vocational training for women and youth in the villages. They are trained in tailoring, typewriting and cell phone repairs. Beautician courses are most popular amongst women as it allows them to earn from the comfort of their home. “Women in the villages are more comfortable with opportunities that do not hinder their routine at home. They feel they can plan their time better,” he adds.

READ has also trained farmers in production of soaps, bio fertilisers and other products, thereby creating in-roads for local employment during the off-season. In order to make sure that the acquired skills were effectively used for livelihood, READ collaborated with stakeholders and encouraged entrepreneurship development.

In collaboration with the Entrepreneurship Development Institute in Chennai and National Institute of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in Hyderabad, READ organised skill training programmes in the

villages around Thiruvannamalai. Further, women and youth were also encouraged to register with the District Industrial Centre to avail loans under different schemes and other allowances to set up their own business units. “It has been four years since this collaboration was initiated. We are proud to see young entrepreneurs talk about the benefits they have gained from Prime Minister Employment Generation Programme and Unemployed Youth Employment Generation Programme. I am happy to see them recognise opportunities that are available within reach and in turn inspire their peers,” he says.

Dhananjayan believes that self-sustainability in villages is a function of both agriculture and other livelihood opportunities that are in resonance with the local life. Enabling people to see these linkages has been a testing time for READ. Recognising the need for attitudinal change, he formed the Krishnalaya Cultural Group at READ and organised street plays and other interactive programmes to communicate key messages to people.

“Agriculture must thrive, not just survive. Organic farming is the future! READ will be instrumental in bringing about this change,” says a determined Dhananjayan.



4. D. Dharmalingam

Becoming an Insider

The influence of education and micro finance on the lives of rural poor, particularly the women has been demonstrated by many initiatives. Amudha Surabhi Sevai Maiyam, based in Kannayiram Taluk of Dharmapuri district also follows suit. What makes it unique is the transition in the Founder's vision. The journey from an outsider's perspective to that of an insider, has helped him recognise the values of self-employment and the principles of credit worthiness in a rural setting.

“I guess that's the difference in running your own NGO. Working in other organisations exposes you to different perspectives of the issue being focussed and does not give you the liberty to change the course of an action suiting the interests of the target group. While it is all about decision making in the former, it is more procedural in the latter,” explains Mr D Dharmalingam, Founder of Amudha Surabhi Sevai Maiyam.

Hailing from Dharmapuri, Dharmalingam was well aware of the development sector's contribution to the social progress in his district. Soon after graduation in Tamil literature, he joined the Arivoli Iyakkam

as Assistant Project Coordinator. Arivoli Iyakkam is a movement aimed at eradicating illiteracy by developing a network of volunteers who went to villages to teach children. Teaching aids and study materials were also distributed. “The three years that I spent with Arivoli Iyakkam allowed me to interact with a wide range of people. Initially, I spoke only as a representative and kept reiterating the significance of education, like any other outsider would,” he says.

Gradually, Dharmalingam began to see how people associated themselves with an educational initiative. As part of his work, he visited 33 Panchayats, and eventually realised how people perceived education. He also saw the critical influence of their lifestyle with regard to education. “It was this open observation that helped me build relationship at the grassroot and district levels. I saw my role as an interface and did my best to realise the outcomes,” he says.

Dharmalingam also focussed on agriculture and in developing his land so as to ensure a steady flow of income for his family. “This was my responsibility and I had to take a sabbatical from development work,” he adds.

After four years, Dharmalingam joined a NGO that focused on micro-finance. Hooked to the idea and the impact it had, he formed 66 self-help groups (SHGs) within a month. With his extensive contacts and relationships that he had built earlier, he was recognised as the face of this NGO. This had a heavy bearing on him when the NGO decided to move out of the region.

“SHGs needed a nodal agency and the groups formed were too young to be left by themselves. I felt that I was accountable and had to take up the responsibility,” he says, indicating the birth of Amudha Surabhi Sevai Maiyam in 2005. Working closely with the SHGs, Dharmalingam discovered how credit worthiness was understood in the villages—both by local leaders and external money lenders.

“Cash availability in these villages was a great issue once. Today, credit worthiness is no longer individual oriented and the open discussion of needs amongst the SHG members is a milestone in itself. There is more

accountability in the villages and the women are comfortable to borrow from the Panchayat now,” he says.

Dharmalingam and his team have formed 272 SHGs and all activities are managed by a team of six staff members in his organisation. Visibly proud, he reiterates that there are no money lenders in his Taluk and that resources have been built through savings. “The groups have utilised more than 50 crores worth subsidy loans and continue to avail loans from different government schemes. Savings has become a habit now,” he smiles.

Dharmalingam does not dismiss the idea of defaulters and appreciates how women have learnt to resolve this problem within their own groups. Accustomed to government schemes and loans, women also began to establish their self-employment ventures. Production of bricks, umbrellas and ropes, animal husbandry, small eateries, tiffin delivery services, flower shops, etc., are run by women. They also inspire young girls who are now aware about their right to education. Early marriages have drastically reduced in this region.

Dharmalingam is very content with the impact his organisation has been able to create. However, he is in complete awe of the fact that SHGs have become a source of social strength for the women in these villages. “They have recognised the need to build an income base besides engaging in agricultural activities and no longer complain about low levels of income from agriculture. This is where I would like to appreciate the value of self-employment. These women have helped me un-learn the falsely perpetuated association between education and income. Whether educated or not, self-employment is an option that everyone must think of,” he asserts.

Trying to cash in on this excitement in self-employment, he has also initiated talks with the Tamil Nadu Skill Development Training Centre to introduce a new range of vocational skills that women can take to. With classes scheduled to begin from September 2017, he is very positive of the impact this move would create.

“This is my valuable lesson from CSIM’s Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme. Introduction of new strategies must be guided by

the changes that evolve during the course of intervention. We waited out to see how our SHGs evolved. We know their strengths now and are confident of using the same to create a wider impact through new programmes,” says Dharmalingam.



5. Haleema Begam

Women Empowerment to Social Development

Traditional and cultural barriers have discouraged women in many areas. By overcoming these barriers, some women have managed to achieve and emerge as leaders. Ms Haleema Begam, Founder of Rojavanam Arakkattalai in Tindivanam district, Tamil Nadu has confronted several struggles to be what she is today.

Born in Ulagapuram village at Tindivanam district, Haleema was brought up in Chennai and Pondicherry, as the family had to move between these cities to suit their business. “My father owned a printing press and also dealt with iron scrap merchandise. We had a comfortable standard of living, but as we had to adhere to traditional gender roles, I could not pursue my studies beyond class 10 earlier,” says Haleema who completed her B.Com degree two years ago.

“I am happy with the social skills and exposure that I gained while studying Diploma in Arabic in Trichy. Without that, I would not have gained self-confidence,” she adds.

As was the practice in her Muslim community and also a popular social norm, Haleema got married at the age of 18. Marriage brought her to Chennai once again and the cultural dynamics in the city inspired her to get engaged in a job where her presence and skills were looked forward to. But, she could not pursue her dream due to her husband's ill health and as she had to relocate to Tindivanam.

At Tindivanam, Haleema became an active member of a Self-Help Group. Her active engagement led her to become the coordinator of the SHG very soon. "I saw the differences that SHGs could make in the lives of women and their families as it did for me too! Socio-economic status of the SHG families eventually changed. Witnessing women overcome their financial crisis steadily instilled faith in micro-finance. I wanted to extend more support to my community," she explains.

Impressed by her work and commitment, Mathura Micro Finance Private Limited decided to recruit Haleema as their Coordinator. Haleema's work with the SHGs convinced her family about her interest and capacity in handling such a huge responsibility. As it was uncommon for a lady in her community to play this role, she had to face a lot of challenges. "I had to reassure that I knew what I was getting into, and that I will be working only with women," she says.

Before taking up this job, Haleema only knew a garment shop in Dindivanam. As the circumstances forced her to earn and feed her family, she transformed into an enterprising woman, who managed work and home with perfect balance, even denying the promotion that came her way. "I gained confidence. I learnt to socialise with all women. I made a lot of friends within bank circles who motivated me to start my own NGO and work with SHG women," she says.

While many women availed loans through micro-finance scheme, Haleema observed that 96% did not utilise the funds for the reason they had borrowed for. "An isolated focus to reach, with no interest in the actual outcome, disturbed me. Money was always in the hands of men, who most of the time, do not feel responsible for repayment. Every time I went to the community for collection, women made me wait and went about mobilising the amount for that month's payment, from the same informal sources, that the micro-finance programme intended to

eliminate. Women were pushed into a vicious circle of borrowing and repayment,” she elaborates.

This led Haleema to establish ‘Rojavanam Arakkattalai’ in 2014 to ensure that women who borrowed through SHGs used the funds to create self-employment opportunities. She formed 10 SHGs and her prior experience helped her sail through these stages without any hindrance. However, almost all these groups failed to invest in savings as they only used the group as a source for borrowing funds. “My plans took a pause and I was almost going to give up. It was then a friend referred me to CSIM. I pursued PG Diploma in Social Initiative and Management. This was the right place for me.

“The course not only allowed me to learn NGO management and engage in a bigger network, but I evolved as a stronger person. I had new ideas and felt motivated. I could place micro-finance within the bigger frame of social development and was able to see the continuum between women’s empowerment and social development,” she says.

Having learnt tailoring at a very young age and her husband being a mechanic in the same field, Haleema decided to start a training centre for underprivileged women and adolescent girls at Rojavanam Arakkattalai’s office, thereby putting the office space to a new use.

As women were speculative about the vocational training programmes that also promised cash incentives on completion of the programmes, Haleema did not plan her training as a revenue generation model. Instead, she conducted 3 batches free of cost, with 20 women in each batch. The women after training kept requesting her for job opportunities and thus came the launch of a garment unit in August 2016, with six power machines, all pooled in through personal investment. Once again, she was beset by challenges as there were only few orders and sustaining the garment unit was difficult. In the meantime, as she got to interact more often with the community members, she succeeded in forming 50 self-help groups that are now ready to be engaged. Haleema dreams of introducing interest free micro loans for these women. “This is my mission in life. I know it is difficult, but this can be very effective”.

Undeterred by all obstacles, Haleema continues to plan her next steps with more diligence than before. She has developed a project with six components – education, agriculture, environment, law, substance abuse, women and children—which will help communities evolve as conscious decision makers. “Social and Knowledge Capital are two things that can redefine the course of development in a community. Utilisation of services will improve along with the demand to seek them, ushering in accountability from both ends—service providers and service users,” says Haleema, dreaming of a balance emerging from these dynamics that will promote social development inherently.



6. Kavitha

Abilities and Learning Curves

The journey from acquiring knowledge to skill building is a process that is both interesting and precarious. “Knowledge and skills result in abilities that allow us to use them in circumstances of our choice. Unless knowledge results in abilities, the choice of application is not in our hands. We then become responsible for the status quo in our society we often question about. Abilities is what can make a difference at an individual level and in an organisation,” says Dr G.Kavitha, Founder of SPOT Healthcare Research and Training Centre in Chennai.

As the eldest among four siblings, Kavitha grew up in an austere atmosphere. She could not even choose her favourite subject in graduation. “My father forced me to choose Chemistry for my under graduation while I loved Mathematics. I could not overpower his decision, but promised to just get through and then look at career options of my choice,” reminisces Kavitha.

Kavitha was inspired by both her grandparents who found new ways of engaging in social services as and when possible. “My maternal grandfather belonged to the Communist party. He was a farmer who strongly felt for the emancipation of women and empowerment of the downtrodden. Although no other family member joined this party after his demise, his ideals of equality and respect for labour are still being practiced. These principles began to influence my choices in life and were the bases on which I questioned the state of affairs in our society. Why people still lived on platforms? Why were so many sleeping hungry despite welfare programmes and other initiatives? What could wipe out poverty and the divide between the haves and the have nots?” asks Kavitha.

Kavitha got an opportunity to engage in social service events during her college days, through the NSS. However, she could not continue taking part in such activities as her father disapproved of them. One of her experiences from NSS days encouraged her to pursue B.Ed. in Special Education (Mental Retardation). As her interest in working for the intellectually challenged children grew, she went on to pursue a Master Degree in Psychology. While she was gaining experience by working with different organisations in Chennai and Cuddalore, the Government of India’s District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) that was introduced in 1998 helped her grow as a Resource Teacher.

“It was my responsibility to train teachers in identifying learning disabilities in children, teaching new methods that can enable learning process for the differently abled and also enrol those who were out of school or school dropouts. Every time I trained a teacher, I felt like drawing the learning curves of new groups of children and I felt proud about my efforts,” says Kavitha.

Kavitha became more passionate about working with children and decided to prepare herself completely. She completed her Post Graduate Diploma in Therapeutic Education from YMCA in Chennai and soon became the Head Mistress of the Special School at YMCA. All her endeavours were appreciated and she was conferred the Best Teacher Award in 2008. Kavitha felt a great sense of responsibility in every step forward. She also studied a one year course on Learning Disability to

be able to train parents of special children effectively. “Learning is a lifelong process which is not restricted to school, nor are parents devoid of this responsibility once their children get enrolled in special schools. Unless we see teachers and parents complementing each other’s work, children’s learning curves can never progress positively. This is very critical in the case of children with learning disabilities,” asserts Kavitha.

With her heart for children, her family circumstances forced her to practice Acupuncture. Professionally trained and well connected with colleagues in the field, she got an opportunity to work with the Sri Santhana Krishna Healthcare and Research Foundation. Kavitha took on every challenge in her own stride. She practiced Acupuncture and simultaneously managed time to train parents, teachers in teaching children with learning disabilities. “All my knowledge, skills and the resultant abilities helped me sail through the toughest time in my life. I survived and also managed to help improve the quality of lives of the few others, I could. It was two distinct fields and a wide range of stakeholders to be dealt with. I saw my abilities dictate my decisions and was determined to practice the principles that inspired me,” she says.

Kavitha enrolled in CSIM’s Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme to learn how to establish her own work centre, but there was more in store for her. “Being amidst people who have always thought about the disadvantaged who are inevitably left out of the social welfare system, I couldn’t help but relate to the intellectually challenged children who lead a life of dependency. I was forced to reason out why training programmes prepared them to face the outer world while mainstreaming was the need. This called for efforts from both sides,” she says.

Kavitha founded SPOT in September 2017 with a two-fold focus. One was to provide medical support and free health care services to the marginalised, and the other was to train parents of special children to help mainstream their children to lead independent lives.

Emphasising that mainstreaming special children is a long term and a holistic process Kavitha believes to have made the right start with

SPOT's activities. Her past pupil's visit on the inauguration day reaffirms her belief. "My old student, an autistic child from the Special School at YMCA is now studying in a regular school and has scored 86 percent in his class ten exams. He presented a memento and wished me success when SPOT was inaugurated. He is now in class 12 and his development reassures my belief in mainstreaming special children," shares Kavitha, determined to change the lives of many such special children through SPOT.



7. P. Muthu

Empowering Self and Community

Achievement is a difficult term. “Every step in life is an achievement, because you move forward. Your decision is your power. It commands respect,” explains Mr P.Muthu, Founder of Sky Foundation in Kolambakkam, Kanchipuram. Highly motivated and grounded, Muthu has always endeavoured to support his community. “I am differently abled. I know it takes time, but I have also figured out how to progress, with the community,” he smiles.

Muthu hails from Kolambakkam in Kanchipuram district. He confronted numerous challenges in accessing education, yet got trained in Plastic Injection Moulding at the local ITI centre. He interned and also worked with many companies, but was unhappy to see other differently abled youngsters from his village deprived of opportunities. “For the differently abled in rural areas, choice and access to opportunities hardly come together. By now we all know the level of support a community can render to the differently abled. It varies from one place to another and every community adapts gradually. At times, each community might take the lifetime of many individuals like me. Lack of support and discrimination is not new. What is disturbing is that the benefits planned

for the differently abled never reaches us or rather the implementing authorities don't find us," laments Muthu.

Muthu's work experience reiterated that the differently abled who live in rural areas prefer to not move from their villages. Their urge to succeed diminishes by the time they encounter all the barriers. Fortunately, Muthu found his way and continued to move forward. He worked with Rejuvenant India Movement (RIM) for three years as Samudaya Sirpi, meaning Social Sculptor. He also coordinated the tsunami rehabilitation and tribal development projects on behalf of Asscord, for about eight years. Engaging with different communities helped him learn about the reality of lives led by differently abled in rural areas. While he felt a strong push to do something for the differently abled, he was also sure that they can come together to help the rest of the community. "Seeking help throughout our lives is both a responsibility and a burden. We must go beyond this and consider helping each other in the community. It is easily said than done," he warns.

Muthu established Sky Foundation in 2012 to help differently abled from rural areas and tribal children in his district. He envisaged building their capacities to ensure personal and societal progress, simultaneously. Beginning with life skills for small groups of students, Sky Foundation has geared up to run free tuition centres for tribal children. The local teams have stopped many child marriages besides educating and sensitising the communities in the process. 24x7 presence in the community helped Muthu and his team to understand the local concerns better, and plan strategies for change. Sky Foundation has collaborated with organisations like Concerned for Child Rights Network to widen their reach and impact.

Sky foundation also anchors the activities of Federation for Differently Abled Association, Tamil Nadu, in Kanchipuram district. Moving beyond pocketed interventions, Muthu decided to form simple structures within communities that took the responsibility of protecting child rights. The foundation thus formed Child Rights Protection Committees that comprised of volunteers from the villages, women, panchayat leaders and other representatives to monitor the situation of child rights in Palayanur and Bukkathurai panchayats. A very successful

and penetrating concept in the realm of child rights, inbuilt community structures promise to help communities comprehend their challenges and resolve them. With youngsters trained at Sky Foundation taking up key roles here, Muthu is hopeful of seeing a better tomorrow for both the target groups.

Muthu's journey has not been easy though. Coming from a technical background, Muthu built his vision from past experiences. A friend's reference led him to CSIM and according to him, completing the one year programme was in itself a big achievement. Although Sky Foundation was established and registered in 2012, 12A and 80G were alien concepts then. "None of the leaders from the organisations where I had worked earlier were inclined to know my personal aspirations. They probably could not visualise a role model in me. CSIM welcomed me as a leader, which was very encouraging. If I can switch on a computer and work on it, it is only because of the training I received as part of the PG Diploma in Social Initiative and Management," shares an overwhelmed Muthu.

"I could see Sky Foundation as a full-fledged organisation now. I learnt the significance of book keeping, and preparing annual audit reports. I am confident of presenting my organisation's work to any audience," asserts Muthu, quickly adding that Sky Foundation's 80G and 12A certificates have been big achievements for him.

Muthu feels capacitated to administer the work of Sky Foundation on a bigger scale. Muthu's vision is to establish a training centre in the village that can create employment opportunities for the differently abled. As always, he moves ahead with his community.

"I have encouraged seven students and friends also to take up the course at CSIM," he signs off.



8. R Palaniammal

Women force to reckon with

Empowerment of women in a multicultural setting is a long journey. It is a multi-layered process that strives to reconstruct the idea of gender from the perspective of equality and equity. “It is a big reform when a woman exercises autonomy to decide on her household expenditure. Irrespective of her being an earning member, the responsibility to manage household expenditure seldom comes with decision making power. The idea of empowerment is to bring change at that level by leveraging small opportunities and build the confidence in women to be able decision makers,” explains R Palaniammal, Founder of Jos NGO in Dharmapuri district.

Hailing from Kadunayakanalli village in Dharmapuri district, Palaniammal discontinued her studies after class 9 and was married off early by the age of 16. “I live amongst women who have accepted the decisions taken by their families. Myrada completely transformed my vision for women in my village,” she adds. After marriage, Palaniammal got an opportunity to get trained in Myrada. As her spouse

also worked in the development sector, her exposure further helped in contextualising the idea of empowerment in her village.

Women in the villages are mostly confined to their households. “I realised that it was important to empower them as they were capable of understanding and prioritising the needs of their children and family,” says Palaniammal who organised many events, training programmes and social activities in her village along with Myrada’s support.

Palaniammal received training in sustainable agriculture, micro finance, formation and management of women’s groups and economic empowerment of women, among others. While she continued to organise activities like toilet construction in local schools, awareness building on child marriage and importance of education, she found herself ‘empowered and capable’. “I felt socially responsible as I had the functional knowledge to guide local women and children on educational loans and its procedures and about managing decision making within households. I liked to see how consciously women revisited their decisions and understood priorities in a household,” she smiles.

Eventually, Palaniammal formed women’s groups and mentored them. Right from recognising priorities and seeking loans, she capacitated the women’s groups and also trained them in managing their accounts. Her groups’ became a medium to organise awareness programmes, plantation drives and communicate critical information on services that the villagers could avail. Women began to look forward to her leadership and grew very comfortable with her presence in the field. In 2006, she established her own NGO to strengthen the women’s groups and replicate the model in the neighbouring villages.

“It was a simple beginning with limited resources. I wanted to see the groups growing together, and in the process, influence their families. It has been 10 years now. The groups function independently and share their experiences with each other. They work together to prevent child marriages, female infanticide and domestic violence. Education is a priority in every household now. People from the villages avail education loans now. Environmental sustainability has become a universal concern here. Kitchen gardens are becoming popular and

plantation drives are organised frequently. Women have become a positive force, influencing decisions within and outside their homes. This is a new beginning in my village,” says a content Palaniammal.

Palaniammal’s association with the ‘Pengal Nilaitu Needitha Kutamaipu’, a federation of NGOs from seven districts introduced her to the SEOP programme at CSIM. While she intended to learn project management in detail, Palaniammal feels that the course gave her more than what she had expected. “I recognised simple errors in the way I planned my activities and the difference they could have possibly had on the impact created,” she admits. Interaction with different stakeholders, according to her, gave her big lessons. “I was in the midst of people who respected each other’s vision and looked forward to learning from them. I saw men talking about women empowerment,” shares Palaniammal who feels determined to see her women’s groups evolve as a social force in the village, shaping the course of growth and development as equal participants.



9. L. Rajendran

Contributing Welfare

The record of model villages in our country emphasises the critical role of village leaders, especially the village sarpanchs and village panchayat presidents. Their way of managing resources at disposal and prioritising village needs from a position of authority and leadership has not only established new models of village development, but also reiterated the efficacy of social transformation in rural villages. More interestingly, the one common thread that characterises all model villages in our country is the participation of local people.

Dr. L. Rajendran, Founder of Best Action Trust in Bahdoor village of Thiruvannamali district was also motivated by the spirit of people’s participation. His mission is not about a model village, but rather a welfare model in the village that ensures care of the vulnerable and marginalised.

Hailing from a family of Siddha practitioners, he also took to the profession by the age of 25. Being the only doctor in his village, his service to the people and concern with which he advocated household practices for good health made him immensely popular. “Institutional medical service was 17 kilometres away at Vandavasi. I had huge responsibility that dictated my actions and could not make the villagers

depend on a system of medicine that was out of reach. I therefore felt that it was important to shape their lifestyle in such a way that health was an inherent value which was taken care of in all circumstances. Such efforts got me closer to people,” says Rajendran, who was unanimously elected as the Panchayat Board President for Bahdoor village in 2001.

Rajendran spent five years in this capacity building overhead tanks, borewells to resolve water crisis and well laid cement roads that increased mobility of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who lived in remote pockets. When residents from marginalised areas began to move around, he believed, their accessibility to information and services also increased, balancing the asymmetry that had set in for ages.

His efforts to make the lives of dhobi community easier was also well paid off. “I am still overwhelmed by the kind of respect they have for me,” he smiles. Rajendran understood that he must bridge the distance between system and the people through his position. This, according to him, was essential to make people comfortable in approaching the formal institutions for their needs.

Rajendran invited the District Collector to his village and organised a Grievance Redressal Day where more than 150 issues were resolved in a single day. “Issues concerning procurement, name change in ration cards, processing of widow and old age pensions, distribution of land documents, etc., were all addressed swiftly, reinstating people’s faith in these institutions,” he says.

He believed that one individual cannot and must not become the face of a system or institution, defining the way people perceive it. However, his journey to realise such values was cut short as he lost in the following election.

After completing his tenure in 2006, Rajendran practiced medicine and simultaneously identified ways of serving his villagers. Having established an identity for himself, it also became easier for him to engage in social welfare activities. In 2011, he founded the Best Action Trust in memory of his father, to continue social services without any external influences. “I grew up learning about welfare initiatives and

about helping the vulnerable. Education sponsorship for the abandoned children, institutional rehabilitation for the destitute and many such programmes inspired me. I wanted to do something similar in my village that paved way for the economic empowerment of poor,” he explains.

Through his Trust, he provided the aged with provisions and clothes and also helped them in obtaining their pensions. He selected children based on merit and offered scholarships, donated cycles for the differently-abled, and launched initiatives that enabled them to pursue their aspirations. For women, he initiated self-help groups to improve their credit worthiness and self- esteem.

In 2013, Rajendran received the Award for Social Service from the then Governor of Tamil Nadu, Dr K Rosiah. He was also awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the Global Peace University in 2013. “I am both a Siddha doctor and a Social Worker, each encouraging the other,” he smiles.

Best Action Trust is funded by contributions from Rajendran’s medicine practice and from his friends. He utilises five percent from his daily earnings for all these social activities. While he was content with his engagements arising from both the roles, his friend introduced him to CSIM’s Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative Management. “All I wanted to know was whether there was more that I could do with the resources and exposure I had. But, listening to contribution stories from different realms, I dreamt of pursuing something big that can have a long term impact on the health of my villagers. All my activities that were scheduled for specific occasions have now become more frequent and more organised,” he shares.

Rajendran’s new mission is to ensure provision of clean drinking water to every household in his village, at the rate of half a rupee per litre. With all the ground work in place, he is looking forward to start operations in the coming year.



10. G Sivanandam

Healing Traditionally

In this fast and modern life, mankind is spoilt for choice. “But how informed are our choices?” Mr A G Sivanandam, Founder of Sorgam Charitable Trust in Thiruthani has always wondered. A native of this district, Sivanandam completed his Diploma in Mechanical Engineering and worked in the industry for seven years. Meanwhile, two years after his diploma, he also pursued Doctor of Medicine in Acupuncture. The shift was found abrupt by his observers as only few knew about his interest in medicine that he had nurtured from class 9. “I was amused to learn that hypnotism had the capacity to heal diseases. I read a lot. The different forms of healing surprised me and the reasons why some were famous and others weren’t baffled me,” he recalls.

While in class 10, Siva came to know about Cancer and the fact that it had no cure scared him. “I did not want to see any of my family members suffer from Cancer. I therefore began to search for answers from traditional medicine,” he says.

Siddha recognises 4,448 types of diseases that mankind can succumb to and also recommends for appropriate cures. Siva believed that Cancer was also recognised in this grouping and began to explore a cure for cancer. He embraced a journey that led him from one place to another and one form of medicine to another, each time resulting in new revelations. He started noticing the side effects in allopathy as against natural healing methods like acupuncture which had no side effects.

The most critical experience in Siva's journey was his encounter with a famous doctor who confessed about side effects in allopathy medicine. "I was shocked to hear a Doctor (MBBS MD) confess to me about allopathy. Why was it so dominating then? I had newer, deeper questions and was taken aback by the extent to which every form of medicine promised healing. As I was also practicing Acupuncture, the training sessions with this doctor enlightened me. I realised my purpose in life," reminisces Siva.

In 1998, when Siva started seeing patients, the speculation amongst the community members was a big obstacle for him. Free consultancies created space for dialogue and he got an opportunity to understand the community. They were also scared of consequences that may result from giving up one form of medicine and embracing another. People were also unable to accept acupuncture as a form of healing as it did not prescribe any medication.

In due course, more people turned up for consultancies, and Siva was invited to other villages as well. He soon began centres at Gudiyatham, Thiruvallur and Punniyam panchayats. The results of his perseverance were now evident.

"Awareness alone does not suffice in the health sector. People want to see results. Unless they see someone from their own family or community cured by acupuncture, they would not have the confidence to try it out for themselves. Believing is not enough," he says.

Interestingly, Siva not only created awareness and offered treatment through his centres. He also promoted the idea of celebrating good health, like birthdays and anniversaries. As this message spread, people

began to notice the value of having good health and leading a stress-free and a happy life.

People started introspecting on their lifestyle choices and a change in attitude was observed. Convinced of the scope of reach, Siva established ‘Sorgam Charitable Trust’ in 2015.

Organised implementation had to be focussed as more and more people wanted to know how to lead a healthy life. Siva began by sensitising people on the concept of ‘good health’, which is more comprehensive than the conventional notion of ‘absence of diseases’. Resilience gained significance and ground was set for the next intervention.

Siva encouraged community members to plant herbal, medicinal plants in their backyard. This not only helped people treat common illnesses at the household level, but also increased the green cover in the villages. This revival of traditional medicine also made sure that it became a way of life amongst the next generation.

Siva has authored a book on “How to live a healthy life in this fast, modern world?” in Tamil and is now writing his next book on herbal medicine.

As operations expanded, Siva wanted to ensure that Sorgam Charitable Trust was effectively promoting good health practices. He introduced Legal awareness for women and helped them in making informed decisions. “Feeling of self-worth is a critical indicator of good health. It all begins here,” he reminds. Vocational training programmes for women also served the purpose. “Women could now practice a vocation from their homes, on their own. They were not answerable to any boss nor were they stressed about missing family responsibilities due to work,” he adds.

“I did have an idea of what I wanted to do, but CSIM helped me derive my vision and operationalise my interventions on a larger scale. I learnt to present my work and measure its progress. I could see how the idea of good health was nurtured by the Trust and the communities. Thanks to CSIM!” smiles a confident Sivanandam.



11. Vasanthi

Development – from Records to Reality

SWomen activists are often forced to fight prejudices at two levels – one at the community level where they advocate for rights of a group and the other at family level, where they try to realise these rights within the family. Not all of them manage to succeed in both levels. However, failure either at the community or family level gives them the determination to succeed in the other.

Ms S Vasanthi's career graph is a typical case in point.

Now popularly known as a tribal rights activist and a mentor of women's groups in Thiruvallur district, Vasanthi had to drop out of school while studying in class ten as she did not possess a caste certificate to validate her tribal identity. "For marginalised groups like us, only such documents have the power to assert our identities. Otherwise, we lose everything while proving ourselves for who we are," says Vasanthi, empathising with uneducated tribals who still remain clueless of the nitty-gritty. Diligently following all procedures, she managed to get her caste certificate from the Tahsildar after a couple of years. Meanwhile, she learnt tailoring and worked in local companies, completely unaware of what the caste certificate warranted her to become.

Having learnt that Vasanthi had her certificates in order, Irular Women's Welfare Society invited her in 1994 to work as an evening tuition teacher in their centres. During the day, she ran a small tiffin shop outside her house to add to her household income. Soon, Vasanthi was promoted as the Village Development Officer, in charge of development activities in ten villages. In the nine years she spent at Irular Women's Welfare Society, Vasanthi got an opportunity to play different roles— Programme Head, Coordinator, Senior Programme Manager, and Secretary. "I got married in 1990. I had a three month old daughter when the job was offered to me. I could not afford to lose this opportunity and hence took my daughter along with me during the field visits. It wasn't easy, but was empowering. I became more confident to articulate for and on behalf of tribal women," says Vasanthi.

In 2003, she founded the Vanavil Women's Welfare Society to work for economic empowerment of tribal women and help tribal families access government services by getting all their documents intact. "I had understood that economic empowerment was a result of a series of changes and that women's autonomy in household decision making was determined by many factors. Overt dependence on their husbands also curtailed women's ability to decide for themselves. Therefore, the initial focus was to open up windows for women to articulate and seek help. Forming of women's groups was the best option I could explore," she says.

Celebration of International Women's Day and the formation of forty women's groups gave the right start for Vasanthi. She conducted household surveys to help resolve mismatch in addresses on different documents. As the records were set right, widow pensions became accessible, members in the community owned their own caste certificates, voter identification cards, ration cards, Aadhar cards and thus availed all government schemes and services meant for them. Women's groups were enrolled in vocational training programmes after which they were guided to take government loans to initiate their own business units. In the course of these formal interactions, women also began to realise the significance of education and made sure that their children attended school.

It was a tough journey indeed. Vasanthi also recounts incidents where communities dreaded her presence, questioning her authority to articulate in such matters. Yet, she continued to work with women and communities with the help of funds received from two renowned networks of tribals – Desiya Adivasi Thozhamai Kazhagam and Tamil Nadu Tribals Federation. Noting the inter community dynamics, Vasanthi also mentions about some groups performing very well in terms of savings while others remained speculative due to interferences from their communities. She relates this to the political representation of some groups that has resulted in active engagement. She also saw that land ownership had a direct relationship with groups' interest in growth and representation.

Determined to demonstrate the possibility of such representation, Vasanthi contested the state assembly elections from Cuddalore district in 2009. Despite losing in the elections, Vasanthi managed to throw light on some critical issues. Forged land records were checked and a harassment case was resolved. There was more awareness on forest rights and women began to occupy key positions in their communities. "Women took to the role of panchayat leaders and ward members. Their growth reiterated why resources must trickle down to where they belonged. Ensuring this can mark a new beginning in the economic empowerment of tribal women in our villages," asserts Vasanthi, adding that the PGDSIM course at CSIM helped her organise her vision and put things in perspective.

While she started her organisation in 2003, Vasanthi managed to organise all events and activities with the help of local contacts and acquaintances. "It was so easy then. But now that I move to different districts, organising my work is very important to see the desired impact. Thanks to CSIM and the priceless interactions with civil servants – I can better organise my work," says Vasanthi, recently honoured with the Social Activist Award by Paran organisation in Erode district.

Vasanthi dreams of a more involved system that eliminates the need for activists as point persons to educate a community of all its entitlements. "Representation is the key and I am happy that I am able to prepare my community members for this".

II. INSPIRING CONVERSATIONS

Interviews with Inspiring Personalities
by Marie Banu

1. Mr. Arun Roy IAS

“Social change is a slow process and we are heading in the right direction.”



Mr. Arun Roy is a 2003 batch IAS officer. A law graduate from National Law School of India University Bangalore, he hails from Tiruvalla in Kerala. His parents are Prof. K.Vijayakrishnan and Prof. Vasantha Kumari and his wife Mrs. G. Laxmi Priya IAS officer is currently posted as the District Collector of Ariyalur.

Mr. Arun Roy has served as District Collector for Ramanathapuram and Krishnagiri; Joint Secretary, Department of Finance, Tamil Nadu Government; and Acting Vice Chancellor and Registrar of the National Law School in Tiruchirapalli. He also held the position of Deputy Secretary of Budget, and as Managing Director of Poompuhar Shipping Corporation.

He is presently the Managing Director of the Chennai Metro Water & Sewerage Board.

In an exclusive interview, Mr. Arun Roy IAS shares with Marie Banu his experience working for disasters and about the water crisis situation in Tamil Nadu.

About your family and education?

I grew up in Kerala and did my schooling here. Basically, I am a lawyer by training. I joined the 5-year B.A.LL.B Honors course at National Law School of India University at Bengaluru and during this period prepared for the Civil Service Examination. My parents are both retired professors, and my wife is also an IAS officer and is serving as District Collector of Ariyalur.

What inspired you to become an IAS officer?

I am a first generation Civil Servant as none of my family members held positions in the higher civil service positions. Of course, many of my relatives held positions in the Kerala Government Service, including my parents.

Can you share your experience as Collector in Krishnagiri?

Krishnagiri is a district of contradictions. On one side, particularly Hosur, we can find development on par with a modern city. But there are also very backward regions including tribal villages having poor development indicators. Child marriage was another rampant social issue. My maid, who was of the same age as me, was already a grandmother.

We were able to run a massive awareness campaign against child marriage. Enforcement was also strengthened. Another satisfying memory was our attempt to reach out to tribal areas through special camps, thus increasing the number of tribals availing social security and food security related schemes.

While there is a law to protect Senior Citizens under Maintenance and Welfare of Senior Citizens Act, 2007, our society is still facing issues related to abuse of Senior Citizens. Your thoughts?

That is true! Finally, the reach of law in family issues is very limited.

This is even in the case of Dowry Prohibition Act. A fine balance needs to be maintained.

Many senior citizens feel guilty after filing a complaint under Maintenance and Welfare of Senior Citizens Act, 2007. They face community pressure as well as group pressure. There are instances where the senior citizens face more harassment after the complaint has been filed or revoked. In such cases, they do have an option of filing a complaint yet again and going through the entire process.

In my opinion, the law in itself is one of the well drafted laws of our country and has been implemented in many districts of Tamil Nadu. It gives a mechanism outside the police stations and courts. The Revenue Division officer or the Sub Collector has been given the authority and so there are plenty of scope for reconciliation.

In many developed countries, it is taken for granted that one cannot abuse a senior citizen. This awareness is not there in our country. By taking actions on such complaints, we are creating awareness on this issue.

Your experience working for tsunami relief and the floods in 2005. Do you think we have learnt enough lessons to deal with such disasters (God-forbid) in future?

I began my career as Assistant Collector (Trainee) and was originally posted in Tuticorin. After the tsunami, I was sent on Special Duty to Cuddalore. Fortunately, my job was to coordinate with NGOs. For this, all that was required was common sense and logistics management. It was a good experience to see the affected places and witness people react to the disaster. I was amazed to see the resilience of the affected people.

Though government systems are criticized for being slow in their response, I am personally impressed to see their strength in Disaster Management; not only in the case of tsunami, but also floods. They gear up much better than the private sector. For instance, when mobile towers go down, BSNL is the first to restore its services.

With Chennai facing the worst drought in the last fourteen years, what strategies have you planned to overcome this situation?

Things will only improve with the North-East Monsoon. Historically, the South-West monsoon only recharges ground water and never fills reservoirs. That is the pattern.

In the month of May, we had a situation where many bore wells went dry in well off areas like Annanagar and Adyar where the water consumption is high. For piped water improvement, we have to wait for the North East monsoon, unless we get Krishna water. But, the reservoirs in Andhra are also in a pathetic state. The areas surrounding our state – North Kerala, South Karnataka, and North Karnataka are also not doing well. Our reservoir from where we draw our water from are at the lower end of Krishna. So, if there is a flood situation in Krishna, then our situation might improve.

What more steps can be taken to sensitise people on water conservation?

People are aware about water conservation and that is why they have taken rain water harvesting in a big way, especially in Chennai. Recently, CMDA conducted a study along with Mr. Sekar Raghavan of Rain Centre on the rain water harvesting structures. It was found that 60% of the rain water has been harvested effectively, which is really impressive!

Awareness should be more focussed on upper middle class groups who consume a lot of water for gardening, etc.

2. Prof. P.K. Biswas

“Social Entrepreneurship is not doing something new because you are motivated; you also need a certain set of skills.”

Prof. P.K. Biswas is the Director of Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR). He has done his Masters in Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi and was Ph.D Fellow at Institute for Social & Economic change, Bengaluru.



He has over three decades of experience in Research, Teaching, Training and Consulting in the field of development and General management. He has worked in multi-cultural situations and multi-dimensional situations having collaboration with community based organizations, civil societies, industries, government and international organizations.

He began his academic journey with Administrative Staff College of India (ASCI), Hyderabad in 1983. He worked with Indian Institute of Forest Management (IIFM), Bhopal (An Autonomous institute of Ministry of Environment and Forest, Govt. of India) since its inception in 1984. In August 2013, Prof. P.K. Biswas assumed the role of Director, Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management (LBSIM), Delhi before joining IFMR in in September 2014.

In an exclusive interview, Prof. P.K. Biswas shares with Marie Banu his views on Social Entrepreneurship in India.

What made you interested in Social Entrepreneurship?

My heart had always concern for social issues. I was always concerned about Community Empowerment. When I worked at IIFM, we worked

on Natural Resource Management, which impacts everyone's life in our country—whether rich or poor; whether rural or urban. That's how I got involved in people-centric development issues and that led me to Social Entrepreneurship because I feel that everybody should get involved in solving social problems.

I was always in the field of management education, although I hold a doctorate in Sociology. I brought in application of social issues in management education. That's the time when I noticed that there has been a lot of good work done in the space of social entrepreneurship. Many of my own students of IIFM have done outstanding work, and most of them are Asoka Fellows. I then thought: "why not a full-fledged course on social entrepreneurship?" Although it is popular in the west, in India it is a recent phenomenon.

Thus, I launched the Social Entrepreneurship course at IIFM in 2006-07, as well as at LBSIM, & now at IFMR. I believe that management graduates are well equipped to handle this situation. Social Entrepreneurship is not doing something new because you are motivated; you also need a certain set of skills. A social entrepreneur should necessarily have communication ability, marketing, finance, and resource mobilization skills. There are a lot of risks in this area, and one should be prepared to face that.

About including SE in the college curriculum. Your thoughts?

I believe that Social entrepreneurship should be introduced in all engineering and management colleges because the youth today have the requisite skillset and can be honed towards social issues. If you go by our curriculum today, there is not much focus on social issues.

I am taking up an initiative to sensitise these educational institutions about the social issues prevalent in India. For instance, you are producing a number of graduates each year. What is the purpose of producing graduates when they cannot solve the problems in their own country? I have the highest regard for people who try and find solutions for solving social problems.

About the need for social entrepreneurs to focus on livelihood?

Livelihood is critical to anybody. We have a large number of people living below the poverty line. There is a misnomer that if there is good economic growth, then development takes place automatically. But, this is not happening! Do you think poverty in India has reduced even after achieving 7.1% GDP?

On the one hand we are adding billionaires to the Forbes' List, and on the other, Central India, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and a few parts of Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra have a high rate of poverty. The missing link is access, entitlement, and rights—which are also reasons for poverty. Normally, we look only at income as indicator. But, this is not correct.

People should have the ability and opportunity to make a choice, which they don't have. They must have political freedom, right to vote, and must be in a position to exercise their franchise. Sustainable livelihood is therefore important to ensure education, health and employment opportunities.

Social Entrepreneurs should therefore give importance to livelihood. They should make money and plough back the money to create employment opportunities.

Any notable Student of yours about whom you would like to share?

Vineet Rai of Aviskar Venture Capital is a social venture capitalist. He is raising a lot of funds for Micro Finance Institutions. Micro credit is a big issue in India, unlike Bangladesh. A lot of people are deprived as banks demand for collateral. MFIs therefore help to bridge the gap.

Paul Basil is the CEO of Villgro mobilises funds to support entrepreneurs, mostly in rural areas, who do not have access to funds otherwise.

Vijay Pratap Singh Aditya, Co-Founder, CEO and Director of Ekgaon Technology brought in technology interface to help the development process. He is also an Asoka Fellow.

Amit Jain is doing extremely well by providing health education through internet. He also provides safe drinking water.

Many of my students are involved in interesting work; a lot of them are working in the energy sector and skill building as well.

They were instrumental in inspiring me to launch a professional course on social entrepreneurship at IIFM, LBSIM & IFMR.

What do you think are the challenges in the Social Entrepreneurship space?

I would say that motivating youngsters to focus towards the social sector and its development is the biggest challenge. Second, is funding. One should be prepared to face failures while experimenting. There is always an element of risk in entrepreneurship; some may succeed and some may not. So, you should be able to provide that ecosystem.



3. Dr. Fatima Vasanth

“Although opportunities and choices are more, our students are focused.”

Dr. Fatima Vasanth has a Post Graduate Degree in Social Work from Stella Maris College and M.Phil. and Ph.D. in Social Work from Madras School of Social Work, University of Madras. She worked at Madras School of Social Work as an Asst. Professor from 1984 and Principal from 2005, a post from which she retired in 2014. The same year, she joined as Principal of Patrician College of Arts and Science, and in June 2016 took over as Deputy Principal at Loyola College, Chennai.

She was a member of the Syndicate, Senate and Academic Council, University of Madras. She served as the Governor’s Nominee at Mother Teresa University, Kodaikannal, Tamil Nadu Open University and Pondicherry Central University. She has undertaken several Professional assignments for Government, Corporate and other Professional bodies at International, National and Regional Level. She was a member of Pre-Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) of Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Chennai, member of NAAC peer review committee, member of National Committee for Transgender, New Delhi and Member - Advisory Committee for Central Board for workers, Govt. of Tamilnadu.

In recognition for the contribution made towards Academic, Research and Training the Government of Tamil Nadu awarded Dr. Fatima Vasanth the Best Educationist Award in August 2010.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Fatima Vasanth shares with Marie Banu the changes in the student community today.

How do you feel to be the first woman to head the head evening shift in Loyola College?

Loyola College is not new to me. I have been associated with the College for more than three decades in the capacity as member of Board of Studies, Board of Examiner, as Chief Guest, and as an expert member of their Academic Audit.

Loyola College is run by Jesuit Priests and the top management positions are held by them. In fact, it was a radical decision made by the Jesuit Management to bring an outsider for this key position and that too for the first time a woman. I am sure that they have deliberated much to take this decision.

While I was already holding the position of Principal in a College, I had to make a critical decision to accept this position. Given the reputation of the College, its rich heritage, the largeness and new opportunities and that a woman is going to head this position for the first time, I was thrilled! I consciously made the decision to come and try out new avenues, face new frontiers and new challenges.

When you see the College's response, it has been very positive. I feel that my presence has made a lot of difference by way of connecting, building ownership, affinity, and human relationships.

What do you think are the changes in the student community compared to what was a decade ago?

The context, culture, relationships were different a decade ago. We had accommodated and adjusted ourselves, and reciprocated or responded to the requirements then. Today, students are matching with the changes around them. Many have working parents, some have parents who are living abroad and family environments are different. The Students have

access to varied sources of information yet they are still responding positively to the changing times. I do not find any abnormality as is feared by adults.

We too do not continue the same practices as we were doing earlier – like visiting our relatives or meeting them on special occasions or spending time with them. Why should we blame the students who are being caught up in a different web? They have their own linkages and different ways and levels of keeping relationships.

Although opportunities and choices are more, I find our students focused. We did not have such choices in our times and even when we were kept in a closed environment, we struggled. But, students today are performing despite their wide choices which could get them astray if right choice is not made. I am truly appreciative of our students as they are able to focus in their academics as well as extra-curricular activities, gear up to the skills they would require, and face campus interviews successfully.

Of course, there might be a small group that might indulge in deviant behaviour, but this was so even in our times.

Is the curriculum design for the present generation of students in line with student and market expectations?

At the Under Graduation level, the student is still young and cannot decide on what he wants to be. For many, the choice of discipline has been made by their parents, and there is a mismatch in a few cases. Market keeps changing and there is no ever Green discipline for the student to make a firm decision on the demand course.

The UG level covers a broad spectrum of subject knowledge, the foundation courses and personality development programmes. The basic objective of UG curriculum is not to specialise in any subject but is meant to orient the student to life and career. That is why we include courses on Human Excellence where the student understands himself and the society and is prepared to be a good human being with the necessary skill sets. At the PG level, the student is old enough to understand and identify his interests and skill sets, and match them with the market demands.

Having pursued a Doctoral degree in Social Work, which of the social issues are your passionate about?

I have a passion to work for women and children related issues. I have been associated with several women initiatives both with NGOs as well as the Government & served as a member in several committees. I once undertook a Government assignment to conduct a study about ‘Children in Moral Danger’. The research findings has brought in a lot of sensitisation on child abuse.

I have anchored training programmes on gender sensitisation and counselling at the Police Training College for Police Officials. I suggested counselling to resolve many domestic cases instead of filing FIR as this strains family relationship.

I was also a member of the LokAdalat and handled long pending disputes along with the Honourable Judges in the High Court. My approach was always through counselling, and have never given consent for divorce or separation easily.

I was a member of the core committee for drafting transgender policy which has now become an ACT. I have represented several international forums on status of women in India and was also a guest faculty for international universities where I lectured on women concerns and issues.



4. Dr. Sr. Jasintha Quadras

“Every girl child should be given an education that prepares her to face a difficult, competitive, and stress-filled environment.”

Dr. Sr. Jasintha Quadras fmm, took office as the eighth Principal of Stella Maris College on May 1, 2008, after serving as Vice-Principal of the College for over three years. She holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Computer Applications from Stella Maris College and an MS Degree in Computer Science from Marquette University, USA. She has an M.Phil. Degree and a doctorate in Mathematics from the University of Madras.

Dr. Quadras holds several expert and advisory positions in various academic bodies in the country. She has been the Member-Coordinator of several NAAC Peer Teams which has assessed and accredited several colleges across the country. She has also been a Member of the UGC Expert Committees to evaluate the UGC XI Plan requirements to consider proposals for grant of financial assistance to colleges, for minor research projects, and evaluating proposals for autonomous status of higher education institutions. She is on the Board of Research Studies of the University of Madras, a member of the University Senate and of Governing Bodies of several institutions of higher education.

Dr. Quadras was the only Indian academician and administrator of a college to be selected for a three-tier leadership programme titled “Leading Catholic Universities in the 21st Century” organised by the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), France, during the period 2012-2013. In 2015 she was elected Vice President (Asia) of IFCU at the 25th IFCU General Assembly held in Melbourne, Australia.

She has received several awards for her services in the field of education. To name a few: The “Best Principal Award”—“Sigaram Thotta Penmani” and was the recipient of an award jointly given by Deakin University and Education Matters for her “on-going commitment and dedicated service to education.” In 2016 she was conferred the status of “Honorary Citizen of the Great State of Nebraska,” USA, by the Nebraska Secretary of State in the course of an exchange programme—“South Asia Women in College Administration” —at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

Dr. Sr. Jasintha Quadras is also an active researcher. She was the Principal Investigator for a UGC Major Research Project, the first of its kind in Stella Maris College. She has published a book titled, *Embeddings and Interconnection Networks*, and more than 30 research articles in peer reviewed international journals. She has guided both M.Phil. and Ph.D. scholars and convened international conferences, seminars and workshops.

In an exclusive interview, Sr. Jasintha Quadras shares with Marie Banu her thoughts on girl child education.

What are your thoughts on girl child education today?

Every girl child should be given an education that prepares her to face a difficult, competitive, and stress-filled environment. Education is not just the conferment of certificates which recognises academic accomplishment. True education is the process which enables the person to develop intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally in a trajectory that will help him/her become well balanced individuals, capable of taking responsible action, being socially aware, and a citizen of the world. The education of young women, to empower them with a

whole person education that will enable them to take on challenges of a complex social milieu is our mission.

Can you discuss the issues faced by first generation learners and students from marginal sections of the society? What are the steps taken by Stella Maris College to tackle them?

Young women, entering the portals of an institution of higher education at the age of 17 or 18 are confronted with multiple challenges, not the least, the problems arising out of having to cope with rigorous academic schedules, and a completely new environment.

Given that our policy is to admit students from marginalised sections and first generation learners, a major hurdle for them when they enter college is lack of expected levels of competence in English. To add to this, is the sense of alienation they feel because of the new environment, and the difficulties they face in coping with the rigorous demands of the system.

We have established two unique support systems for such students so as to enable a smooth transition from school to college. The Stella Maris Pathway Programme emphasises the overall development of these students from the first year onwards through training in life skills, employability skills and computer skills right through their three-year undergraduate programme. They are also given English language skills to bring them on par with the rest of the student community. The training sessions are handled by experts from within the institution and outside.

The Language Partnership Programme follows up with a focussed English Language Skills training programme through their first year of college. This is a peer-led training programme, where senior students who have the requisite proficiency in English teach small groups of 12 to 15 students who need the extra coaching.

Remedial coaching and tutorials take care of the other academic needs of students. These are conducted by the respective departments. All newly enrolled students undergo an orientation programme over one week on various aspects of college life. Senior students take them on a guided tour of the campus. This serves two purposes: familiarising

new students with the layout of the campus as well as creating bonds of friendship between the seniors and juniors.

Stella Maris is also concerned about the mental health of its students. Counsellors are accessible at our campus extension centre, SMCDRIVE, for those who need psychological support. Our faculty are also trained in counselling skills.

Social and cultural compulsions, in conflict with personal and other factors lead to confusion, stress and tensions. Some cope, while others need help. Issues arising due to diversity in culture and language, lead to identity crises and affects some students. To deal with these issues, we have a well-established mentoring system in place. Every student is assigned a faculty mentor who meets her mentees periodically to monitor and track her progress and advice and counsel her when need be. Mentees are free to meet their mentors whenever they feel the need.

The Students' Union is encouraged to organise programmes that are inclusive and celebrate diversity in positive ways. They do their best to ensure that almost every student has some role to play in the various events they organise.

Can you tell us about the “green policy” adopted by Stella Maris College?

Adopting environment-friendly initiatives on a continual and sustained basis is the focus of our policy. The College constantly seeks to promote the care of Mother Earth in keeping with the spirit of St. Francis, the Patron Saint of Ecology and of the religious congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. Therefore, one of the primary objectives of the institution is to sensitise students on environmental issues and to motivate them to promote ecological justice and sustainable development.

As a College administered by a Catholic religious congregation, it is but natural that the Franciscan charisma of our patron, St. Francis of Assisi permeates its ethos and worldviews. Concern for Mother Earth, the environment, flora and fauna is embedded in the educational systems, processes and activities of the institution.

Tree planting supported by CSR industry, water harvesting, using organic manure, developing composting pits, recycling grey-water for watering plants, lighting the campus with solar panels, providing solar powered hot water systems for hostels and convent, adopting “Green Chemistry” by the Department of Chemistry, using simulation for practical application and reducing use of live animals by the Department of Zoology—are some of our sustainable, environment-friendly initiatives.

How does the SMC alumnae contribute to the growth of the institution?

Our alumnae are an integral part of our educational processes. Alumnae run the Career Guidance Cell. They conduct training programmes and workshops on employability skills and interview skills for the final year students, and hold placement and recruitment activities in collaboration with industry. They also offer financial support for needy students by way of examination fee payment.

Being the first educational institution to conduct a Social Audit, what has been the key findings?

Overall, we are well on our way to achieving our mission objectives which is: To empower young women to face the challenges of life with courage and commitment, to be builders of a humane and a just society, and to promote a learning community in which all, especially those from less-privileged backgrounds, feel part of the collaborative high quality educational process which is value based and leads to holistic growth.

It was significant that our alumnae gave high ratings to all the key values. The curriculum was rated quite high, with the focus on a liberal education approach to education to create “well-rounded” individuals.

The social audit has given us insights into our relevance and reason to exist and has given us additional motivation to continue our mission to be builders of a just and humane society.

5. Dr. M Kandasami

“Governance is the key in NPOs, however good they might be in their finance or programmes.”

Dr. M. Kandasami is a practising Chartered Accountant for over three decades, and Managing Partner of Kandasami & Associates, Chartered Accountants in Chennai. A Commerce graduate from Loyola College in Chennai, he has won several awards for academic excellence.



Dr. Kandasami’s experience in the non-profit sector spans a wide spectrum of organizations, ranging from grass roots groups to Government and international agencies, including the United Nations Development Program. His firm is involved in providing audit, FM capacity building and legal and financial advisory support to non-profits in India and several Asian and African Countries. He has contributed to the study on Charities Administration for the Planning Commission, Govt. of India and is a visiting/adjunct faculty for Management Institutions

Dr. Kandasami is a well-known author and his book titled Governance and Financial Management in Non Profit Sector Organisations is in global circulation. He is a sought after trainer and resource person at national and international seminars and workshops.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. M. Kandasami shares with Marie Banu his journey with the Non Profit Sector Organisations and his impressions about Non-Profit sector.

Did you start your Audit practice with Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) or with other types of clients?

Actually, I had started my profession with corporate bodies and individuals who were involved in business, politics, judiciary, civil service etc., for their audits and taxes. Of course, it was exciting to deal with the above set of people.

I had a feeling that my life should touch other people's lives. I used to ask myself: "Am I doing the right thing?" It's around that time, few educational institutions, health and social work organisations approached me for professional help. This area was completely new, but their cause and service attracted me. In two to three years' time, I had more organisations approaching me with their request to establish accounting systems and for financial audit. From then, there was no stopping!

Many could not believe that from providing service to the high and mighty I went on to get involved with grass root voluntary organisations. But, I was listening to my heart! It was not an easy decision, but I enjoyed it.

What is your impression about NPOs in India?

NPOs play a vital role in our society touching every aspect of human life and making it a sector by itself in addition to Government and Corporate sectors. They continue to evolve in philosophy, programmes, governance, financial systems, accountability, etc.

They have been shifting their paradigms from welfare oriented to facilitators of development, becoming rights-based, issue and theme based. At times of disaster, NPOs are the first to respond and provide timely support.

Of course, like in other areas, there are black sheep and they may be on the increase. But this should not undermine the work of millions of NPOs who are rendering wonderful service to our society. They have to ensure that the outputs of their programmes map with the needs of their target groups.

Collaboration of NPOs with Government and corporates are on the increase. It is high time that NPOs focus on good governance which

has been a major finding in my recent research as well. While there is so much discussion about Corporate Governance, there is very little engagement on NPO Governance, which is all the more critical, as they deal with public funds.

We learn that you have provided support to NPOs in Asian and African countries. What is your experience and impression of NPOs in these countries?

Yes, I have worked in other countries - 10 in Asia and 15 in Africa together with the Network of Auditors. In most of these countries, the NPOs are very effective and complement the work of their government.

A few needs are common in all these countries—good governance, transparency and accountability, and capacity building in terms of programme and financial management and governance. The capacity building process is therefore path finding and not fault finding.

We understand that you work with a network of auditors to provide support to NPOs nationally and internationally. Can you tell us about this?

Many people say that Auditors find it difficult to work as a team. I have a very positive experience of working with a network of auditors for nearly three decades in India and other countries. They have been very collaborative and supportive and we have enjoyed working together.

That is why when we were working together, it was not just the sum of the number of auditors, but the synergy - in terms of perspectives, effectiveness of our intervention, and the clarity about our mission - that made us accomplish so much of work.

What inspired you to get involved in advisory role, training and writing books for NPOS?

I realised that the NPOs needed much more support than just audit, which is a statutory obligation that happens after the event. They required capacity building for establishing systems, compliance and governance.

National and international level organisations approached me for advice and I was happy to see my inputs reaching hundreds of organisations - not just in India, but also Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and Bangladesh - whom they supported. Although the laws are different in each country, the financial management principles are common.

Many organisations also requested for trainings and workshops for their Board, staff and advisory committees. There was a need for a toolkit on financial management which inspired me to write my first book in early 1990 titled “Management of Finances for Non-Profit Sector Organisations”.

I realised that financial management alone is not sufficient, and went on to focus on governance. It was an enriching experience. In mid-nineties, I therefore wrote my second book titled “Governance and Financial Management in Non-Profit Sector Organisations”, then a book on Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and Financial Management Capacity Building. I also share my experiences with the Government agencies such as Income tax Department and Institute of Chartered Accountants of India and Management Institutes through my teachings.

About your Doctoral Degree focus on Governance of NPOs?

My clientele is largely non-profits. They range from grass root organisations to international NPOs on the one side; and on the other focus on all horizons in the social sector – education, social development, social enterprises, right based organisations, welfare bodies, etc.

Governance is the key in NPOs, however good they might be in their finance or programmes. There is very little literature available for NPO Governance in India, Thus, I wanted to pursue my Doctoral Degree to focus on governance. I had to source information from across the world. Completing PhD is just a beginning! There is much more to learn and the learning continues.

What challenges have you faced in the course of your professional journey, that too in a profession such as yours which is questioned

for some of its roles especially these days. How did you manage to overcome the obstacles?

I learnt hard work from my parent's life experiences. My teachers in my school and Jesuits and Professors in Loyola College taught me values and discipline. My senior, where I completed my Chartered Accountancy, taught me integrity and honesty. Several of my well-wishers have been such a great inspiration. My family has been very supportive for all my initiatives and efforts. Through these columns, I thank all of them for what they have been and what they are to me and thank God for giving me all the above opportunities.



6. Mr. Karthikeyan Balaraman

“Every time I see my life scale going up and then down and starting from zero again.”

Karthikeyan Balaraman is a former student of College of Fine Arts Chennai and a post-graduate from National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. He was trained at the institute by some of the industry’s greatest and foremost designers. After working in the silk jacquard industry for some years in Bangalore, Karthikeyan moved to Brighton in the United Kingdom where he established a store retailing Indian arts and crafts, named Coconut. However, after some years, Karthikeyan felt a deep calling and moved to India to his home town Chennai where he became an empanelled artist for Development Commissioner of Handicrafts and Handloom Export Promotion Council. In 2009, Karthikeyan joined the National Institute of Fashion Technology as a faculty member of the Textile Design department where he now develops the designers of the future.

Karthikeyan Balaraman has been fascinated by the indefinable Poojyam and has created a series of paintings to explore the concept of the infinite void which in itself is nothing but, created everything within itself.

In an exclusive interview Karthikeyan Balaraman shares with Marie Banu the concept of Poojyam and how his life has revolved around it.

When did you realize your interest in Arts?

When I dropped out from school, many asked me what I was going to do. This was a big question! I actually did not know as I had tried whatever was possible and somehow was considered to be not worthy.

I had a teacher Mr. K. Seshadri who was good in Art. He motivated me to visit art exhibitions and I accompanied him for competitions. This is the time I realized that I have something else that a normal school going child does not. Every time I drew, I felt happy! If you gave me more colors, I would enjoy!

Once I sketched my Grandfather. It was on the back of a greeting card and my first portrait. It resembled exactly him and he was so happy that he gifted me a colour cake (water colors). Immediately the thought that come to my mind was: “Yes, I can do Art!”

From there, everything else started!

Your education and work experience?

I joined the five-year course in College of Arts in 1992 and chose textile design for my specialization. I pursued my Post Graduation Diploma in Textile Design at National Institute of Design (NID) Ahmedabad. If there is something that I learnt from College of Arts —it is Art! Moving to NID was like understanding design in terms of Art. I feel that Art is important for a designer. Skill and Knowledge has to complement each other.

Today, I see that there was an Artist inside me which was not making me understand design as one needs to think about—what people like and what market needs are. This is where NID turned me towards design and enhanced my artistic skills to develop better designs.

While at NID, my graduation project was with Xylum, Delhi. This company deals with handmade paper and my project was to apply

textile sensibilities on handmade paper. I explored dyeing, weaving, printing, stitching, and embroidery on paper. At that point in time, there was an exhibition in Delhi where I was given a 10 feet by 18 feet space to create a mood board. I explored with paper and worked on a collage. My boss, who usually does not appreciate, said: “You are reminding me of Shri. Darshak Patel.” That was a big compliment! Darshak works usually with collage and works with whatever materials he finds locally.

After NID, I joined a company in Bangalore called Bharat Tissue where I practiced textile designing for European market. I left the company after three years and went to UK where I launched my boutique in Louise called ‘Coconut’ along with a partner. I returned to India in 2005 and worked with the Development Commissioner of Handicrafts Export Promotion Council. I am also one of the empaneled designers for Ministry of Handicrafts.

I came to a point that I was not doing something what a regular person does. That was again a ‘Zero Point’. I realised that I needed some kind of discipline. Being a consultant or a contract designer, I had my own time to work. Hence, I joined National Institute of Fashion Design in 2009 in the Textile Design department. I found a big vacuum as there were no industry experts invited for lectures.

Every time I see my life scale going up and then down and starting from zero again!

About the concept of Poojyam?

At college, I was taught that every line you draw starts with a dot. The dot is an important point as everything starts there. I see a dot, I feel happy! It can be in any form. It all started when I recently visited Australia. During my entire trip, I was seeing dots everywhere. I clicked a series of photographs where I saw—from signages to grippers to blind people to be in the shape of dots. Also, the aboriginal art is amazing as they use only dots. I got my inspiration from these paintings.

A child seeing his mother wearing a bindi, makes him focus immediately on it and tries to pick it up. Otherwise, the focus goes to the eye. Somehow the round shape has something to do with attention. There

is a philosophy on illusion and one of the important point of the human body—the eye—is in the shape of a dot.

I have been thinking from a designer point of view. You need an identity, inspiration, concept, and a theme to start working. Unlike many artists who say that this is my style or my identity, I wanted to have a theme and have people relate my work with my theme.

I therefore chose Poojyam as it is relevant to me and has been important at every moment in my life.

When I returned to India, I convinced my seniors that I am starting my career as an Artist and mentioned about my theme to them. I told them that I am just exploring to see how far this dot would take me. They accepted it and never cross questioned me. That was my starting point!

Initially, it started as Shunya. People used to comment that my work resembled that of Raza's. It was just a coincidence as his colors and style are different. I like Raza's paintings a lot and have a lot of respect for him. It was a challenge to break that myth. I started exploring with dots and was careful not to imitate Raza.

About your recent Art Exhibition for a cause? How was the response?

I created a series of paintings on the theme Poojyam. Saraswathi Educational Charitable Trust organized my exhibition at Lalit Kala Academi and even sponsored the materials that were required for the paintings.

During the exhibition, I interacted with all the guests to gain their feedback and understand their perception of the paintings. It was amazing to learn that some saw a spiritual connection. One referred to a single dot to be a third eye, and the nine dots to means navagraha.

I am happy that the exhibition went off well, and that we raised around 5 lakh rupees for a cause. I donated the entire funds raised to the Trust on one condition—to assist needy children who are pursuing art and design.

I realise that life is all about giving and not keeping everything to yourself. Yes, you have to save something for the next level, but on a process, give away some for others to enjoy.

Your future plans?

I wanted to break the illusions, and hence moved from dots to lines. This was a movement for me to explore something different. I have certain likings of colors and started using silver, gold, and bronze in my paintings which is usually considered not to be used by a painter.

I wish in the coming future that 50 percent of the Chennaites will have at least one of my paintings. It has been a wonderful journey! My scale has been up, down, and up!



7. Mrs. Lakshmy Ramakrishnan

“Social silence will no more become acceptable.”

Lakshmy Ramakrishnan is a unique filmmaker, talented actor, reality show presenter and a social activist. A Graduate in Commerce, the entrepreneurship bug bit her when she pursued a course in Fashion Designing at Kothari Institute in Chennai.

She made her debut in the Malayalam film Chakkara Muthu (2006), and has appeared in over 40 films in South Indian languages and one in Hindi. She also hosts a Tamil reality show in Zee Tamil titled “Solvathellam Unmai” which has crossed over 1500 episodes.

She has won the Asianet Film Awards in 2007 for Best Character Actress; Edison Award for Riveting Performance in 2012; and Filmfare Award for Best Supporting Actress – Malayalam in 2017, besides several others. She has been recognised for her contribution for the Welfare of Omani women by Ministry of Heritage & Culture, iGovt of Oman & Omani Women’s Association.

In an exclusive interview, Lakshmy Ramakrishnan shares with Marie Banu her passion for social issues.

About your journey as an entrepreneur?

I started with fashion designing and moved to event management. All my ventures have been entrepreneurial and co-producing the film Aarohanam has made me a social entrepreneur. When I left India and joined my husband at Muscat, I ran a vocational camp called ‘Kids Camp’ as there was very little scope for fashion designing here. I found a lot of children sitting in their homes either watching television or playing computer games as they did not have much scope to play in the open as the summer months were very hot. I joined six other women who were qualified, but did not have a work permit, and started a small activity for our own children. We started with 15 children, and by the time I left Muscat, we had 5,000 children every year from different parts of the world enrolling for the camp.

Whenever we conducted an activity, we ensured that it focused on a social issue. We had the support from Toyota, Genteco, Pizza Hut and National Bank of Oman who sponsored our events for children. We also hosted fashion shows for children where the theme was either world peace, or water conservation, or tree planting. In 2001, at Coimbatore, I organised a road show against plastic menace where we distributed more than 5000 jute bags with the help of women.

Till now, nothing has been planned in my life. At the same time, I have not missed out on any opportunity that has come my way. Having come from a conservative family, I am thankful for the support of my husband and my three daughters who have been with me all through my journey.

The role of women in Indian cinema?

In Tamil cinema, about 20 years ago, we had very meaty roles and women oriented films. Of late, say 10 years, Tamil films are not portraying their female lead as good as before.

Apparently, Bollywood films have more women involved in production work and there is a lot of progressive thinking content wise. Today,

issues like stalking and wrong portrayal of women, have been taken up by the media very seriously and they are raising their voices. This is a good sign!

When you talk about an inclusive society, we should also talk about women. It is sad to see some movies portraying issues related to women or disability in a melancholic tone. Why cannot they show them as contributors to our society? The future will see more women in Indian cinema and social silence will no more become acceptable.

Why do you choose socially relevant issues as your movie themes?

I do not make movies for the sake of it. Whether it is Arohanam or Nerungi Vaa or Ammani – I only choose socially relevant issues. I do not wish to sacrifice a year of my personal life in making a movie which is not socially inclined, even if you would give me crores of rupees for that.

I wish to be socially responsible and do not want to compromise on the bigger cause for the sake of becoming popular. I am not saying that I am a social worker, as I do have financial goals and personal ambitions. I balance and find a way where my work gives me the scope of giving back to the society in some way. This is what social entrepreneurship is all about, isn't it?

Arohanam addressed an issue like bipolar disorder, which most of us would already know. But, there is another section of the society who think that any mental disturbance is mental illness. I found cinema to be a beautiful medium to address this issue.

What motivated you to be part of the reality show Solvathellam Unmai?

Solvathellam Unmai is not my brain child. Theshow was already popular when I came in. In fact, when I was approached first, I could not accept the offer as I was busy shooting for the movie Arohanam. When I was approached again. I thought that there must be some reason for me to keep receiving offers for this programme, hence agreed. Till

now, I have hosted over 1200 episodes.

At Solvathellam Unmai, we are discussing on a larger screen either a personal problem or an accusation which is totally private. Whether these issues should be discussed by counsellors or psychiatrists or lawyers and not with the media is a debatable question.

Domestic violence is not a private affair, but rather an offence against the state. Many times, people do not intervene to resolve family disputes or street fights as they feel that they do not have a role here. Through the reality show, we are trying to address this issue by directing the affected person to a counsellor or a police station or a lawyer with the help of the media.

Media has the power to influence people over a period of time. We were certain that there will be a change in the mindset of people, and we are witnessing it now.

Were you able to resolve many cases through this reality show?

The term ‘resolve’ is very relative. In one instance, a 19-year-old girl was abandoned by her family and a passer-by on noticing her sitting at Koyembedu market for over four days brought her to our studio.

She was found to be pregnant and suffering from fits. Her husband had deserted her and she had no place to go. While discussing her story at Solvathellam Unmai, she said that people should learn from her life and should not commit the mistake of early marriage, which she did. We traced her husband and reunited her with her family. She delivered a healthy baby and my team visited her at the hospital. The doctors disclosed that she had a brain tumour which needs to be operated. On hearing this, one of our leading movie stars came forward to support her medical expenses.

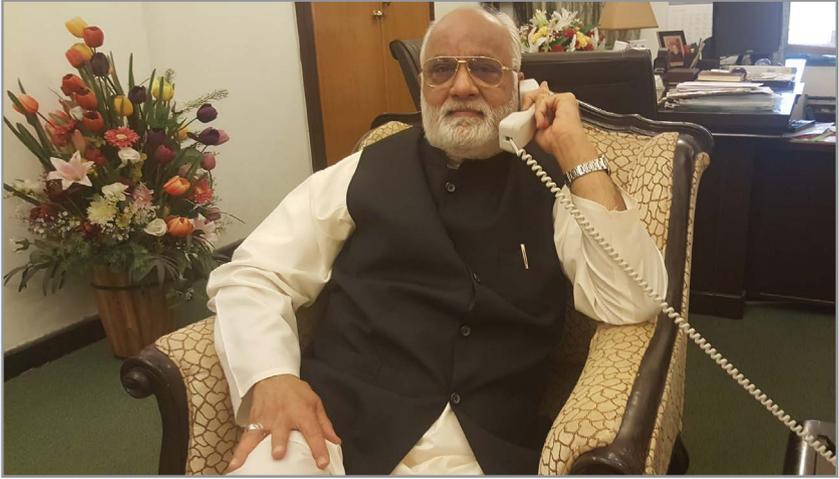
Like this, there are many more people who have been benefited from Solvathellam Unmai. Rotary Clubs and Lions Clubs approach the affected people and support them directly. Out of 1500 episodes, I can say that not all have been successful. Although, much change cannot happen within two to four hours of interaction with the affected persons,

it has given us the platform to create a dialogue.

Most media are used to shutting up women, not allowing them to talk about their grievances, disparity or the violence against them as we always attach a stigma to it. On the contrary, Solvathellam Unmai is braving people to talk about their problems. We lend a hand, a timely help, but it is up to the affected persons to make the best use of it. This show has created a lot of awareness amongst people which in itself is a great achievement.

**Who do you think plays a larger role in the issues faced by women?
Women themselves or men and why?**

In most of the cases, I find that although a man would have inflicted the pain on a woman, there is a woman who has been the cause for it. There are only certain sections of the society who are more empowered and have liberal thinking. In others, it has been set deep down in their DNA that women are conditioned in a certain manner, are insecure, have inferiority complex and low self-esteem which makes her react in a certain way with other women. This should change!



8. Nawab Mohammed Abdul Ali

“Secularism is the oxygen, without which India cannot survive.”

Nawab Mohammed Abdul Ali, Prince of Arcot, studied at Churchpark Presentation Convent and Madras Christian College School. He also received coaching in Arabic from private tutors. He also served as Sheriff of Madras for two separate terms and was interested in public life from the time he was in his teens.

The Hon’ble Prime Minister of India had nominated Nawab Mohammed Abdul Ali as a Jury Member of the National Foundation for Communal Harmony, an organisation established by the Central Government, Ministry of Home Affairs, along with His Excellency the Vice-President of India, the Hon’ble Chief Justice of India, the Chairman of the University Grant Commission (U.G.C.), and the Union Home Secretary.

The Prince is founder-secretary general of “Harmony India” a registered association formed in 1990 to promote communal amity and national integration. Mr. N. Ram, Former Editor-in-Chief of The Hindu, is the President while the other 32 members are drawn from different communities. The aim of the organisation is to educate people to live in peace, to hold seminars, processions and meetings towards this end and to extend help and advice during riots.

Nawab Mohammed Abdul Ali heads a religious endowment. He also manages the wakf in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. He was the President of All India Muslim Educational Society (AIMES). The Prince is also an accomplished singer and pianist.

The Prince has been the recipient of many awards for this social service, including the National Unity Award from His Excellency the Governor of Tamil Nadu on many occasions. He was the recipient of “For the Sake of Honour” award from the Rotary Club.

Nawab Mohammed Abdul Ali, Prince of Arcot, is a patron of music, art and literature and his hobbies are photography, gardening and reading books. He is married to Sayeeda Begum and blessed with two sons, Nawabzada Mohammed Asif Ali and Nawabzada Mohammed Naser Ali and daughters-in-law, Nawabzadi Seema Ahmed and Nawabzadi Aasia Zainab along with several grandchildren.

In an exclusive interview Nawab Mohammed Abdul Ali shares with Marie Banu the need for Secularism in our country.

Your childhood, education and hobbies?

My family’s history is perhaps older than the city of Madras. My great ancestors ruled much of South India and were known as the Nawabs of the Carnatic/Arcot. As a testimony to this, there are many landmarks here, the most important being the PWD offices at Marina Beach which was constructed by my great ancestor Nawab Muhammad Ali Wallajah who was the sovereign and independent ruler of this part of the country. Later on, the senate house came there and these grounds were used for firing gun canons to welcome the dignitaries in those days. The University of Madras, MA Chidambaram Stadium, and the State Guest House were all constructed on the land belonging to the Chepauk Palace.

I am proud to say about my great ancestor Nawab Muhammad Ali Wallajah (1749 to 1795) who distinguished himself in the South Indian History. His contribution to religious places besides the Muslim is notable. He gave several lands for Hindu Temples as well as to Christian Missionaries. The garden from which the flowers are grown for the

deity in Sri Ranganathan Temple is even today known as Nawab Thottam (Nawab Garden).

The land for the Mylapore Kapaleeswar temple tank was also donated by Nawab Muhammad Ali Wallajah. Likewise, land for Bishop Heber College and St Joseph's College at Trichy were also donated by the Nawab. I am also proud to say that all leading religious heads have visited Amir Mahal. The Chief Imam from the Holy Kaaba Mecca, Saudi Arabia; Arch Bishop of Canterbury; Chief Jethadar from Golden Temple at Amritsar; and His Holiness Jayendra Saraswati of Kanchipuram Mutt have visited our ancestral home Amir Mahal in Chennai. Swamiji told us that that it was in the first time in the history of Kanchipuram Mutt for over 2000 years that a Swamiji has visited a Muslim house. He said that the reason was because of my ancestors' association and their contribution to the Hindu religion and he wanted to pay a visit as a mark of respect. Even Shri Sunil Acharya from the Jain Community had visited Amir Mahal during my ancestor's time. I keep Amir Mahal open to public on such occasions.

I want to say that India is a secular state with multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic people. That is its great strength, and it must be preserved at all times. It would therefore not be possible to introduce Uniform Civil Code (UCC). Not only Muslims, but even other communities will be affected. When there are many important things like housing, education, and employment that needs intervention, why create disharmony through UCC? Even the RSS Chief Shri M.S. Golwalkar had clearly stated earlier that UCC will not work in India.

Secularism is the oxygen, without which India cannot survive. Secularism should be preserved whoever comes to power at the Centre or in the States. India is a great country, no doubt, and especially the Muslims in India are well secured and happier here like any other community. Even during independence, many Muslims have sacrificed their lives. Those Muslims who wanted to go to Pakistan have left, but those who are staying here like to live in India. So, why should anyone ask them to leave the country?

Can you share your thoughts on Communal Harmony in India?

My forefathers have always promoted harmony in our country with their heart, soul, and blood. For instance, the Milad-un-Nabi procession that used to take place in Triplicane, Chennai was stopped by my continuous persuasion and finally there is no Milad-un-Nabi procession taking place anymore.

There is more peace in India when compared to other countries. People from different faiths are living together for centuries. You cannot find this kind of country anywhere else in the world. Even the politicians, whichever party they belong to, must understand the Constitution and what it says about secularism.

About Muslim Women and their status in India?

The status of women in our county, not only Muslim women, is much better comparatively. In Chennai, we have good Colleges for women, especially for Muslim women like SIET and Mohammed Sathak College. When compared to developed countries, India is much behind in education. The whole world is paying full attention towards education. Without education, no country can develop or progress.

Certain obligations, fundamental rights like Hijab for Muslim women, and fasting have been ordained by our Almighty God. It is not necessary for women to cover their full face. They need to cover their head and wear loose dress, not necessarily black burkha. This has been adopted for the good of the people. Even fasting has been prescribed in all religious scriptures. The Holy Quran says: “Your religion is with you; my religion is with me.” So, let us not interfere in each other’s religion.

What is the Philanthropy trend in India?

There are several associations and organisations engaged in social service to help the poor and the needy at times. In Church Park convent, the Alumni have recently formed a committee called ‘Maryada’ (meaning respect) under the Presidentship of Mrs Nikhat Suhail, to help the retired teachers of the school. Late Dr. J Jayalalitha, former CM of Tamilnadu was my senior by 4 years and we played sports together. Maryada will also provide medical aid and support for the old teachers in whatever way they can.

9. Dr. M. B Nirmal

“Humanity is beyond anything!”

Dr M.B. Nirmal is the Founder and Chairman of Exnora International, a civic movement in Chennai, which deals with environmental issues. He is a globally known Motivator, Innovator, Change-Maker, Mind Programmer, Humorist, Orator, Trainer, Environmentalist, Social Reformer & Social Activist. He has addressed meetings on topics of global concern, in the UN bodies, and World Bank.



Dr. Nirmal did his schooling in Government Higher secondary school Kundrathur and obtained his graduation from Pachaiyappa’s college in Chennai. He obtained his degree in Law from Madras Law College.

He served last as the Chief Public Relations Officer of Indian Overseas Bank before he took voluntary retirement. In addition to his involvement in Exnora, Dr. Nirmal is also involved in consumer advocacy, afforestation programmes, and rehabilitation of convicts among others.

Dr. M.B. Nirmal has received the Environmental Leadership Award Presented by US consul General in November 2005, The Distinguished Citizen Award presented by Mr. N Ravi, Editor in 2005, Best Environmental Service Organisation Award Presented by Honourable Minister for Environment in 2003, besides several others.

He is author of twelve books in Tamil and six books in English written on individual and societal development.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. M.B. Nirmal shares with Marie Banu his passion in environmental management.

What inspired you to launch Exnora International?

I hail from Chengelpet district and belong to a very rich family. We had our own dairy farm, and owned five villages. People like Late Chief Minister Dr. M.G Ramachandran, Dr. J. Jayalalitha, and Shri. Kamaraj had visited my family then.

While I was young, my grandfather lost all his wealth and so we had to move to a house in T Nagar which was surrounded by a slum. One of my friends asked me: “why not move to a better place. I replied: “I do not have any other option, but to make this place better.” The spark to launch Exnora came from this question.

We hear you are an avid gardener and have your own terrace garden. Tell us more about that hobby.

As I told you, we had owned a lot of land and property. When I moved to my home in T Nagar, I encouraged myself saying: “Sky is the Limit!” That’s how I started a terrace garden in 1995.

I once told a lady to segregate the waste in her home and use it as manure, she asked me what she could do with the manure. I then asked her to use it as fertilizer for her garden. She said that she did not have space for a garden for which I told her to grow one on her terrace.

Many people wonder if they can grow vegetables on a terrace garden. Yes, this is possible. Milk trays, pipes, drums, bamboo poles, and mud pots can be used to grow plants.

My innovation spread like ‘Jack and the bean stalk’. I initiated the vegetable basket programme where people in apartments can come together to grow vegetables in their terrace.

In my Koyembedu apartment, except for my bedroom and a small portion of my kitchen, the entire space, including the veranda and terrace, have plants. As plant produces oxygen during day time, my flat is full of oxygen sans pollution. As plants exhale carbon dioxide during the night, it is better to avoid it in your bedroom.

I took the concept of foldable lawn that was created from coco peat from Kerala. I refined this idea and created a terrace lawn.

Necessity made me innovate such projects. Creativity came from necessity.

About your home where you have provided people from various religions a place of worship?

I do not discriminate anybody based on their caste, language or religion. One of my life's philosophies is "Human is for Human. Humanity is beyond anything!"

Once my daughter who lives in the US gave a wonderful lecture and people asked her where she learnt to speak such good English. She replied that NUNS of Chennai Church Park School where she studied taught her English

We are a mutual dependent society and we cannot deny that. I created a common place of worship in my apartment in Koyembedu where people belonging to any religion can come for worship. I have modified each room to have the ambience of a temple, mosque, church Gurdwara, etc. where Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians can visit for prayer.

Exnora also dedicates its time and energy towards educating children about use of toilets. How has that experience been?

I found the toilets not to be sufficient for children and not child-friendly. Hence, we planned for a Joy-let. There would be books, newspapers, and carom board which the toilet using adults can use as a diversion while waiting for their turn to use the toilet.

We created a 'Toy-let' for children where there would be rocking horse/swan, black board where the children can write what they want, some toys in the shelf where the hand wash was kept, and things like that. This was a great source of attraction for children to go to TOY-LET only TOY-LET.

These simple steps would make a child get interested to use the toilet instead of choosing to defecate in the open. We have to capture such ideas and use it in places where children come.

About People’s Toilet in Trichy?

“Waste is not waste until wasted.” We created a public toilet called ‘People’s Toilet’ in Trichy. It was the first in India and was unlike the ‘Pay and Use’ toilet. In People’s Toilet, we looked out for three kinds of resources – gaseous waste, liquid waste, and solid waste. Gaseous waste can be also called as Methane which can be used in the canteen as cooking gas and for lighting liquid waste is treated with bacteria and can be used for the garden cum horticulture; and the remaining solid waste (minus methane) is composted and used as manure for the garden.

Mr. Subbaraman developed this idea further and launched a programme ‘Use and Receive’ wherein he pays 10 rupees to a person who uses the toilet for 30 times. This is economically viable.

What has been your proudest moment in Exnora International?

We had a vision much before Swachh Bharat.

The American Ambassador, who visited us recently, said that our project should be replicated by all the developing nations. While we were in one of our project sites, we saw a lady selling masala vada on the pavement. The American Ambassador bought a vada and said that he is eating the vada as his certification for the clean environment there.” I felt proud when he ate the vada.



10. Mr. Sanjay Pinto

“My career transition from the newsroom to the courtroom may be construed as dramatic, but it all boils down to communication.”

It’s a transition from the newsroom to the courtroom. Before donning the black gown as a lawyer in the Madras High Court, representing celebrity clients - media owners, international sportspersons, political leaders, bureaucrats and film stars, Sanjay Pinto was the Resident Editor of NDTV 24x7 and the Executive Editor of NDTV Hindu. A household name and the face of NDTV in South India for a decade and a half, this Gold Medalist from Loyola College and ace debater from the Dr.Ambedkar Government Law College has been an award winning national media personality.

Sanjay is the face and voice of Chennai on almost all prime time national TV channel debates. ‘Justice for All’ is a popular weekly legal column that Sanjay writes for the Deccan Chronicle focusing on a slew of legal issues and ‘Corridors of Power’ on top bureaucrats in Ritz Magazine.

Having won quite a few widely reported cases in Court, Sanjay was selected by the United States Government to represent India in the

International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP) on the ‘Rule of Law & Judicial Reforms’ in the United States of America in February, 2014.

Seldom do you come across a person who has straddled every form of the media - television, print, radio, online and now even media law. Extremely active in the social media through his Facebook posts, tweets & LinkedIn updates, Sanjay used to write a national column on the social media for The Hindu and was the Brand Ambassador of the US Chennai Consulate’s Facebook page when it was launched.

Sanjay has been a talk show host on Chennai Live 104.8 FM, is an Author of the Bestselling Book ‘Speakers Are Made Not Born’, a Public Speaking Mentor of the Silver Tongue Academy Resource and a former National Debating Champion with a record 106 victories in inter-collegiate debates and now a regular panellist on prime time tv debates on most English News Channels and Guest Lecturer on Media Law at Symbiosis Law School, Pune.

An eloquent Speaker at Seminars & Summits, Sanjay regularly moderates Panel Discussions and Conferences across India. A recipient of the Rotary ‘Vocational Excellence Award’ for his distinguished service in television journalism and the Rotary ‘For The Sake Of Honour’ award for his contribution to society through Law & the Media, the former ‘breaking news’ man continues to fight for truth and justice

In an exclusive interview Sanjay Pinto tells Marie Banu about his book ‘Justice for All’.

About your childhood, education, family?

I come from a middle class family with middle class values born out of middle class struggles. My parents are retired salaried staff. My father A.V.Pinto was an employee of Binny and my mother Judy Pinto was a teacher at Don Bosco, Egmore, where I also studied. They gave me the best education possible. Post Don Bosco, Egmore, I graduated in History & Politics at Loyola College, with a Gold Medal and the Best Outgoing Student Award. At the Dr.Ambedkar Govt. Law College, I emerged a National Debating Champion.

My wife Vidya is a television journalist turned college lecturer turned communication mentor. We are blessed with 6 year old twin angels - Sanvi & Vidan.

From Newsroom to Courtroom. What was the reason for this change?

In 2012, I saw a picture of my 9 month old daughter Sanvi trying to talk to me through the TV. It was a game changer and a catalyst for my decision to move from the rat race of breaking news to a more organised career with a relatively more predictable schedule. My target audience changed from viewers to my family. That was not the only reason. I began to sniff out symptoms of burn out and stagnation in NDTV. My Job Title Changed to Resident Editor, but my Job Description remained the same - as a Reporter on the field. I also wanted to put my God given talent of speaking to greater use and to earn more money.

You see, lawyers have no retirement age and Law is where the big bucks exist, at least after clocking in the years. So, 5 years ago, I played the Prodigal Son, quit the mainstream media and plunged into Law Practice. But, I still have one foot in the media through my columns, prime time TV debates and writing books - 'Speakers Are Made Not Born' and my recently released law book for the layman 'Justice for All'.

My career transition from the newsroom to the courtroom may be construed as dramatic, but it all boils down to communication - before the camera then and before a judge now. Law Practice has a big gestation period. So, before I made the switch, I kept a nest egg ready to tide over the financial vagaries of the legal profession.

Have you used media to highlight any pressing social issue and was the effort successful?

The role of a journalist is to speak truth to power. I have rattled many skeletons in the cupboard, and exposed scams. I remember exposing a land grabbing racket in Pondicherry in 1998 which led to a CBI probe. In 15 years in NDTV, I have lost count of the stories that made an impact. I have covered some of the biggest breaking news - natural disasters like the tsunami, sensational midnight arrests of political and

religious leaders, air crashes, communal clashes, prison riots, narcotics smuggling, and assassination attempts like the one on Chandrababu Naidu in Tirupati. I was among the first few TV journalists to use the hidden camera in investigative reports.

You had the opportunity to interview several celebrities and top leaders of our country. Any nostalgic moments you wish to share?

I have covered leaders across the political divide, international sportspersons, and actors. Almost breaking the security cordon to interview former Prime Minister Vajpayee, an argument with tennis champion Boris Becker during a press conference, travelling with the Indian Cricket Team to Colombo for the Asia Cup in 2004, former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Late Ms. Jayalalithaa stopping her convoy in Trichy to give me an interview during her election campaign in 2011 and calling out to me after meeting BJP patriarch L.K. Advani in Chennai in 2012, and playing chess with my school senior Viswanathan Anand during a shoot (I don't know a thing about the game!) are quite unforgettable.

Can you tell us about your recent book 'Justice for All'?

As a TV journalist, the accent was always on brevity and simplicity in reportage. Even the most complex news stories had to be told in sixty seconds. Laws and judgments are often lengthy and replete with heavy legal jargon that a common man would often find difficult to comprehend. Moreover, during my journalistic career, I always felt that there was a disconnect between what viewers wanted and what was dished out to them with that overdose of politics. That's what prompted me to approach Deccan Chronicle 2 years ago to write a weekly column on legal issues. My book 'Justice for All' is a compendium of longer versions of many of those columns. It deals with 24 branches of law – from consumer protection to criminal law, property and banking to constitutional law and animal welfare. It is meant to be a ready legal reckoner, primarily for the layman.

In the 86 chapters in my book, readers will get an essence of their legal rights on a broad spectrum of issues that would confront them in their daily life. I have raised questions, challenged unfair provisions

in bills before they are passed by Parliament, pointed out lacunae and championed the cause of the common man.

My target audience is the layman. But even high Constitutional functionaries like the Tamil Nadu Governor Mr.Vidyasagar Rao, who wrote the Foreword, said that he liked my columns on constitutional controversies, particularly the role of the Governor in the Indian political context. The back cover with testimonials from titans of journalism like Arnab Goswami, my friend and former colleague, legal luminaries, a renowned academician and a law student from the No.1 Law School in India proves the reach and relevance of my book. Published by Covenant Media, it is priced at Rs.499 and is available at Odyssey, Star Mark, Sitaraman & Co. amazon.in and flipkart.com

About Silver Tongue Academy, its courses, and the response amongst youth?

This is run by my wife Vidya Pinto. I mentor students over the weekends during specific seasons. The premise is that ‘Speakers Are Made and not born’. We conduct modules in select institutions.

About Social media. Is it a boon or bane?

It cuts both ways. The social media has made every user an Editor in Chief of his or her views. The force multiplier effect has even made it set the agenda for the mainstream media and kept it on its toes. Social causes can be championed here. And you cannot bribe or silence this platform! Anonymity, lack of regulation and defamation are the downside.

As a debator, what is the topic you like to discuss most?

I won a record 106 inter-collegiate debates and oratorical competitions. I have spoken on issues ranging from spiritualism to vegetarianism, environment and democracy. It’s difficult to zero in on a pet topic. But, I always lapped up topics on burning social issues, politics, media and the law.



11. Mr. Sonam Wangchuk

“Social Entrepreneurship is applying thinking to solve problems, even if you don’t have resources.”

Sonam Wangchuk, is a Ladakhi engineer, innovator and education reformist. Wangchuk completed his B.Tech in Mechanical Engineering from National Institute of Technology, Srinagar (then REC Srinagar) in 1987.

He is the founding-director of the Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) which was founded in 1988 by a group of students who had been in his own words, the ‘victims’ of an alien education system foisted on Ladakh. He is also known for designing the SECMOL campus that runs on solar energy and uses no fossil fuels for cooking, lighting or heating.

Wangchuk was instrumental in the launch of Operation New Hope in 1994, a collaboration of government, village communities and the civil society to bring reforms in the government school system. He has been honoured with the prestigious Rolex Award for Enterprise 2016.

In an exclusive interview, Sonam Wangchuk shares with Marie Banu the need for Social Entrepreneurship in India.

Known as the ‘The Real Phunsuk Wangdu of Ladakh’, who has been your inspiration to advocate for alternative learning?

I spent my childhood in a very tiny village without schools, till I was roughly about nine years old. I learnt, although I did not go to school; in fact in a better way than normal conventional school goers. This made me think of different ways one can learn which does not have to be just memorising—A for Apple and B for Ball type of learning. That childhood which I have spent with plants, animals, mountains, water and rivers, helped me learn as much.

About Ice- Stupas and your experience?

In January 2014, I started this project—Ice Stupa. My aim was to find a solution to the water crisis that were faced by our Ladakh farmers during April and May each year. This is the time when the natural glaciers melt and waters start flowing.

I wanted to freeze glacial water in a way that it melts gradually in spring and be available to villagers when they need it the most. I was inspired by the experimental work of a fellow Ladakhi engineer, 80-year-old Aba Chewang Norphel. It was eureka moment when I was driving past a bridge over a stream in Phey and saw a big chunk of ice under the bridge. It was during the month of May and at 3,000 metres, the lowest altitude, it was the warmest place in the whole area. It was then I thought — we can keep the ice right here in Phey if we protect it from the sun. This made me develop a design and make the ice stupas work.

By end February 2014, I successfully built a two-story prototype of an ice stupa which could store roughly 150,000 litres of winter stream water, but nobody wanted it. In 2015, when Ladakh faced a crisis due to a landslide that blocked the Phugtal River in Zanskar and formed a 15 kilometre long lake, it became a huge threat for the downstream population. I proposed a siphon technique to drain the lake safely instead of blasting it, but my advice was not taken and. On 7 May 2015, the lake burst into a flash flood destroying 12 bridges and many fields.

In 2016, I applied the Ice Stupa technique for disaster mitigation at high altitude glacier lakes. The Government of Sikkim invited me to apply

the siphon technique for a lake in their State which was in a dangerous condition.

In September 2016, I led a three-week expedition to the Lhonak Glacial Lake in North-West Sikkim, which had been declared dangerous for the last few years. My team camped in tents for two weeks at the lake amidst rain and snow, installing the first phase of a siphoning system to drain the lake to a safer level until other measures were taken up.

In late 2016, the idea started gaining traction from the authorities in the Swiss Alps. I was invited by the president of Pontresina, a municipality in the Engadine valley, Switzerland to build Ice Stupas to add to their winter tourism attractions. In October 2016, I went to the Swiss Alps along with my team and started building the first Ice Stupa of Europe together with the Swiss partners.

Over the last two decades, our work has received ample recognition and awards have come our way.

What are the programmes offered by Himalayan Institute of Alternatives?

Himalayan Institute of Alternatives engages youths from multiple Himalayan countries in Research & Development to tackle the issues faced by mountain people, especially in the domains of education, culture, and the environment. Like SECMOL, the university aims to break the rigid boxes of conventional thinking, be relevant to people's lives, and encourage learning via practical application of knowledge.

As the theme is mountain development, our programmes focuses on mountain environmental studies, sustainable tourism, architecture, sustainable habitats, and so on.

What are the issues faced by locals in Ladakh?

The mountain communities, especially the trans-Himalayan communities have very little to gain from new technologies or studies being done. Therefore, we do not find solutions from conventional systems. Climate change, glaciers melting, bio-diversity being affected, natural disasters

like flash floods and earthquake, avalanches, landslides, etc. are facts of life and the

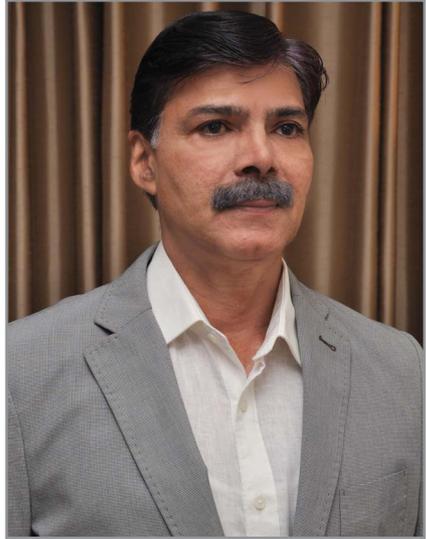
The need for the Social Entrepreneurship in India?

Our country has many challenges and therefore there is a need for solutions that are innovative, that uses more minds and thoughts than money. You can make up for the loss of resources and wealth with the use of creative ingenuity and that is what Social Entrepreneurship is all about. Social Entrepreneurship is applying thinking to solve problems, even if you don't have resources. That is how my solutions have been—using idea as resources.

12. Mr. K. Vijay Kumar IPS

“I believe that India will be free of Maoism - in the present form.”

Shri. K. Vijay Kumar is a former officer in the Indian Police Service (IPS) and was the Chief of the Special Task Force that was behind the killing of the notorious bandit Veerappan during Operation Cocoon of 2004.



Shri. Vijay Kumar joined the Indian Police Service on 10 November 1975. He served as Assistant Superintendent in Pattukkottai, Trichy and Sembiam. As Superintendent of Police, he served in Dharmapuri from 1982 to 1983 and Salem from 1983 to 1985. He assisted

Mr. Walter Devaram IPS during this tenure. He served from 1985 to 1990 in the Elite Special Protection Group (SPG) with former Prime Minister Shri. Rajiv Gandhi. In 1990, he was posted as the SP of Dindigul district followed by Vellore district in 1991. He dealt with the Bus conductors and drivers’ strike with a firm hand.

In 1991, he went on to form the Special Security Group (SSG) to provide security to Former Chief Minister Jayalalitha. In 1997, he was posted as the first Inspector General of Police for the South Zone after having handled the caste clashes in the southern districts. He served from 1998 to 2000 as the Inspector General, Border Security Force (BSF) Srinagar during the peak of militancy. He also served as IG (Operations), BSF before being recalled to the state to head the operations to hunt the forest brigand Veerappan.

In December 2001, he was appointed Commissioner of Police, Chennai. The highlight of his career came when he headed the task force operation, Operation Cocoon that killed the forest brigand Veerappan in October 2004.

In 2008, Shri. Vijay Kumar was chosen to head the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy in Hyderabad. He served as the Director General of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) from 2010 to 2012.

In December 2012, the Union Government appointed Shri. Vijay Kumar as Senior Security Adviser in the Home Ministry where he advises on security and development in the Naxal-affected States. He has been entrusted with the job of advising in deployment of the Central armed police forces (CAPFs) in the LWE-affected areas, besides overseeing coordination among the CAPFs and State police forces (SPFs) for counter-insurgency operations.

In an exclusive interview, Shri Vijay Kumar IPS shares with Marie Banu the possibility of India to be a naxal-free nation.

Your recent book ‘Chasing the Brigand’. How was it to relive the moments of capturing Veerappan?

It’s a unique feeling for the mind and body. I just have to close my eyes and goose pimples will erupt. It’s vivid. I don’t hype when I say I can visualise the climactic part- each of my boy’s perch, what all was going on. All the activities seemed dissected into mini- actions - for instance an old couple who suddenly were heading towards us on mobike, at may be 40 km speed, but it seemed an eternity, because they were cutting into our last 10 minutes. Those moments, as I recollect now remain a strange mix of flash back and fast forward. I’ve in the last chapter tried somewhat to capture that mood.

You have mentioned that the proceeds of the book will be donated to charity. Which of the present social issues are you most passionate about?

I’ve no idea how much money this book would rake in, but that decision not to retain it was made soon after ops Cocoon. I’m looking at education & skill - development in parts of his and STF turf.

What is your impression about NGOs in India?

Like in most walks of life, amongst NGOs too, there are the good, the bad and the ugly ones - but mostly good. Luckily, I’ve done business with the last mentioned types. In Maoist - affected areas if they fill in governance - void in even small ways, I say, we should embrace than

shun them. A bad NGO is an oxymoron and an occasional accident. But a bad apple has enormous negative capability to erase all the positives of the rest. It's like a rogue cop who erases the noble toil of his peers in one wrong move.

You present role in providing security and development in the Naxal-affected States. Do you think that it is possible for India to be a naxal-free nation?

I'd prefer to use the word 'maoist, than 'Naxal'.

I can't fix a deadline but things are getting better with a 4-prong strategy of 'security - development- rights & better information'. The thumbnail is in 2016, Maoist violence was 40% less than previous year's. I believe India will be free of Maoism - in the present form. But the movement may morph. There are too many pockets of angst that can be tapped. My take is: their philosophy of armed rebellion does not gel with a democracy - even an imperfect one-is a better fit for a heterogeneous society such as ours (than disruptive Maoism). Maoists' narrative stands on the conflation of indigence, exploitation and injustice down the ages. I feel this entitles a very compassionate and positive discrimination but certainly not weaponising the deprived. Minus his gun, a Maoist may be ok.

Your thoughts about honor killing and how it can be resolved?

Honor killing is abominable practice, doesn't fit into a modern world. Social engineering, which is usually done by education (social awareness) or enforcement (by enacting a law) is a must. Sati, child marriage, dowry were once 'honourable'. Not anymore. So, to stop honour killings, we need to educate the concerned and also vigorously enforce the laws.

Your advice for IPS aspirants?

It's not an easy job. If you like outdoor work, if you like to lead men 24x7 in combat (of a different sort), if you like getting paid for being fit and looking smart (in uniform) and want to try out 'fair-weather captaincy', please join the (IPS) club. But over and above all these, one has to be a bit cerebral. Because, each year 5 to 7 lakh people are jostling for a 100 IPS slots. IPS is one of the finest jobs ever.

III. NGO PROFILE

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

Writer: Shanmuga Priya. T



1. ACWERK

Understanding Common Needs

Community health initiatives are based primarily on and driven by people's participation. Overtly reliant on the local social dynamics, the reach they succeed to have at the village level is incredible. Acwerk Rural Development Foundation, founded by Dr T M Chinnaiyan, began as a community health initiative in Salem in 1999. Dr Chinnaiyan had always dreamt of building an institution that provided accessible health care to villages in rural Salem. A doctor by profession, he began his community service by addressing general health concerns of people in the rural pockets of Salem district. Soon, his efforts became focussed on treating early leprosy, tuberculosis and rehabilitation of the differently abled in appropriate institutions. Community drives for awareness, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation was coordinated efficiently with local participation. Since community involvement was strategized

from the initial days, health seeking behaviour of the local communities improved.

In such a favourable atmosphere, it was only relevant for Acwerk to integrate accessible health care in its main objectives. By 2009, leprosy was almost eradicated in the region and Acwerk began to assess other needs of the community. By 2012, both leprosy and tuberculosis were completely under control and Acwerk decided to focus on the educational needs of the underprivileged children in Mettur. “I stepped in as the Managing Trustee in 2012. Education was clearly the need of the hour as there were many villages that were simply cut off from opportunities in the urban areas. Our priority was to ensure good quality and age appropriate primary education so that children developed interest in going to school,” says Ms Athiya Chinnaiyan.

The beginning was no doubt, daunting. The very concept of schooling was alien to some of the remote communities. With only a government day care available in Navapatti village panchayat, Athiya and team found it very difficult to introduce the idea of regular schooling to the villagers. “Children were usually taken along with their parents for work. Eventually, they also took to their parents’ jobs. While poverty is the primary cause, lack of alternative options, i.e. access to opportunities that children from urban areas enjoyed, forced them to remain within the vicious cycle of inter-generational deprivation,” Athiya adds.

While Acwerk decided to provide similar opportunities through pre-schools and offered free primary education for children belonging to the age group 2 to 5 years, the team was fully aware that it was a challenge to make the community members accept this new development. “The communities were not suspicious, but apprehensive. They did not have the knowledge to question or assess the service that our pre-school would provide. They took their time, but eventually began to enrol their children. Providing nutritious food for the children helped us to convince the community further,” she explains. Aam pre-school was thus inaugurated in 2014 in Navapatti, as a regular school for children of farmers, daily labourers and industrial workers from the twelve villages in this panchayat.

With an intake of 35 to 40 children each year, Aam pre-school

successfully stepped into its fourth year. The school follows a customised syllabus that has elements from Montessori, activity based learning and other models, emphasising on creative study. Simulations are used to expose children to different social situations and hone their response. Communication, confidence building and spatial learning are given special emphasis so that children do not become a closed group in the presence of volunteers from outside the village. Local women are trained and offered full-time employment to administer the school as well as train the children. This not only made it easier for children to open up in the classes, but also helped the management to understand their needs better.

Traditional and locally familiar games were used to facilitate the learning process. Athiya feels that such a familiarity is in itself an ice breaker—be it in the methods used to teach or the people who teach/take care of the children. This is an advantage urban children have always enjoyed and rural children were always deprived of.

Having been exposed to education systems in both rural and urban areas, Athiya was intrigued by the gap between them. While in cities, children were generally understood as capable individuals, not much is expected from the rural children as their future is often predicted in the lines of their parents' lives.

“People we met often questioned what more their children could do. Things are changing and the villagers are comfortable with the idea of schooling than before. Auto services to pick up and drop the children at Aam pre-school has also encouraged parents to look out for similar options so that children can continue their education in schools in the neighbouring villages.”

“We all know that child labour is a social evil, but it has taught us that rural children's attitude is to be productive and that is really good. Only education can enhance this productivity, to drive them out of the cycle of deprivation and Aampre-school is a simple effort in that direction,” says Athiya.



2. All India Disaster Management Institute

Building Back Better

Disaster management is a long term process and disaster risk reduction (DRR) is an inevitable, parallel process abetted by growing knowledge and resilience. Since community is the first to respond after any disaster, working with communities is the first and crucial step in building resilience. While disasters like the Orissa’s super cyclone (1999) and Gujarat earth quake (2001) challenged our capacity to manage rescue and rehabilitation efforts, they paved way for the evolution of a National Disaster Management Policy. From the idea of mitigating droughts and floods through watershed development programmes and specially designed programmes for drought prone areas, focus shifted to disaster preparedness and disaster mitigation. However, all such efforts needed decentralised and micro level planning to address concerns arising before and after a disaster.

With disaster management plans taking shape at the district, state and national level, civil society organisations led the movement for community level disaster preparedness. “Risk awareness is the critical link in this ecosystem. The drought in Gujarat during 1987-1989

revealed the lack of risk planning in development projects resulting in the poor becoming poorer and even more vulnerable. Development is omnipresent, and we cannot do away with it. It is therefore essential to assess risk at all times. Thus, All India Disaster Management Institute (AIDMI) was established in Ahmedabad in 1989 to promote risk awareness in development programmes at the national and regional levels,” says Mr Mihir Bhatt, Founder and Director, AIDMI.

Deriving inspiration from the work of Shri Ravishankar Maharaj, a grassroots leader who had initiated drought relief programmes with a developmental approach, AIDMI strives to make India’s development process ‘risk sensitive’. In the initial years, AIDMI worked on advocating the agenda of disaster risk reduction as response and relief dominated the humanitarian agenda. “We have studied the reasons behind disasters, the patterns between their occurrences and have drawn clues for mitigation and risk reduction,” he says.

Right from the 2001 Gujarat earth quake, AIDMI has been responding to all types of disasters (whether major or small) and accidents in South Asia thereby demonstrating the ‘human security approach’ and advocating for ‘livelihood security’ during rehabilitation processes. “We see this as an opportunity to foster poverty alleviation by supporting the marginalised communities through sustained efforts,” he says.

AIDMI’s primary objective is to capacitate local communities to build their resilience and coping mechanisms after a disaster. The organisation understood the significance of capacity building in their mission, as participatory planning is a prerequisite in disaster management and risk reduction process. With an exclusive focus on leadership in emergency response situations, all stake holders— panchayat/local leaders, school teachers, children, community members, government officials, civil society organisations—are trained on pertinent topics so that any ensuing effort emerges as a dynamic and collective effort at the ground level. This is the key to building community resilience.

AIDMI has conducted over 550 training programmes across 14 states in India as well as in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar, Maldives. Besides, 25 national and regional courses have been designed with universities in Switzerland, UK and Bangladesh, and training of

trainers programme have been conducted for civil society organisations and government officials in Afghanistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Iran, in addition to 9 states in India.

AIDMI's work has influenced the DRR policies in India and other South Asian countries. Over the years AIDMI has worked with more than 5,000 schools, 10,000 teachers and children in 12 states of India to make schools a safer place. Expertise from their consistent evaluations of disaster management efforts, safety audits, mock drills and community initiatives has allowed AIDMI to introduce mitigation measures in more than 1,200 schools, prepare 915 school disaster management plans (DMPs), 15 departmental DMPs, 11 city DMPs, 63 DRR knowledge products and also generated demand for risk transfer with 4500 small business units. AIDMI introduced the concept of disaster micro-insurance in 3 cities of Assam, Tamil Nadu and Odisha, thereby resulting in local market recovery and ensuring smooth movement of supplies to disaster affected locations.

Reiterating participatory planning at the micro and macro level, AIDMI took upon the task of building platforms to facilitate such dialogues. Seminars, Workshops and Consultations were organised at national and regional levels to ensure local participation in planning disaster related programmes. As these dialogues saw multiple stakeholders coming together, it was more convenient for AIDMI to advocate for a pro-poor agenda, mainstream needs of the marginalised communities, and address gender concerns and safety for all children.

“The idea is to make everyone resonate with ‘build back better’. It becomes more relevant in the context of rapid urbanisation and the resulting vulnerability of marginalised communities living in the peripheries. In 2001, AIDMI was invited to focus on four towns of Kutch—Bhuj, Bhachau, Rapar and Nakhatrana—and has since worked on urban recovery and resilience in over 20 towns and cities in India. Urban resilience is now on the national agenda. AIDMI is working to include resilience building in the 100 Smart Cities programmes. The communities have a lot to offer in this effort,” he adds.

AIDMI was also part of the expert panel that prepared the Ahmedabad

Heat Action Plan. Their work received appreciation and soon the team was invited by Karachi Municipal Corporation to initiate the process of deriving a heat wave action plan.

AIDMI is a pioneer in evaluation of humanitarian efforts in South and South East Asia. With more than 28 evaluations to its credit, the team has been promoting joint evaluations that not only improve accountability, but also help in focussing on the poor and marginalised. “We have come a long way in understanding disasters and risk reduction efforts. What we still lack is a direct focus on the poor and most vulnerable in humanitarian action. Our programmes must endeavour to bring them out of both – poverty and risk. Unless their needs and concerns are mainstreamed, any effort will remain incomplete,” he laments.

“For an organisation with humble beginnings, the recognition we received has been overwhelming. We would now like to assess the role of common assets like air, water and inventions like internet that is the heart of DRR. Schumacher called us joint owners of these ‘hidden assets’, and we at AIDMI call them ‘humanitarian commons’. We will be examining them while reviewing European Union’s work in India and Nepal,” he shares.

Mr Bhatt hopes to see the bottom-up linkages in DRR planning and implementation strengthened in the coming years. “After all, without such linkages, our efforts may not result in a ‘transformative process’ that we look forward to,” he signs off.

3. Born to Win

No gender barriers in contribution

Struggle for acceptance has been a part of every community's history. For the marginalised, this struggle has been fraught with rejection of human and civil rights, manifesting in different forms. "The transgender community's struggle is unique, for, there is an overdose of ostracism and discrimination, denying us the opportunity to explore ourselves as able individuals. Our immediate recognition as sex workers is not just humiliation, but a loud expression of the society's assumption of our interests and capacities," says Ms Swetha Sudhakar, Founder Director of Born2Win Social Welfare Trust, Chennai, in a tempestuous tone.



A post graduate in Sociology, Swetha worked on a HIV/AIDS project for eight years. Her journey from a peer group leader to a senior programme manager forced her to look beyond usual associations, into the life of trans genders. Questioning the prejudices that defined lives of trans genders, Swetha felt that the community must come together to take a stand and show what they were capable of. "We had lost a lot of time in coming to terms with who we are and then, letting our families do the same. Nobody wants us around them. We do know we are different, but not any less than others. We cannot wait for acceptance. I wanted to build relatable role models from among us only to help society see us as equally efficient as others," explains Swetha.

Swetha established the Born2Win Social Welfare Trust in 2013 to realise her vision. Celebration of 'Transgender Day' was the first event organised by the trust to recognise the achievements of trans genders. "It was not only about transgender persons who had begun to make

their mark in different fields. There were many others who were fighting the stereotypes in their own way, improving the lives of others too in the process,” says Swetha. The jury included board members, advocates, writers, social activists, civil servants, media persons and other notable personalities, whose presence not only created visibility but also encouraged all the transgender persons.

According to Swetha, this event is an opportunity to show case what trans genders can be - musicians, teachers, doctors, auto drivers, fashion designers, beauticians, other professionals and mothers, too. Some have also formed groups to facilitate services at local temples and schools. Yet, this was a once in a year event that needed to be complemented by other efforts to keep the inspiration on. “Awards and nominations are just one part of the story. Through the trust I wanted to identify means of supporting education and employment of other transgender persons,” says Swetha who soon launched India’s first Trans calendar in 2014, highlighting the contribution of awardees to society.

She laments that all her friends and colleagues had to get over the usual dismissal to be able to own up to the little contributions they made in the society. Building this confidence, she felt, was crucial to allow acceptance. The proceeds from the sale of these calendars were used to support education and employment of transgender persons and abandoned children. In 2014, when the calendar was first launched, the proceeds were donated for the welfare of HIV infected and affected children. Swetha emphasises that empowerment is not only about self. It is important for our gestures to reflect our sense of responsibility as empowered individuals. “This was the right start,” she informs.

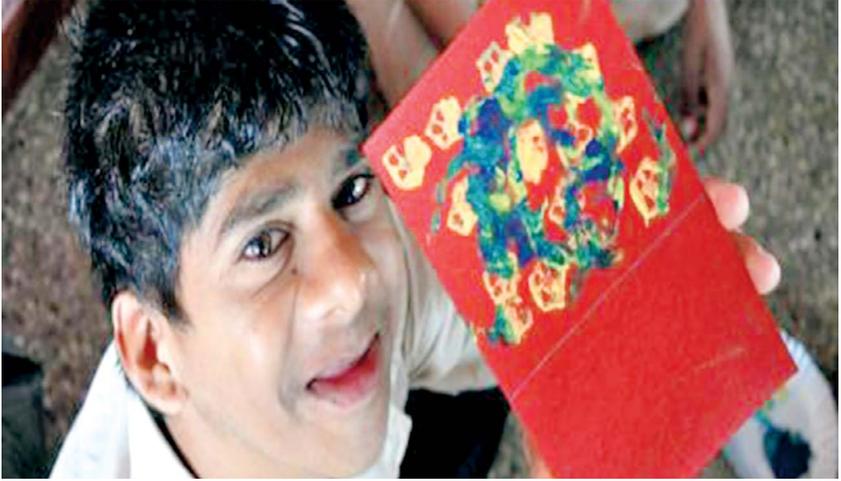
The following year, proceeds were donated to a Trust that worked towards providing cancer treatment for economically challenged patients. During the Chennai floods in 2015, the Trust provided household items for fifty transgenders. “Every year, such interactions made us feel responsible and capable,” says Swetha. In 2016, the Trust organised a fashion show in collaboration with Oxford University for trans models. Two winners were chosen to pursue fashion designing from reputed institutions with the support of revenue raised from the calendar sales that year. As the trust’s revenue from calendar sales increased every year, Swetha and team managed to do much more than

what they envisaged for the year.

In 2017, six trans women were enrolled in professional beautician courses. Two trans men have also completed their driving classes with the help of the trust. So far, 17 transgender persons have been placed in administrative and supervisory jobs. Two more are learning Carnatic music in the city. “Born2Win tries to fulfil their desires. Every individual chooses his/her own way of survival. We wish to mainstream them in their own chosen fields. After all, trans genders can also choose to be productive, contributing individuals and succeed to become role models for the next generation. We have created role models,” says a proud Swetha.

The trust’s award ceremony is in its fifth year, waiting to add 15 more to the list of 60 awardees recognised so far. Interestingly, there are also categories that recognise the efforts of individuals in promoting social acceptance of trans genders and supporting their welfare. The trust, according to Swetha, must grow organically. “All colleagues and friends live by the values and principles promoted by the Trust. Staffed by transgender persons, this Trust is like a unit of representatives who work to empower their community. It is the same spirit, same sensibility and same responsibility that we feel towards our society.

It is very unfortunate that people do not get to see this easily. Our contribution stories need to be told and Born2Win will continue to do that. Our gender is not a barrier to what we can be,” remarks Swetha.



4. Chennai Volunteers

Joy in Volunteering

Volunteering is an enriching experience that unravels the scope for growth in an individual, a community and an organisation. This growth, resulting from collective learning, exchange of knowledge and skills has created a new identity for social service. Sustaining the impact of such engagements is necessary to promote the inherent value of every individual/group, the understanding of which forms the basis of social capital in a society – the more diverse, the richer. Chennai Volunteers is a social initiative that endeavours to build this foundation in a very systematic manner by providing the supportive infrastructure through an interactive, dynamic web portal.

The underlying concern is that many non-profits do not have the requisite resources to hire professional help, and, there are professionals who wish to contribute through their skills or just time to specific causes/ domains. With limited platforms to bring them together, sustaining this potential engagement and the consequent impact is a challenge. All they need is support to figure out where, how and whom to engage with. By engaging citizens from different walks and socio economic status, Chennai Volunteers intends to open channels of learning & development for ‘all’.

Established in August 2011, Chennai Volunteers has built an ‘exhaustive volunteering knowledge network’ that makes it easy for anyone to choose partners in resonance with their interests. Chennai Volunteers was started as a social initiative of Mecheri Foundation. It was the vision of Rajeev Mecheri with Rinku Mecheri and Sanyukta Gupta as mentors. The Trust had already been working with a handful of NGOs in the areas of education, care for elderly and differently abled children. It was born out of personal experiences in volunteering and the idea was to leverage the benefits of the digital medium in the field of civic engagement.

“Volunteers only have to communicate their interests, location and time. All ground work and research to ascertain credentials of both individuals and organisations has already been done, thereby removing all apprehensions pertaining to association with a new partner. Accordingly, Chennai Volunteers’ portal enables open ended scheduling to ensure a very productive experience for all stakeholders,” says Rinku Mecheri.

Chennai Volunteers has organised many events over the last six years and has on its board local, and national partners. Supporting such a huge network, the organisation makes sure that every volunteer is adequately oriented and guided in their work area. Volunteers are also paired with senior volunteers for a brief period, where they are accompanied to ensure that volunteers’ skills and field requirements match. “Volunteering is slowly becoming a part of people’s lives and there is a growing need in them to give back to society. The youth are fantastic in their efforts and it is heartening to see middle-aged as well as retired people reaching out to volunteer with their time and skills. With the CSR Act coming into play, volunteer engagement is seen as an integral part of corporate responsibility”, adds Rinku.

Be it recreation at ‘Homes for the Aged’ or disaster relief or teaching differently abled or art conservation, Chennai Volunteers has grown to promote values and principles of volunteering, given its diverse network of organisations and volunteers.

“It’s been a smooth sail with lots of positivity and inspiring people whom we have met along the way. The only challenges that we faced were to

bring structure into a largely unstructured ecosystem; and to educate the NGOs on the benefits of volunteering and not let them approach volunteers with their sponsorship needs,” adds Rinku Mecheri.

What started as a small attempt to foster volunteering and heighten the role of individuals in civic society, has now developed into an entity of its own. “While we consciously stay away from the number game, some milestones in our work so far has been encouraging. In our second year, we accomplished more than 50,000 hours of volunteering during Daan Utsav. During the Chennai floods, we facilitated more than 12,00,000 hours of volunteering for the cause during a period of 2 months. We have partnered with 100+ NGOs/ institutions till date and try to deepen the volunteering impact with them,” says Rinku, adding that the structured platform provided by Chennai Volunteers has made it easier for volunteers to reach out, despite their busy lives.

With NGO partners also realizing the real time impact of volunteers, their belief in it is increasing. Given the dynamics of development at all levels in a country like India, volunteering ushers in new hope in bridging the gap between haves and have-nots. “The benefits are many and today, it is heartening to see the new crop of social entrepreneurs around us”, smiles Rinku.

The limitations to volunteering aren’t many – it’s a practice that has been part of our culture for centuries. You can call it seva, service or volunteering. We have grown up seeing it happen around us. Volunteering is the new avatar! However, it is important that every volunteering effort has a resultant impact either in the short term or long term. “Without that, there is no fulfillment for the volunteer or the NGO”, she warns.

5. Colordearth

Where Every Day is Earth Day

Terracotta products have been a part of human life since the Indus valley civilisation. They were used in pottery, sculptures and also to construct homes. Over the centuries, the use of terracotta has evolved and today terracotta jewellery is a fashion statement among the young and old. The aggregation of artisan groups from different villages across the country by many creative enterprises has kept this art form alive.

Colordearth is an eco-socio enterprise in Hyderabad that began from creating simple designs by its founder Ms. Hema Balakrishnan. “I never visualised that this would evolve into a social enterprise. When I began in 2003, I did not even know about this term,” says Hema, who was intrigued by the promise of clay while taking her kids to craft classes. She immediately joined the classes on terracotta jewellery and started making products for her family and friends. “I was overwhelmed with the appreciation and feedback. When I saw them wearing my terracotta jewellery to weddings and other occasions, I was motivated to do more. Thus, I began to see this as a business opportunity,” she says.

The evolution of Colordearth has a lot to do with Hema’s quick decisions. On recognising an opportunity, she immediately validated the feasibility and possible returns, the habit that paid off very well in the years to come. She trained two more of her friends, and the three women started producing a range of products—from eardrops to fashionable neck pieces.



“We were called Alankruthi then. We adopted the credit model to sell our products in stores. Eventually, delay in payments became a critical concern. It was a big lesson for us,” says Hema.

Having seen the potential of her venture, Hema decided to get in touch with other like-minded people who were into terracotta jewellery. “We had contacts from craft exhibitions, and also from the person who made electric kilns for jewellery makers like us. I was not alone! All of us had one issue in common—marketing,” she smiles.

In an effort to refine the model so that all women had their returns on time, Hema began to collaborate with different groups. A one-year sabbatical gave her the time to research all possibilities and refresh her contacts. She got back to her customers and sought their feedback. All this homework encouraged her to apply for the 10000 Women programme—a Goldman Sachs funded Initiative for Women Entrepreneurs in 2009.

While working on her business plan during the course, she researched on handcraft businesses and was awestruck at the concept of a ‘Social Enterprise’. “Alankruthi was a social enterprise. I just didn’t know that,” exclaims Hema, who realised the need to tell her story in a different way. Very soon, she decided to start direct retailing from a mall in Hyderabad, during weekends. “From Alankruthi to Colordearth, from credit model to retailing - this was clearly a new beginning and revival that we were all looking forward to. We slowly moved from a weekend stall to a kiosk in the mall. All the while, I was conscious of the cost. Lower the cost, greater the profits and thus, a sustainable income for all the artisans,” she says.

Today, Hema has a network of 12 terracotta artisan groups from six states (Karnataka, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal, Telangana) covering 200 artisans. Colordearth has come a long way and there is no looking back. Equipped with their own studio completely administered by women, the venture is very popular in social media circles.

“Working with women is empowering and at the same time challenging. Attrition is an issue that confronted us and we needed a model that

provided a win-win situation for the centre as well as the women artisans. Therefore, every centre worked out different operational strategies that best suited the women in their region. While in some production centres the women preferred to work at the workplace, many were also allowed to work from their homes. Local NGOs liaised with the women's groups, distributed the raw materials, collected the final produce and delivered it to our enterprise. Adopting different strategies with each centre ensured that women were comfortable with this engagement," reassures Hema.

Moving into their own studio, Hema and team faced a drop in sales. They could not spend on marketing and were disturbed by the uncertainty in retailing. "Many customers wanted us to share catalogues and also ship products to them. This meant that our stock for online and offline sales should always be intact and adequate," she says.

With this kind of demand, Hema decided to establish a platform for online sales. Today, there is more offline sales than online, but the way Colordearth has taken up new channels has been very satisfactory for Hema.

Colordearth's activity in social media also paid off when Hema was chosen to share Colordearth's social media story at the Facebook India Ephany Council. "It has been an enterprising journey since 2003. Today, we have a movie made on us and when I show it to my artisan groups, their sense of fulfilment, satisfaction and pride is inexplicable. The fact that Colordearth is capable of providing sustainable incomes to these artisans is an overwhelming achievement which always encourages us to go further," says a happy Hema.



6. Environmental Sanitation Institute

Sanitation and Dignity

Sanitation is a complicated issue both in rural and urban areas. Management of human waste is a huge concern that has always suffered neglect due to different reasons. Our social structure has designated a section of the population to manually handle human waste and this community continues to remain the most disadvantaged.

“The root cause of all these problems is the disrespect we are habituated to associate with toilet behaviour. As a result, it is not even normal to discuss the characteristics of the waste we produce on a daily basis. We are too embarrassed to talk about an existential problem,” says Mr Kishan, a volunteer at the Environmental Sanitation Institute (ESI) in Ahmedabad.

The story began from the time of India’s struggle for independence when Mahatma Gandhiji expressed his concerns over the sanitation situation in the country. Gandhiji’s claim that sanitation was more important than independence motivated Shri Ishwarbhai Patel, popularly known as the ‘toilet man of India’, to dedicate his life to study and implement practical solutions for human waste management.

Shri Ishwarbhai Patel had travelled extensively to understand all details – physical, social and cultural – pertaining to toilet behaviour and developed 13 different designs of toilets that suited Indian context and needs. He also won the Padma Shri Award for a design that uses only 1.5 litres to flush. “He was a visionary who thought of ergonomics for toilets. Studying the composition of human waste, he advocated that each one of use were producing rich fertilisers, every day. He then found a way to harness this utility from our waste and our campus demonstrates just that, effectively, on a routine,” says Kishan.

Ishwarbhai became the Director of Safai Vidyalaya (Sanitation Institute) of the Harijan Sevak Sangh in Gandhi Ashram in 1969. With the state government’s enactment of laws on liberation of manual scavengers, there was a shift from use of dry latrines to wet/flush latrines, thereby preventing the need for removal of night soil from the latrines. Ishwarbhai was appointed as the Advisor to Government of Gujarat to supervise the implementation of programmes that followed the enactment. Thus, Safai Vidyalaya became a renowned training institute that trained officials from sanitary inspectors to cleaners with the municipalities. At such a time, it was important to influence people’s habits and their attitude towards building toilets in their houses. Ishwarbhai’s conviction to the cause and his leadership led to the construction of more than 200,000 toilets by Safai Vidyalaya and also launch of more than 100 organisations that work tirelessly to improve the situation of sanitation in our country.

In 1985, Ishwarbhai established ESI to disseminate the learnings from research and practical experience at Safai Vidyalaya. Based on the Gandhian principles of environmentalism and upliftment of poor, ESI was dedicated to the task of changing people’s attitude towards toilets. “When we say attitude, we are not only talking about people who defecate in the open. We are also talking about bureaucrats who neglect the work, policy experts who fail to realise the social practices, taboos associated with toilet behaviour in different contexts. There are women who feel shy to use a toilet when men are present in the house. The humiliation they feel is a big social burden we must write off to change their attitude towards hygienic toilet behaviour. Therefore, the need of the hour was a decentralised model that could strike a chord with

common people, officials, safai karamcharis, village leaders and others who influenced practices and attitudes at an individual and community level. Such an approach allowed us to study social behaviour when people moved out to defecate. Women disliked toilets as it restricted their personal space with friends, so the design for women's toilets had a small window and also a small community space in the front that allowed them to indulge in their private conversations. Every detail about a toilet was worked out diligently in every construction we took up," he elaborates.

Whenever a toilet was constructed, a grand inauguration with a traditional ceremony was organised to reiterate the importance of the ignored corner of the house. Beginning with one resident, the cycle of change resonates throughout the village. An interesting approach used by ESI is the introduction of Nandini Van. An exemplar for space management, this van moves to villages with an equipped cleaning team and a pre-set exhibition on health and hygiene to create awareness among the children. The cleaning team, comprising of volunteers, goes on with the work while also engaging in play with children in the village. Customised games help the team to open discussion on hygiene and then the exhibition completes the process of education. In the evening, a gram sabha is called and pictures of the village before and after the cleaning exercise is shown.

"We also show pictures of the children playing with us. The team talks only about that day's experience and the village's plight. The discussion never moves beyond the context of the concerned village. Hence, building a bond with the villagers becomes possible and we get to see a few get convinced about the cause. We then encourage them to talk to others in the village and influence their attitude towards toilets. It is such an overt focus on attitudes over construction that has led to 85 percent of the toilets constructed being in use," he explains, adding that focus on toilet construction was reduced since the introduction of Swach Bharat Abhiyan.

ESI's campus is an example of sustainable architecture and zero waste structures. Waste from all the toilets in the campus, along with food waste enters a pit where microbes work to produce methane gas that powers the bio gas plant. Remaining sludge is used as manure for the

garden. A notable feature of the campus is the toilet garden developed in 1967. Showcasing different models designed by Ishwarbhai, the garden is a wealth of information about that corner in a house that hardly goes through meticulous planning. Taking the sensitisation further, is the toilet café in the campus, built by Jayeshbhai Patel (Ishwarbhai's son and Director, ESI) in 2010, where everything from chairs to tables is modelled on toilet designs to create awareness on sanitation. "Basically, a positive outlook on those who clean the toilets is what the café tries to create. They are an equal part of the society," adds Kishan.

Besides the training and sensitisation programmes, ESI also implements programmes for the welfare of children from this community of cleaners. With the help of the residential hostel facility in Gandhi Ashram, more than 6000 girls have completed B.Ed and are now teachers in schools across Gujarat. The journey of this eminent training institute continues beyond our borders, reaching out to 20 other countries, including Germany, Japan and Netherlands. "There is still a long way to go! Unless we see the poorest of poor living in hygienic conditions, fully acknowledging good sanitation practices, and until we see people – both rich and poor – respect sanitation and the pertinent work, ESI will continue its march, unhindered," asserts Kishan.

7. Kaagaz ki Kashti

Mainstreaming paper bags

There are a range of interventions tried and tested in the context of various social/development issues. Educating and sensitising beneficiary communities on the concerned subjects has been a significant component in all of them, reiterating the passage between nudge and behavioural change, that is often concealed. While both have their due credits, executing them together promises to bring about an internal willingness to change. That is the juncture where attitudes transform and lead to a sustainable life.



Kaagaz ki Kashti, a social enterprise based in the textile city of Surat, in Gujarat has been trying to do the same. Right from identification of the cause, problem analysis and the choice of strategies, they have an interesting narrative on mainstreaming the use of paper bags. Founded by two passionate women from diverse backgrounds—Aakruti Dalmia and Mimansa Shastri—Kaagaz ki Kashti demonstrates the potential of interventions that are layered in nature. One of them a Chartered Accountant, and the other a researcher in atmospheric science came together through the Global Shapers Hub in Surat and resolved to reduce the use of plastic bags in this city, as much as possible.

Well informed of the kind of city Surat is and the rationality of decisions among its residents, the duo were forced to assess the economic value of paper bags. Post this assessment and the inevitable comparison with that of plastic bags, they brainstormed on the path for change. “Our strategy had to be two-fold. We were not inclined to set up a production facility to manufacture paper bags as this could be a promising livelihood option

for the underprivileged. With the question of production answered, we had to figure out a way of making paper bags cost effective,” explains Aakruti.

Kaagaz ki Kashti is only eight months old and has already trained two groups in the production of paper bags. Regular procurement from these groups has helped them meet the present demand. “Whenever there is a sudden surge in demand, we also procure from groups run by other NGOs. Our supply side has always been adequate and efficient. Building the network to ensure timely supply happened faster than anticipated. We had to shed more focus on building the demand for these paper bags,” she adds.

Clearly, paper bags were at a disadvantage at the cost front. While one plastic bag cost only 10 to 30 paise, a paper bag costed 4 to 5 rupees. This huge disparity in economic value affected consumer behaviour. To bridge this gap and to make paper bags more affordable, Aakruti Dalmia and Mimansa Shastri decided to subsidise the cost by sourcing advertisements and publishing them on the paper bags. This revenue allowed them to sell the paper bags at the rate of plastic bags. Now that the cost has been subsidised, they had to find buyers for these paper bags that are promoting local brand products.

Aakruti recalls that identifying buyers was a task in itself. They decided to approach merchants who used plain plastic bags. “We had to find out merchants who were not keen in creating their brands. Medical shops and stationery shops became our niche consumers. Other business units like textile showrooms, boutiques, departmental stores and others, usually had their plastic bags printed for brand promotion,” she elaborates.

In spite of addressing the crucial cost factor, there was resistance to change from both ends. Affordability did not result in making paper bags an attractive option. For one, business units were apprehensive of the reach advertisements on paper bags could have. On the other hand, store owners were not convinced about the utility of paper bags. This resistance to change, Aakruti says, was the toughest challenge they encountered. “Surat as a city has not yet woken up to the menace plastic can create. There has been no movement against the use of plastics – neither from government nor from the civil society. No bans like the

ones in Bangalore and Delhi. The community is not sensitised against the use of plastic bags,” she laments.

After a lot of discussion and convincing, Kaagaz ki Kashti’s rate of conversion is not more than 30 percent. Yet, they are hopeful as the chain of motivation to mainstream paper bags has finally set in.

Although promising, the duo are worried about another trend that has set into the markets– the increasing use of non-woven bags in departmental stores, jewellery shops, etc, replacing plastic bags. “While the idea of reducing plastics is making its way, there is little awareness on the right alternative. Non-woven bags are made of 98.3 percent poly propylene. These bags are as dangerous to the environment as plastic bags - the only advantage they have over plastic bags is that they are reusable. They have been banned in Delhi, Chandigarh and Haryana. Kaagaz ki Kashti is now designing awareness programmes to inform merchants and commoners on right alternatives to plastic bags,” she says.

Every plastic bag coming into the house and going to the bin counts. The irreparable damage to the environment needs to be contained. Sensitisation, as team Kaagaz ki Kashti believes, can motivate change in behaviour. “It is the customers who have the power to build the movement for change. It is their demand that can nudge business houses to use paper bags. We shall do all that is possible to realise the chain of impact in our city,” says a hopeful Aakruti.



8. Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences

Redefining education of indigenous children

Residential Schooling has a long history. While the objective has been different in different regions, the very idea of residential schooling supports inculcation of native culture and values, in the process of preparing children to face the competitive world. Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) is the world's largest residential school for indigenous children that has demonstrated the same. KISS provides free holistic education from Kindergarten to Post-graduation and is equipped with all amenities. With a humble beginning in 1993, KISS is now a renowned landmark in the city of Bhubaneswar.

KISS was founded by Dr Achyuta Samanta, a visionary who lost his father at a very young age. Having realised the importance of education in the lives of poor from his own struggle, he established an ITI centre in 1992 with the help of a grant and a minimal amount collected as loans from friends and well-wishers. Achyuta decided to utilise profits emerging from this ITI centre to build a residential school for indigenous tribal children living in and around Odisha. In 1993, the school was established in a rented accommodation, admitting 125 children from poor labour classes mostly belonging to the tribal community.

Today, ITI has succeeded in providing technical education on a large scale and has grown to be Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology, capable of providing professional training in more than 20 different streams. A portion of the turnover from this institute supports the activities of KISS.

“These two institutions of academic repute have succeeded together only because of the vision and passion behind them,” says Mr Suraj Roy, Deputy Director of Resource Mobilisation at KISS. A single residential facility housing 25,308 tribal children in a green campus is not common. Roy feels that KISS’s vision and the passion of its founder Dr. Samanta has guided the institutions at every step of its evolution and will continue to do so. Recognising the model it has come to be, Roy feels that KISS has redefined the fundamental principles of tribal education. “Almost one-fourth population in Odisha are tribals and most of them are poor. Their struggle for survival does not allow them to prioritise education, which is the most crucial factor in changing their lives. There are 62 different tribes in Odisha who speak around 40 different languages. Oriya as the medium of instruction in Government Schools is a challenge for the tribal children as they are unable to cope with the syllabus and therefore dropout. Breaking this language barrier with the help of local teachers and teaching in their mother tongue has been the critical factor in KISS’s acceptance in the community,” he explains, adding that 60 percent of the children at KISS are girls.

KISS has always endeavoured to acknowledge the culture of indigenous children that has completely different norms for social behaviour, personal hygiene and adolescent health. “We encourage children to explore the same in the light of other cultures. They understand diversity and learn to respect/accept different cultures. This understanding allows them to easily mingle with members outside their communities. By now, language barrier is broken and children are confident to interact with any new person,” shares Roy. The sense of belongingness in teachers, he feels, makes them peers in the campus. The nature of interaction that gradually builds encourages them to go back and work for their communities.

KISS graduates who come back to teach have been of great help in handling apprehensions of new comers and vulnerable children. This

has also helped to contain the dropout rate, which is below one percent. Roy adds that the range of activities included in their routine helps them to adjust to the new atmosphere and relate to lessons learnt from life skills classes. Further, the nature of these interactions encourage them to teach the families and peers, building a chain of impact in the family and at a community level thereby contributing to the achievement of SDG's & Millennium Development Goals in Odisha.

The achievements of KISS's children repose faith in the vision and the principles that have governed KISS over the years. To name a few, children have won international Rugby championships, participated in Asian Games, represented Asia in a live discussion over video conferencing with the then UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon in 2013, and participated in UN Malala Day celebrations at UN Head Quarters in New York.

Two alumni also established the first ever Ashoka ventures from tribal background. KISS has been awarded Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council by the UN and is also approved by the UN Department of Public Information. No doubt it has been ranked 223rd amongst the top 500 NGOs in the world (NGO Advisor).

The change and impact brought about by KISS has been well recognised and the fact that KISS's management has been invited by the State Governments across the country for consultation on tribal education stands testimony to this.

KISS is on a mission of educating two lakh indigenous tribal children in the next decade. Efforts are already on to establish branches in different districts of Odisha and across the country. "KISS alumni in TISS, IIT, IIMs, as Railway employees, Olympic medalists, entrepreneurs, bankers, researchers, etc. has left us dreaming big.

KISS and UNDP recently signed a historic agreement to jointly establish a Centre of Excellence for Skill and Entrepreneurship Development at KISS. KISS has also introduced the Kalinga Fellowship for international students," says a proud Roy, quickly adding that the first international student from Ethiopia joined KISS in 2017.



9. Learning Curve Life Skills Foundation

Prioritising Social and Emotional Learning

Learning is a gradual, continuous process and every child learns at his or her own pace. There are different methods that suit a child. While the system may not be able to adapt child specific methods at an individual level, it is certainly possible to empower every child to realise their potential. And for that, the process of learning must be holistically perceived, building equal importance for social and emotional learning, along with academics.

Learning Curve Life Skills Foundation was established in 2011, in Hyderabad to realise this vision. Ms Gayatri Natarajan, Co-Founder and Chief Operating Officer of the Foundation was earlier running her own pre-school where she witnessed the sense of competition amongst parents. She feels that Early Childhood Education is not given the importance and time it deserves. As a consequence, children are forced to catch up with their lessons in a short span. There is so much to learn in a brief period and an overt focus on writing skills even before a child gets to scribble and explore the art of writing has built persistent challenges, thereby affecting a child's self-esteem in the later years.

Gayatri and her spouse Mr Subbu Parameswaran (also the Co-Founder

and CEO of the Foundation) strongly believed in enabling the potential of children and were cognizant of the additional support that children from marginalised communities required. Volunteering at a Children's Home gave them a wider perspective, calling for further research and consultation. "The girls there lacked self-confidence. They were ambitious and dreamt of a future, but weren't strong in their academics. As the first batch from the Home were appearing for their 10th grade exams, this was considered as a milestone as it would take them closer to the realisation of their dreams," says Gayatri.

"Academics was not the only area that we had to focus upon. We had to also pay attention to their 'behavioural deficits'. So, we started building their self-esteem, self-awareness, social skills, cognitive abilities and then focused on academics. The success of this intervention encouraged us to probe deeper, and as we did, we were confronting questions on holistic development of children and the lack of emphasis on social and emotional learning," explains Gayatri, lamenting that life skills were often misunderstood as livelihood skills.

After two years of rigorous research and consultation with experts, the couple developed a model framework to facilitate teaching in regular schools. Drawing from science and structure, this framework sought to build positive learning environments and enable spaces for children. Teachers were the backbone for this model as they were responsible to transact the curriculum. Shaping attitudes, mentoring, and enabling emotional intelligence amongst children ensured healthy development of children, learning and social readiness, and critical thinking and reasoning abilities. Structuring these core areas in a continuum for children belonging to the age group of 8 to 14 years, assessments were used periodically to measure outcomes at all levels. While this model has managed to bring about a positive influence at the right age, its uniqueness lies in the transformation seen in both teachers and children.

The results from the pilot encouraged the couple to reach wider. Fellows from Teach for India also used this model in schools they intervened. "In one of the schools, the management decided to run the programme even without a fellow from class 4 to class 9, as they were impressed with the results," shares Gayatri. But, aren't the teachers overburdened? The teacher in her smiles. Capacity building of teachers is the first and

significant step as children spend most part of their active hours during the day with them. Continuous training programmes give teachers the space they need to transform themselves. Thereafter, running the programme is almost like a routine task for them in their schools, but more interesting and engaging.

The changes the teachers see in themselves and the children has encouraged them to explore this model further. “There is development every day. Teaching and learning – both are adapted to contexts and both are looked forward to. Academics and life skills are equally attended. That’s what we call as an enabling environment. This is where children can clearly focus on the now, act responsibly and make better choices, decisions,” she adds.

Gayatri and team dream of a time when life skills will be understood and valued for what they actually are; when social and emotional intelligence will be seen at par with academic skills/achievements. Although a long journey, the couple are happy with the progress they have made so far. “We are only five years old and hope to achieve more along with our change makers – the teachers,” says a hopeful Gayatri who is, looking forward to start operations in Chennai, Bangalore and Pune, very soon.



10. Manuni Foundation

Awareness spreads by Giving

Menstrual hygiene is a concern not adequately addressed in the developing countries. As an issue, this too is multi-faceted. However, only the health dimension is focussed while the social and human rights perspective is often unacknowledged. “The fact that vast majority in the urban and rural areas cannot afford menstrual hygiene and that it is only looked at superficially is very disturbing,” says Ms Meena Mehta, Co-founder of Manuni Foundation Trust, based in Surat, Gujarat.

Inspired by Ms Sudha Murthy’s (philanthropist and eminent writer) efforts to deliver four trucks of sanitary napkins to girls and women affected by Tsunami in Chennai (2004), Meena began to observe women’s health issues in the poor sections of our society. She came to realise the nightmarish experience poor girls and women go through during their monthly cycles. Driven by the desire to give back to the society, her observations led her to identify ways of addressing women’s health and hygiene during menstruation.

“Awareness is a heavy term. As an outsider, when I tried to educate girls and women on the use of sanitary napkins, safe means of disposal, and other information related to menstrual hygiene – I could not see the connect at all. It is not that they weren’t aware. Yet, they succumb to

ways that jeopardise their health.

Affordability is the issue, not just for sanitary napkins, but also for underwears. A 12-year old girl studying in a government school once told me that she had no underwears to use napkins,” says Meena, clearing the air on the commonly held perception about lack of awareness on menstrual hygiene. Her chance observation of an adolescent girl who tried to pick up a used napkin from garbage to wash and reuse, moved her. “I wouldn’t recite about poverty here. Rather, I keep asking myself, why things essential for women’s health and hygiene are not allowed to penetrate to all sections of the society. Is it not unfair to burden them with awareness, when they could do the least about benefiting from it?” she laments.

With the support of her family, Meena decided to reach out to needy girls and provide them with sanitary napkins. While her family supported her, there was criticism and discouragement from all corners. “I had to face trivial questions like: Why don’t you distribute umbrellas, rain coats for children? Why not simply food or money for the poor? Why sanitary napkins? They called this ‘dirty work’. They did not understand that ‘giving’ was intended to change the situation of women’s health and hygiene and not meant to satisfy the ‘giver’ in me. Change cannot happen without awareness and awareness does not spread without giving,” asserts Meena.

Meena’s visits to schools and slums gave her a deeper insight into the issue. From a humble beginning in 2012, Meena now has more than 4000 girls who look forward to her visit every month. Very soon, her experience and interaction with the girls gave her the idea of distributing a kit, which consisted of napkins and underwears.

“My husband is my pillar of support. Watching my work closely, he suggested that I also include soap and shampoo in this kit to make it a complete hygiene kit that girls and women could use during their menstruation,” she says. Thus, the ‘magical kit’ was introduced comprising of eight sanitary napkins, two underwears, one bar of soap and four shampoo sachets.

Manuni has established distribution drives in 35 municipal schools and 30 slums around Surat. Every distribution drive was accompanied by a casual conversation with the girls, educating them about the use and safe disposal of napkins. The organisation's activities gradually impacted the attendance and performance of girls in the municipal schools.

“Accustomed to using any piece cloth taken from mothers’ old sarees or collected from garbage, rashes/infection was a common scene. They would simply buy Betnovate or Sophramycin ointment from the local chemist and this was the routine they followed every month. This has been drastically reduced now,” says a happy Meena.

Meena's interactions with girls and women revealed their sense of safety that they began to feel after using Manuni's kits. “For us, it was a revelation. Underwears are the most needed but least donated garments. The girls shared that they felt exposed every day without under clothes and more vulnerable during periods. That is when I realised that it was not just about hygiene, but self- esteem,” she elaborates.

Adolescent girls hardly participated in sports activities and were often found sitting with hands under their breasts. Women strongly felt that it also contributed to child sexual abuse. Manuni therefore introduced another kit, the ‘Tini-mini Kit’ for 4 – 11 year old girls, comprising of two slips and two under wears. Brassieres were also distributed to adolescent girls. Over time, incidences of child sexual abuse have plummeted significantly.

Manuni consistently worked with women in the communities as well. Besides the magical kits distributed for menstrual hygiene, a ‘happy mother's kit’ was also provided for new mothers. This was recently introduced and the community readily accepted this gesture from Manuni. The kit consisted of ghee, jaggery, two sets of nighties, two sets of under garments, sanitary napkins, four baby wraps, diapers and clothes for the infant. Meena insists that the idea of kits was the most comfortable way to organise the products and distribution. “It is also easy for donors. They can simply donate for a certain number of kits,” she says.

For a young organisation like Manuni, the impact it has made is huge

and very promising. Meena's thoughts have inspired many others to contribute to this mission. She has received sanitary napkins worth one lakh rupees as a birthday gift from Ms Sudha Murthy who has been her source of inspiration.

When asked what keeps her going, she smiles. "My girls inspire me. The change I see in them when they are aware and confident, gives me the strength to continue. Once I met a girl who got her first period during the distribution day and panicked thinking it was cancer. I took her to the washroom, helped her change, explained what was happening and taught her to use the sanitary napkins. When I gave her two kits, she simply returned one and asked me to give it to another girl who may need it. Change is essential and possible. It must also be made affordable," she signs off.

11. Stree Mukti Sanghatana

Re-introducing women's rights



The understanding of women empowerment is, no doubt, continuously evolving. So are the new challenges as women make their presence felt in various domains, where women's presence was not even thought of earlier. As women march ahead, breaking gender stereotypes, there is also a huge body of work going on simultaneously, conscientising and preparing society to welcome these developments. Established in 1975, Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS) in Mumbai has been an important part of this journey, in the state of Maharashtra.

Founded by seven friends who were moved by the situation of women oppression in the country, SMS did not gain acceptance easily. "We wanted all women to receive facilities and opportunities as we did. People laughed at this thought," reminisces Ms Jyoti Mhapsekar, one of the Founder Members of SMS. Conceptualised as a voluntary organisation to help vulnerable women, SMS' first task was to sensitise the community and encourage women to seek help from different sources. "The first girls' school in Maharashtra was introduced in 1848. We still have illiterates and a huge number of drop outs in our country. It was bound to be a long journey," says Jyoti, in a reflective tone. Explaining further, she says that rape and dowry were the two big issues then that affected the wellbeing of women in the society.

SMS established its first counselling centre in 1985. Presently, there are 10 centres spread across seven districts in Maharashtra. Besides counselling services for the affected women, self-reliance was promoted through vocational guidance and employment opportunities, so that they are economically independent.

SMS has organised many large scale awareness campaigns on women's issues across Maharashtra and India that had a remarkable impact in the society. Their first play "Ha Prashnacha Chukicha Aahe!" meaning "The question itself is wrong!" was produced in 1979 and highlighted problems faced by working women. SMS's awareness campaigns, known as Yatras, were spread across 10-15 days, where around 50 volunteers came together and enacted performances, organised structured conversations with the audience, used presentations to educate them on health issues, violence and harassment, and also displayed their range of publications. These programmes gave an opportunity for the villagers to observe similar messages through different media over a longer period of time, thus influencing a change in their attitude and behaviour.

Eight such Yatras over a period of 15 years gave SMS the foundation to advocate for specific initiatives. One such notable event is the signature campaign in 1989 where 40,000 women participated to request the Government of Maharashtra to introduce a policy to provide creches at the workplace for the benefit of young mothers.

Communicating critical messages was an art and SMS managed to do it in their own style in every campaign. The first of its kind 'Cultural Troupe' was formed to present messages on women's issues through different forms of media. This is the only Cultural Troupe in our country that has been functioning for over 35 years, reaching out to every section in the society. "Access to education is not empowerment. Similarly, lack of access to education does not mean that marginalised cannot be educated or sensitised on social issues. Society, despite its heterogeneity, must be able to comprehend situations and emulate change, and if possible, at each of their levels," Jyoti explains.

Being pioneers in the field, SMS is approached by other autonomous organisations to help design campaigns and also prepare educational material on women's issues. The relevance and effectiveness of

materials (songs authored by the women at SMS, articles published and also, their magazine) were evident from the way they were extensively used by other like-minded organisations. One of their plays - ‘Mulagi Zali Ho’, meaning girl is born, written by Jyoti became a huge hit with over 3000 performances. This play was translated into eight languages and was also performed by other organisations in their respective project areas.

The number of women who volunteered to work with SMS increased manifold; all of them wanted to help improve the lives of vulnerable women. While still engaged in a formal employment, these women took time out to strategise interventions and reach out to women from all strata. Domestic Violence complaints were addressed through different strategies like family counselling. Adolescent sensitisation programmes were also organised to influence gender dynamics among students. SMS also opened day care centres to take care of the children of working mothers, so that their career aspirations were not side lined by new responsibilities for the child. All along, the use of theatre, music and publications on women’s issues, not only improved gender perceptions, but also helped Jyoti and her team understand feminism.

“Over the years, our understanding of feminism has improved. We see the same change in our society as well. There are two landmark cases that redefined rape laws in our country – Mathura case and Nirbhaya case. Then and now, the significant difference is the participation of men in the latter. Feminism is no longer confined to what women perceive,” says Jyoti, a recipient of the Nari Shakti Puraskar award in 2016.

While theatre and music ensured spreading awareness, there were other initiatives that intended to consistently update our society on emerging issues in the realm of women’s rights. Since 1987, SMS has been publishing a Marathi magazine to achieve this objective. While the literates could read this magazine, SMS made sure that illiterates also had the access to the same information through All India Radio broadcasts and other means.

Engaging men in women empowerment has reached a consensus now; it is also being taken up as a policy directive in some states. SMS was able to demonstrate the impact of men engagement as early as 1980s.

“Men from our audiences volunteered to work with us for the benefit of vulnerable women, supported by SMS. We were never against men,” says Jyoti, also informing about the school level sensitisation programmes that led to positive gender attitudes in some districts of Maharashtra. Apart from the strategies discussed above, SMS initiated an exclusive project of the time – Parisar Vikas, in 1998 with the cooperation of Municipal Corporation of Greater Bombay (MCGB).

Noting that waste picking is a caste and gender based activity of urban poor, SMS also recognised that most of them came from female headed households and were socially marginalised. Working without any form of protection, lack of bargaining power along with inadequate health services and access to credit, women were far behind in socio economic parameters. SMS felt that working with these women cannot only help promote the vision of solid waste management, but also contribute to conservation of environment.

Women waste pickers were trained on basic protection and hygiene. After registration and training, women were brought together, either through a self-help group or waste cooperative or micro-credit group, and then capacitated to make profits from their businesses. They were also trained in alternative skills like gardening, bio-methanation and vermin-culture. Assistance in developing business plans was also provided.

Promoting zero waste practices was the next big step to engage these women waste pickers with an institutional set up. Having demonstrated the impact of biogas plants, Parisar Vikas is now trying to focus on composting and biogas production at the household level.

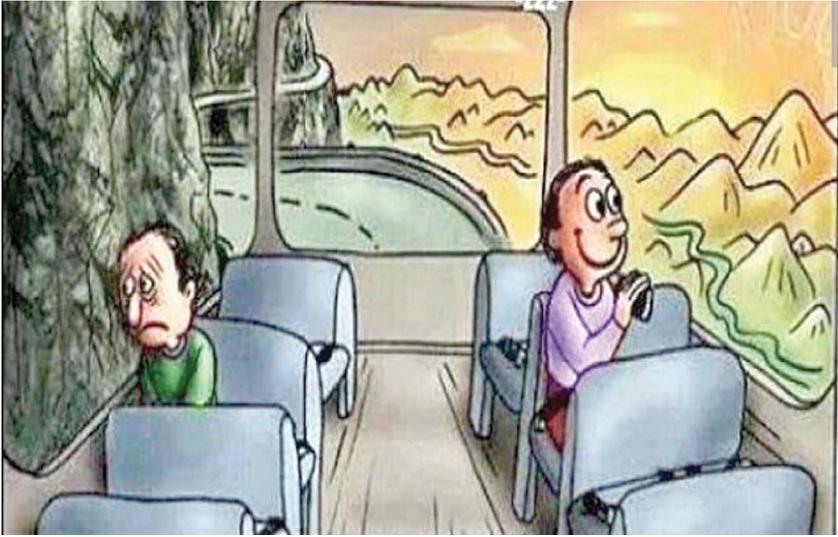
Having been with SMS since its inception, Jyoti tries to put women empowerment in perspective. “SMS dreams to see a gender just society. I may not live to see it, but we all must know that areas of focus under women empowerment is a dynamic frame. We have come a long way since 1975 and change in contexts need not be mistaken as being regressive. New forms of patriarchy have emerged and so has the resistance of women. A lot of work is happening. We only have to be positive and supportive throughout. Happy Women’s Day!” she signs off.

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. Continual Choosing



“What is the meaning we give to life experiences? We run or not run our lives, living in the cocoon of the meanings we have derived. These meanings are never the absolute. In other words, a same situation would be interpreted differently by two people. The meaning we create is drawn from past experiences, our judgments and our assumptions. These meanings generate feelings and in the process keep us driven or immobilized.

We witness our construction of reality when we realize that we habitually assign meaning to nearly everything and then operate as if those meanings were “really real”. Why stay trapped in something that isn’t reality at all?

What if there were no meanings in our minds? Would we move towards possibilities and optimism? Would it unleash the mind’s capacity to create versus comply, protect or control? The meanings we carry obstruct acceptance, create expectations and much of the living is “in the mind” and choiceless.

Practising continual choosing enables one let go of the meanings. The choosing takes courage and real work to give up old, unproductive

ways of being. When we choose courage—it creates possibility. It gets made up as we go along. Choosing sustaining frameworks that offer possibility, that prompt for giving up what doesn't work, stops the process of past forward.

2. Happiness

“Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from your own actions.” — Dalai Lama XIV



One of the most quoted facts about happiness goes as follows:

50% of happiness is determined by your genes.

10% of happiness is determined by the circumstances (like your job, your partner, money, clothes etc) in which you live.

40% of happiness is determined by your actions, your attitude or optimism, and the way you handle the impact of life circumstances.

I am learning this in many ways now. Often, I have postponed my happiness—not doing things that I love, finding meaning and purposefulness in the things I do and so on. Now I realize that as I keep consolidating the “circumstances” I live in—for e.g.: my job, my home, my relationships, I keep chasing quantity and not quality. A realization is that, happiness is in the quality—what are my intentional actions, in other words how am I exercising choice even in the way I am living in my life circumstances. One does not need to do something new, however, become more mindful of what brings one happiness &

keep connecting with that aspect even in the face of difficulties or even success. Do not allow success to mask the actual causes of happiness.

By quality, I mean making a choice or standing for something I want to create. I am beginning to “stand for” something, it could be a cause for others or a quality of compassion, or of self-expression. The “standing for” helps me discover the choices, possibilities which are otherwise invisible to me. For example: When I do a project with a partner and we do not get the results that we want----Before I would be “unhappy” because I was betting my happiness on getting success. Now, I am cultivating the practice of “standing for” acceptance—it is not about “fixing” something, yes winning matters but not winning does not mean I do not deserve to be happy. Delinking outcomes from happiness is helping in bouncing back and becoming resilient. Surprisingly, it is also getting me closer to the goals of success and winning because now I have purposefulness beyond short-term gain.

Do you want to be happy? It is a choice you make. Explore, what intentional behaviors help you connect with happiness? Make place for that in everything you do.

3. Levels of Listening

“At the source of leadership failure is lack of listening, lack of connecting with what’s going on in reality right now. Listening as a leadership capacity is the most underrated. Listening is at the source of all great leadership.” - Otto Scharmer



At its core, leadership is about shaping and shifting how individuals and groups attend to and subsequently respond to a situation. As a leader, one intends to “hold” a space that invites others in. The key to holding a space is listening generously: to oneself, to others and to that which emerges from the collective.

Listening is at the core of leadership. When leaders listen generously they begin to ‘declutter’ their inner world and become ready to operate from the emerging future!

In many ways our ability to listen generously commences with our inner condition. The first step is to focus inwards, to learn about our own filters and biases. The most common types of ‘internal chatter’ come from our auto-pilot response-listening through our ‘filters’:

- Judging the person who is speaking
- Being preoccupied with the other person's opinion of us
- Getting angry or preparing a response as a result of being defensive

As we become aware of internal chatter, we learn to deal with three resistances. The first is the voice of judgment—it blocks our capacity to access our open mind & collective creativity; voice of cynicism — blocks our capacity to be vulnerable and to access our open heart; voice of fear—blocks our capacity to access our open will, to let go the old self and let come the deeper authentic self. [SEP] For leaders, empathic and generative listening are two additional sources of listening that offer ways of addressing the voices of judgment, cynicism and fear, thus taking them to the threshold of transformation.

In empathic listening we suspend evaluation and criticism when we listen to others. It's listening with an open heart. Generative listening requires us to access not only our open heart, but also our open will—our capacity to connect to the highest future possibility that can emerge. When we operate from generative listening we realize that by the end of the conversation we are no longer the same person we were when it began. We have gone through a subtle but profound change that has connected us to a deeper source of knowing, including the knowledge of our best future possibility.

4. Response –Ability

“We are not responsible for the circumstances; we are response-able in the face of your circumstances.”



How to Respond?

Response-ability is the ability to respond rather than react in a situation. This is a choice we can exercise in our life. More often than not we are caught in excuses, blame or withdrawal, because ordinarily “responsibility” means duty, doing things the way you are expected to do them by people around us or because of the “rules of the society”.

The power to respond is a defining feature of humanity. Our response-ability is a direct expression of our freedom & our empowerment. Being human is being response-able. It is the ability to consciously and deliberately choose our responses with intention and care. We are not responsible for the circumstances; we are response-able in the face of your circumstances.

Though we are response-able, we tend to be in a place of reaction many times. This is a physiological process caused by the amygdala in the emotional part of the brain. The amygdala offers us the capacity for “flight-flight” when we face survival threats. However, the amygdala cannot distinguish between physical and perceived threats. So, we end up exercising “fight or flight” even in situations where we do not have any threat to our physical safety. In essence, we seek our “emotional safety” through “fight or flight” which is definitely not sustainable and creates a downward spiral.

Would you like to consider connecting to your ability to respond, in other words, “rest-digest”, to meet your needs of emotional safety? So what would that look like in real life situations?

The next time you get into a conflict situation, a situation that can be emotionally intense, either at work or at home, remind yourself that you have the choice to pick your response, it need not be the habitual “flight or flight” reaction. The “fight-flight” reaction is programmed to come up when we experience something outside of us as life threatening. However, when we face an emotionally intense situation, the reason for the strong emotion is not outside, it is inside us. For example: having a difficult conversation with a colleague or your partner, you may be anxious but that is not caused because of your colleague, it is because you need this conversation to be respectful and meaningful. This understanding will bring you into the state of response-ability.

Start exercising your response-ability. Enjoy the freedom coming from that.

5. Rivers are our energy

“The care of rivers is not a question of rivers, but of the human heart.”
 - Tanaka Shozo, 1910



River as life. River as energy. Both these aspects about rivers and water has made me respond to the rally for rivers. It struck me that we are so ignorant of the five elements that sustain us. We are composed of 60% water and this is nurtured by the water in nature. Yet, we take the water in rivers for granted.

When I think of rivers and my childhood, I fondly remember the river patalganga. My house was located on the banks of Patalganga, in Maharashtra. I used to spend my evenings on the river side, watching the river flow. The serenity of being in touch with the river’s energy is so alive in me, even now. Just watching a river flow, creates an inner energy beyond words.

Currently I am volunteering for Rally for Rivers. An initiative which is promoting awareness to revitalize our rivers. An important element of the rally is to promote government action to protect the river beds by planting trees on either side of the river bank. An elegant solution which enables the soil hold more water during rains. As our rivers are rainfed, the trees help in increasing precipitation and in also retaining rainwater. For this solution to be implemented along with development and growth, we need government resolve and people’s resolve too. You

can read about the rally at www.rallyforrivers.org. Share with more people too.

Revitalising our rivers is revitalising ourselves. This is our chance to open our hearts and connect with nature. Let us not be transactional, atleast with nature!

Everyone who consumes water must rally for rivers. Isn't that a no brainer?

6. The Power of Gratitude

“Gratitude in so many ways is so dramatically missing in the world today. Without gratitude nothing is enough.” - Julio Olalla



One of the earliest advocates of a daily gratitude practice was Dutch philosopher Rabbi Baruch Spinoza. In the seventeenth century, he suggested that each day for a month, we ask ourselves the following three questions:

Who or what inspired me today?

What brought me happiness today?

What brought me comfort and deep peace today?

Grateful living is a way of life which asks us to notice all that is already present and abundant – from the tiniest things of beauty to the grandest of our blessings – and in so doing, to take nothing for granted. Focus on gratitude is a state where “I, me, and mine” has been set aside. It empowers you to get out of our own way.

Gratitude is a fullness of heart that moves one from limitation and fear to expansion and engagement. Every situation offers us an opportunity to practice gratitude, and when we do, we can shift from an anxious feeling to a calm feeling and from an angry feeling to a more peaceful feeling. It’s easy to underestimate gratitude, but research shows that people who exercise gratitude are more likely to be productive, optimistic, generous

and happy.

When Mark Twain said, “I can live two months on a good compliment,” he only told half the story. While the person who receives the appreciation enjoys feeling noticed and valued (and is motivated to do more of the same), the giver can also bask in the connection.

Settle into the moment, and open your heart in gratitude.

- Write down & practice: In what ways can I expand the circle of gratitude—including the qualities of thankfulness, appreciation, acceptance and generosity—to all I come in contact with on a daily basis?
- Do a gratitude meditation or a gratitude walk every day. Dwell upon three people or things for which you are grateful

7. The Servant Leader

“We need leaders who put service over self, who can be steadfast through crises and failures, who want to stay present and make a difference to the people, situations and causes they care about. We need leaders who are committed to serving people, who recognize what is being lost in the haste to dominate, ignore and abuse the human spirit..... Let us use whatever power and influence we have, working with whatever resources are already available, mobilizing the people who are with us to work for what they care about. Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.” **Margaret Wheatley**

Though these words have been told by Margaret Wheatley, a leadership expert who combines the heart and the mind for resolute action, these were also the words shared by Mr P.N.Devarajan, a practicing servant leader, founder of MSDS Trust and my father. He passed away on November 2, 2017. Barely a week later I’m writing this article because I wanted to bring forth my realizations about servant leadership, which I saw my father live in his life.

Robert Greenleaf, the person who first articulated about Servant Leadership narrates, how the idea of The Servant as Leader came to him because of reading a book by Herman Hesse, Journey to the East.

It is the story of a band of men on a mythical journey. The key person in the story is Leo. He is a servant who does chores for the travelers, but he also lifts their morale with his positive spirit and his singing. He is the glue that holds the group together. The travelers all sense Leo’s extraordinary presence.

The journey goes well until one day when Leo disappears. Without Leo, the group falls apart, and the journey has to be abandoned. They simply can’t continue.

The traveler who tells the story goes looking for Leo, and after some years of wandering, he finds Leo. He discovers that Leo, whom he had known first as servant, was in fact the titular head of the Order that sponsored the journey. Leo is its guiding spirit, a great and noble leader.

This story clearly says that the great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness. Leo was actually the leader all of the time, but he was servant first because that was what he was, deep down inside. That was his true character. He was given a leadership position, but he was by nature a servant—someone who was focused on helping others. The leadership position that was given to him could be taken away. His servant nature—his desire to help others—was a part of his character, and it could not be taken away. That's why he was a servant first, a servant at heart.

In my understanding, servant leaders exhibit humility, coming from a source of service. It is a state from where resolute action emerges but it is not abrasive, it is inspiring. In today's world where many of us live with the attitude of I, me, mine, servant leadership offers a way to develop and grow as communities beyond being individualistic. I have experienced servant leadership as one where the leader revels in the accomplishments and potential of others. S/he celebrates others' achievements and invests in developing people as leaders.

Such a leader also ask questions, enables people make their decisions, supports them in bouncing back from mistakes/failures. This is a person with immense optimism, curiosity and zest to serve more and more. Somebody who outgrows the family structure and embraces the society as her/his own.

Life is lived by living it and not by planning to live it. Servant leadership makes living a reality as the leader engages with people, belongs to communities s/he serves and is immersed in learning, doing and moving forward. While results matter, servant leaders are not limited by it. There is an endless thirst to persuade more and more people to unleash their energies and empower themselves to contribute to the society.

In a world which is getting more and more fixated with material success, with holding power and desire for endless individual growth, servant leadership is a way to embrace. While many aspects of being a servant leader seem innate, it can be learned. Volunteer work can be an excellent 'power' neutralizer. Through volunteering one can become aware of the power of relationships with others and express empathy and respect for others through service.

Would you like to explore the life of a servant leader? Would you like to be one?

Let go your instincts to survive and embrace the life of service.

My father, called PND by his friends and followers, stood for the practice of servant leadership. He saw opportunities to serve in all the problems that were posed to him. I seek to embody the practice of servant leadership, keep an open mind and heart and to fill every heart with hope and optimism. To see everything the way it is, devoid of limiting judgments, with a heart of compassion and willingness.

If you wish to walk this path, pledge your support with MSDS' 4T Pledge. Visit www.msdstrust.org for more details.

8. Trust: Open mind, Open heart, Completing Incompletions

“If you want to trust someone, look for the points of connection, not the points of divergence.” - Lea Brovedani



To be trusting is willingness to be vulnerable. In trusting someone, we can experience our mental and emotional limits—in other words, one can observe the experience of an open mind and open heart towards situations and people that one interacts with?

I am presenting here some thoughts and experiences with trust.

Trusting and being trustworthy is an ongoing pursuit. I am volunteering for a cause now. In this context, I am experiencing the dynamics around trust in every encounter. What would make the other person's heart open towards the cause? This is a moment of trust building. I experience that building trust requires me to be first open towards the other—even mental chatter in the head interferes with the trust that can be potentially built. Like an ECG—sensitive to heart's activity, trusting as a process is sensitive to our thoughts & emotions in the moment. Trust is both, rational and emotional and gets amplified based on the mindfulness one can bring to the situation or to someone.

Rebuilding broken trust, particularly with close family members is challenging. There would be life stories where family members do not speak to each other, or their relationship is strained because trust between them eroded. Here, trust is not as much rational. It's more emotional. One would need to complete those emotional incompletions to rebuild trust. Something that is incomplete, for e.g.: an apology, unhealed grief, takes away a lot of energy and in the process leaves very little space for trust to emerge. Completing incompletions is about letting go past hurts, disappointments, unmet needs and expectations and lack of forgiveness towards others.

Here is a short story about trust.....

*Little girl and her father were crossing a bridge.
 The father was kind of scared so he asked his little daughter,
 'Sweetheart, please hold my hand so that you don't fall into the river.'
 The little girl said, 'No, Dad. You hold my hand.'
 'What's the difference?' Asked the puzzled father.
 'There's a big difference,' replied the little girl.
 'If I hold your hand and something happens to me,
 chances are that I may let your hand go.
 But if you hold my hand, I know for sure that no matter what happens,
 you will never let my hand go.'
 In any relationship, the essence of trust is not in its bind, but in its bond.*

Would you look at your life and see whom do you trust, like the little girl? What makes trust happen in that relationship- is it love, is it caring or commitment or something else? And would you like to express those elements in other relationships in which you want to build trust—can there be intentionality in your actions?

V. TRENDSETTERS



1. AIDWA

A HAND TO GROW

Today's society is replete with a number of challenges that women have to contend with, in all walks of life. These include but are not restricted to issues such as exploitation, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse and honour killings, to name a few. "These issues are being experienced by women not just in homes, but in open spaces, schools, colleges and at the workplace," explains P Sunganthi, General Secretary, All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). "We've observed that perpetrators of these crimes feel that they will not be questioned," she continues, "There is a notion that they can threaten victims with force, and that children would not protest on account of fear and humiliation."

For several years, the CPI (M)'s women wing, AIDWA, has taken up issues like these on a war-footing, and tackled it efficiently. "We conduct awareness campaigns for the benefit of school and college girls, and do that without even identifying as a political party-affiliated organisation," says Sunganthi, "Remember institutions are against any political intervention as such. Hence, it is but imperative that a proper awareness in terms of political platform as a source should be created among them."

But it's not just this that the organisation is restricted to, in its activism against social injustice. "Our agricultural labourers — daily wage

earners, minority and marginalized section of women, self-help group women and dalit women — are also some people we work for,” says Suganthi, “There is an acute drought at the moment with no harvest in sight. Due to this situation, farmers are forced to undergo an untold amount of suffering.” As a consequence of situations like these, farmers are subject to depression and some sort of mental agony. Suganthi says, “They (farmers) are not in a position to settle their bank loans, and relief measures from the Government are neither adequate nor timely. Those who have extended micro finance to them are liberally resorting to the practice of engaging rogues to collect their dues from the rural people.”

AIDWA on its part has managed to rehabilitate these affected dalits and stage protests for increasing minimum number of working days from 100 to 200 days. “We have also been actively lobbying to increase daily wages from Rs200 to Rs400, payable by the Government,” Suganthi continues. But even as one battle is currently being fought, another one surrounding caste bigotry and caste-based political violence, has also emerged. “This problem is also increasingly happening in Tamil Nadu, from time to time. While, as per law, both the boy and the girl are entitled to exercise their right to select their life partner, they are not allowed to do so, in reality,” says Suganthi, “In the name of tradition and custom as enshrined in the age-old code of Manu, they are mercilessly killed, leave alone ostracized from their clan. Thus, these are the two most crucial problems that are being encountered by the women.”

But the journey to social reform hasn’t been easy. Facing practical constraints from family and relatives has been a challenge. “There’s the matter of late working hours, then there’s also the question of raising your children, taking care of our family, and certain other problems that we need to tackle ourselves,” says Suganthi, “When we are necessitated to provide shelter and support to the forcibly separated couples, we have to face threats to our very life by the caste fanatics.”

Suganthi claims that several of her volunteers in AIDWA have been attacked by anti-social elements. “They are forced to face false cases too. Besides this, the local administrative representatives also face tough challenges while discharging their responsibilities,” she says, “Cases like Leelavathi’s gruesome murder are also being met with by the members of the women’s association.”

The issue of domestic violence is another major problem being faced by the women of today. “Addiction to liquor is the basic cause, which has not spared even children and old people,” Suganthi says, “We have so far provided counselling to nearly 6000 affected people throughout Tamil Nadu through AIDWA. We have prepared charter of their common demands and presented to the Government for necessary remedial action. Time and again, we have represented to the Government for abolition of TASMALC shops. Last year we staged closing down of nearly 118 shops through our Women’s Wing out of which our Government itself had virtually closed 38 shops.”

The NGO’s persistence has forced the government to announce closure of a hundred TASMALC outlets, so far, with the hope that many more such prohibition-centric measures will be introduced. “It is a real victory on this front. We have also represented to the Government for opening up rehabilitation and counselling centres in the Government hospitals for the sake of the affected families,” says Suganthi, who continues, “In addition to this, the dalit women are also put to various kinds of sufferings like sheer exploitation, sexual harassment, caste-based discrimination and other malpractice for which also we join hands with their womenfolk and create necessary awareness by way of organizing different propaganda through different means.”

The aim for AIDWA is to intervene in all possible stages and promote objectives of democracy, equality and fraternity. Thus, we endeavour our best to intervene in all possible stages and promote our common objectives of democracy, equality and women emancipation from the clutches of exploiters. Our journey towards the ideal state of absolute democracy, equality among the women on a par with men with no discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and financial status and above all, their economic freedom in our nation, does continue. “It is doubtless that it requires a virtual revolution or change of order to be brought about for the sake of the oppressed women,” says Suganthi, who continues, “Change is only permanent and that is our Marxist philosophy.” She signs off: “Everything will change and a safe and secure society will certainly blossom in the days to come for the ultimate benefit of our women.”



2. Akshaya Patra

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

It was in the year 2000, that Bengaluru-based Akshaya Patra decided to begin a journey to feed 1,500 children from five government schools in the city. The initiative’s objective was simple: no child ought to be deprived of education because of hunger. Soon enough, well-known citizens of Bengaluru — the likes of Mohandas Pai and Abhay Jain — joined these efforts, and the programme never looked back. “What helped us grow was the Supreme Court’s mandate in 2001, which directed State Governments to provide mid-day meals to children in their schools,” Dhanashree BM, Deputy Manager, Akshaya Patra. “It also helped that the food wouldn’t just bring children to schools, but also helping them focus on what they were being taught.”

In 2003, Akshaya Patra became the first organisation to forge a public-private partnership with the Government to implement the mid-day meal scheme. A similar approach would soon be followed by other States. Today, 27 locations across 11 States serve up mid-day meals thanks to the organization. “The Mid-Day Meal programme is an apt example of public-private partnership in the non-profit sector,” says Dhanashree.

While Akshaya Patra goes to great lengths in implementing the Mid-Day Meal schemes for several governments, the governments themselves allot land on long lease, at nominal costs. “Grants and subsidies are provided by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and the Food and Civil Supplies Corporations, who also help with timely procurement of grains. The permission to seek donations from within the country is granted by the Finance Ministry, while the Ministry of Home Affairs grants the permission to seek overseas donations under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), 1976,” explains Dhanashree, “Each meal costs us Rs. 10.23, of which Rs. 06.05 comes from the Government, while the remaining Rs. 04.18 is borne by us.” Funding for the organisation comes from both, individual and corporate donors.

Only four years ago, the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Policy framed under the New Companies Act of 2013 aided the efforts of Akshaya Patra on the funds and sustainability front. The organisation says it now observes more companies coming forward, to socio-economic development programmes.

As far as the Mid-Day Meal scheme is concerned, the organisation seems to have all elements in place. Akshaya Patra’s meals meet nutritional requirements of children, complying with the Governmental norms. “It’s also worth noting that the menu is designed after taking into consideration the local palate,” says Dhanashree, “We strive to meet the Government norms in terms of consumption of dal, vegetables, and oil. Curd is also served from South Indian kitchens.” The scheme also makes the most of technology. “We feed over 1.6 lakh children from 13,529 schools in 11 states. For this, we rely on our state-of-the-art kitchens,” explains Dhanashree, “Of the 27 locations in which we operate, 25 have centralised kitchens — Bengaluru has two centralized kitchens. These units can prepare food in huge quantities in just four hours. Everything is prepared on a huge scale without compromising quality.” In fact, the rice cauldrons in these kitchens can churn out 500 litres of rice, while roti-making machines can dish out thousands of rotis at a time. An estimated 100,000 children can be fed through each of these machines at any given time. In two locations (Baran in Rajasthan and Nayagarh in Odisha), the organization found it unfeasible to set up centralized kitchens owing to their remoteness. “In these locations, we

have adopted the decentralized model. As a part of this, Women Self Help Groups are assigned the task of operating small kitchens, which typically cater to one or two schools in the vicinity.” In Nayagarh alone, the system feeds 23,976 children, and in Baran, the number stands at 11,020.

With no commercial model in place, raising donations from corporates, philanthropic trusts, and individual donors is the primary approach towards fund-raising. “We are a charitable organization, and donations help us can meet the deficit of the programme cost,” says Dhanashree. Despite being a not-for-profit organisation, Akshaya Patra has a board of trustees helming of the organisation’s affairs. A chairman and vice-chairman occupy positions, overseeing departments like operations, projects and infrastructure, resource mobilization, donor care management, communications, finance and accounts, people function, and administrative services. This enables smooth operations on a daily basis.

Food safety and hygiene are crucial factors in the NGO’s operations. “Total Quality Management (TQM) tools are used to comply with food safety and management system standards,” says Dhanashree, “Our kitchens are 5S (sort, simplify, scrub, standardise, and sustain) and GMP (good manufacturing processes) compliant, and checked with regular audits.” Samples from kitchens are periodically drawn and analysed in a NABL-accredited laboratory. A First-In-First-Out (FIFO) method is implemented to make sure all perishable items are used efficiently, while all kitchen locations use a toolkit to ensure that FSMS norms are complied with. “Once the food is cooked, it is packed into steam-sterilized vessels. All the food contact surfaces are of either 304-grade stainless steel or food-grade plastic,” explains Dhanashree, “Cauldrons, trolleys, rice chutes, sambar or dal tanks, cutting boards, and knives are sanitized with steam just before use.”

While cooking the food prides itself on high standards, equal importance of standard is given in the delivery process too. “The cleanliness of the vehicle is checked before loading the food. The body of the vehicles is insulated with thermocol to retain heat. Stainless steel racks meant for vessels of small, medium, and big sizes are laid inside to secure the vessels and prevent spillage,” says Dhanashree, “When the vehicles

return after delivering food, they are washed with a pressure jet. A daily feedback mechanism is established and responded within 24 hours, stakeholder complaints are managed within 24 hours and beneficiary satisfaction surveys are conducted to improve the products and services.”

At these kitchens, operations begin as early as 2am. By 6am, delivery vehicles start leaving for schools. “Around 9am, after vehicles leave, the cleaning process begins,” says Dhanashree, “This is followed by preparation for the next day. Vegetables are cut in pre-processing area and stored in the cold storage room. By the time this is done, vehicles are back from schools with empty vessels. These are cleaned thoroughly. There are guidelines for each of these processes, which are strictly followed at all times.”

Today, the organization helps feed 1.6 million children from 11 states. “While there are nine new kitchens in the pipeline, which are expected to add close to 40 lakh children to our beneficiaries list, we are in also in talks with other State Governments for possible partnerships,” says Dhanashree. “Our mission is to reach 5 million children by 2020 and the rate at which we are expanding our footprint in the mid-day meal space, we are confident that we will be able to realize it,” she signs off.

— JS



3. Deshpande Foundation

START-UP, SKILL UP

What began in 1996, as an attempt to use entrepreneurship as a catalyst to bring about social change has today become a holistic movement towards changing lives. In a nutshell, that is the story of Deshpande Foundation. Established over 20 years ago, by Dr Gururaj and Jaishree Deshpande as a platform to bring about social change in the US, Canada and India, the organization has bloomed over the last couple of decades. “The Foundation was launched in 1996 with the vision of creating a world where increasing numbers of individuals and organizations are driven by entrepreneurial energy to create and grow enterprises that address social challenges or market opportunities,” explains Naveen Jha, CEO, Deshpande Foundation. “Our approach today does not restrict itself to merely solving a problem but to also build an ecosystem that enables ideas and entrepreneurs to complement each other for a large impact.” A large part of Deshpande Foundation’s success however, took place in 2007 when it started the Hubli Sandbox initiative, which was aimed at creating and nurturing a group of problem-solvers. “The sustainable and scalable ideas that would go on to come out of this, we hoped, would address challenges of local communities – challenges

like poverty, income inequality, and lack of access to basic facilities.” Says Naveen.

The idea of course was to tap into Rural and Semi-urban India, and the capabilities and entrepreneurial drive of its populace. “Through the Sandbox’s bottom-up approach, Deshpande Foundation India equips these people with necessary skills, provides them grants and infrastructure to experiment, puts them through the right networks, and maximizes their potential by constantly engaging them,” says Naveen. Over time, Sandbox has thrown out some partnerships that have evolved into awe-inspiring success stories. “A few of our notable non-profit partners who have scaled effectively are Akshaya Patra (provides nutritious hot mid-day meals to over 1.3 million children in North Karnataka) and Agastya International Foundation (runs the world’s largest hands-on science learning program) and Save a Mother (reduces maternal mortality in over 100 villages in Karnataka),” he adds.

Many programmes that the Sandbox has initiated has emerged from pure need. “Like our Farm Pond program which provides assured irrigation for 2-3 crops a year in drought-prone rain-fed lands, which has led to the construction of 2,000 ponds, irrigating over 6,384 acres, impacting 9,105 lives across 4 districts of North Karnataka, in the last couple of years alone,” says Naveen, with a sense of achievement. With critical crop-saving water, the initiative has also ensured that farmers turn innovative, diversify crops and multiply income, three-fold.

Another problem that was solved by the organization was an acute HR crisis in tier 2 and tier 3 towns. “We realized that these towns needed skilled human resources to fuel socio-economic growth, skill building programs were launched for unemployed youth in accounts, office management, electrical operations, IT hardware and networking, sustainable agriculture and social entrepreneurship,” says Naveen. “As on date, we have trained and provided gainful employment opportunities to nearly 3,500 rural and semi-urban youth since 2010.”

Another program that reinforces the organisation’s ‘entrepreneurship’ approach to development is Navodyami, which empowers micro-entrepreneurs, especially in textiles, organic food products, arts and handicrafts. Through Navodyami, the entrepreneurs get easy access

to credit, offline and online market linkages and expert on-ground mentoring. “We have empowered over 300 micro-entrepreneurs, with some of their enterprises growing by 6 times,” says Naveen.

No doubt, the biggest challenge that India faces today, is nation-building. To aid in this, the organization has also launched a first-of-its-kind ‘Leaders Accelerating Development’ programme, which aims to unleash the power of youth towards solving community problems. “We have over 7,000 LEADers who have undertaken projects like developing break-system for bullock carts, smoke-less chulhas and also small activities like pot-hole filling, painting bus stands and conducting blood-donation camps,” says Naveen. “Ever since the Hubli Sandbox was formed in 2007, we are glad to have already gathered the right kind of expertise that we bring to the start-up space, today.” Till date, the foundation has incubated over 60 startups, which have added over Rs 50 crore to the economy, and in doing so, have also created 800 employment opportunities.

“Our model supports mission-driven individuals to come up with sustainable and scalable organizations which have significant socio-economic impact on local communities,” says Naveen, explaining what the Deshpande model is all about. He continues, “Our wide network of 150 non-profit organizations and 300 industry connections has doubled up as a living laboratory of sorts for entrepreneurs test ideas that get strengthened and sustained for a period.”

New infusion of capital as impact investment and CSR has today, opened up avenues to address social challenges on a large scale. The foundation believes that tomorrow’s challenges can only be met with innovative solutions that are nurtured into viable enterprises by their respective entrepreneurs. “To foster the next generation of entrepreneurs, leaders and organizations the Foundation’s key focus is on partnering with universities and communities to help build an ecosystem that will create these innovative enterprises,” Navee explains.

Today, Deshpande Foundation has its hand full. All its attention is now focused on its ‘Farm Ponds’ project, to battle drought in several parts of the country. “Most parts of India have been reeling under drought for more than three successive years,” says Naveen. “Ensuring a secure

source of water in rain-fed areas can be the biggest multiplier for agricultural development and our economic prosperity. The National Initiative on Climate Resilient Agriculture finds that harvesting surplus runoff through farm ponds dug in the field is a climate resilient option of ensuring adequate water supply in rain-fed areas. We already have a demand of over 1,000 farmers in Dharwad district want ponds constructed on their lands. We have also started the project in Telangana and are looking to benefit more numbers of vulnerable farmers in drought-hit areas across India.”

Another area of focus is skill-development; the platform here: Tier 2 and Tier 3 towns. “We have set up two centers in Nizamabad in Telangana and Nanded in Maharashtra, from where we propose to skill over a thousand youngsters, every year,” says Naveen. “We are also constructing India’s largest skill-development and incubation center at Hubballi, which will become a hot-bed for innovation and entrepreneurship. We also hope to set up skill-development centers in 5 other Tier 2 and Tier 3 towns this year.” Even as it focuses its energy on initiatives like these, the foundation’s agricultural initiatives will also expand to other districts in Karnataka and Telangana. “As we scale our initiatives, it is important for us to develop the next line of leaders. I will focus on building existing leadership and groom many more to successfully combine the business excellence of for-profits with the compassion of non-profits,” says Naveen as he signs off.

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4. Eco Trends

BAG-GING SUSTAINABILITY

The success story of Ragulan Kadiresan and his company, Eco Trends, can be put down to simple serendipity — a happy accident that occurred when Ragu was taking shelter from the rains. It was perhaps this twist of fate that, in the end resulted in the very core Eco Trends’ USP and its claim to fame. It happened just after Ragu had returned from the Netherlands a few years ago, where he met the founder of Ragbag, Siems Haffman, who decided to let Ragu help supply bags for his business. “Siems had just agreed to fund me 2,000 Euros, half of which was for a flight ticket to and from Amsterdam,” says Ragu, “The remaining money amounted to 60,000 rupees, of which 45,000 went towards buying plastic sheets, pet bottles and procuring soft materials for bags.”

When Siems gave Ragu funds to design new kinds of recycled bags for their brand, he made 10 recycled bags for which he spend most of money. Simultaneously, he developed some up-cycled (up-cycling is the process of using waste material to make something of higher value than the original product) products like advertisement hoarding bag, fire hose bag, old saree bag, old denim bag, and fire hose bag. “Siems

liked all my upcycling ideas and he tried to sell all of them. Since then, Ragbag focused only on upcycled bags,” says Ragu, “While walking back with these products, it began raining and I took shelter in a waste-paper mart. There, in a corner, I found a stack of used tea sacks. And that’s when the idea hit me.” Using tea sacks meant that Ragulan’s bags would be both up-cycled and eco-friendly.

Today, Eco Trends makes use of nearly 40,000 tea sacks in its bag-making process. Nearly 40 percent of these sacks are supplied by rag-pickers, while a significant percentage of its supply comes from agents who supply them to Thiruppanandal. When business was dull last year, Eco Trends still managed to supply bags made from 20,000 discarded tea sacks. Each tea sack has a capacity of 50 kilograms. “I decided to give this a shot only because I care for two things: sustainability in terms of employment, and simple eco-consciousness,” says Ragu, “It’s not just about caring, but the intention to care. If your intention to care for the society is in the right place, you want your circle to be as large as possible.”

The ecological impact of Eco Trends is also appreciably high. Every day, India generates 0.14 million tons of garbage that usually ends up in landfills. Considering a large part of this garbage consists of unused materials like these tea sacks, Eco Trends is playing a vital role in mitigating the impact of these discarded materials on the environment. In fact, there is 20 to 60 percent wastage from the up-cycling material at Eco Trends, but the company has managed to send that to a recycling plant at a cost of Rs 20,000. “It’s all about ability,” says Ragu, “If I believe I have it in me to carry a weight of 10 kilograms, I want to fulfil that ability and carry all those 10 kilos.”

Eco Trends' workspace in Thiruppanandal comes with an equally daring, edgy and experimental feel. While not all of Ragu's ideas and designs are successful, he's willing to take risks. "I'm running a studio, not a factory," he quips, as he takes us through his centre, located just off National Highway 36. A two-storied building that houses his materials and work stations is the heart and soul of Eco Trends' work. "I supply my bags purely on a made-to-order basis," he says, explaining his business model. "When an order comes in, I get down to thinking up designs, discussing them with my clients and getting down to making bags based on what we've agreed to." He continues, "My bags are not even insured, but somehow it's all worked out for us." Apart from Ragbag, Eco-Trends also supplies to big players like Converse, which ensures that as far as big brands go, Ragu's initiative couldn't possibly put a foot wrong.

As far as future plans go, Ragu is now keen on targeting the United States to expand his business. "The reason is quite simple: the US is more like a continent than a country," he says, "Supplying there will be a huge boost to business and our attempts to ensure eco-consciousness through our products." However, the one big impediment to these plans is funding. "We need funds to expand, and we're short on that at the moment," he admits, candidly. Another goal that Eco Trends has set for itself is to expand, within. "I have wanted to grow the number of people I work with and those who work around me," says Ragu, "That way, I not only do business but I also create an environment of awareness and eco-consciousness. It's important that people realize the gravity and importance of eco-friendliness in day-to-day life."

As it heads into the future, Eco Trends will continue playing to its strengths, manufacturing shoulder bags, yoga bags, and many other similar products from old tea sacks. In doing this, Ragulan's enterprise could successfully ensure that it manages to achieve both its visions: sustainability and environmental consciousness. At the end of the day, it is perhaps this realization of Ragu's dreams that will hold the company in good stead as it attempts to up-cycle in the pursuit to keep the environment clean. And it all began because a simple tea sack was used to make something bigger and better.



5. Exnora International

GREEN REVOLUTION

“Necessity is the mother of invention”. In the words of M B Nirmal, Founder, Exnora International, the entire purpose of his now-famous NGO, can be summed up in that one sentence. He explains, “When we were younger, we moved to a house that was surrounded by a slum. The sheer population that we witnessed inspired me with an idea.” He continues, “I thought to myself: why can’t these people become a solid source of social capital? They can be made to contribute to the environment and the society around them.” In many ways, that was the moment the seed was sown – the idea for Exnora International was born, then.

Over the last three decades, the cause of Exnora has stayed the same, but in Nirmal’s words, “the rules have changed”. He takes us back to how Exnora International began, with some big celebrity faces as endorsement and an ever-available helping hand. “Actors like Kamal Haasan and Manorama, for instance, were presidents of their respective Exnoras,” Nirmal recalls, “These smaller civic bodies were excellent in

that they complemented existing government bodies like corporations. At one point, there were nearly 180 to 190 well-known faces who were part of Exnora International. This included over 25 IAS and IPS officers, all of whom were office-bearers too.” Re-tracing the baby-steps that Exnora International made back in 1989, Nirmal says that it was precisely this promising start that, which became the rock for the NGO’s foundation.

One of the earliest initiatives which won Exnora International, widespread praise, was its source segregation programme. And in Nirmal’s own words, understanding the basis and need for source-segregation, was a challenge in itself. “Earlier, the focus was cleanliness. We needed to keep our surroundings clean,” he says, “As long as our garbage was not in our backyard, everything was fine. We didn’t stop for a moment to think that the garbage that makes its way out of our backyard goes to a larger garbage dump in Kodungaiyur.” In several ways, that revelation helped Exnora International make a name for itself through its source-segregation programme. Its green and blue waste-collection tricycles soon became an enduring image. In Nirmal’s own words, they signified a shift from “cleanliness” to “environmental upkeep”.

With the growing popularity, a long line of challenges also came Exnora International’s way. The first of those challenges occurred when garbage collection was contracted out to an international enterprise, who Nirmal says didn’t quite have the city’s best interests at heart. “We noticed that this company was falling into the same pitfall of focussing on cleanliness as opposed to environmental upkeep,” he says, “The company wasn’t practicing source-segregation, which remains the most environmentally conscious practice of keeping your surroundings clean. For instance, the company began clearing debris from construction companies, through their trucks — it wasn’t quite helping the cause.”

These days, Nirmal is busy promoting the concept of home Exnoras. Speaking excitedly about the concept, he explains how certain

adjustments to the home environment could go a long way in conservation and promotion of enviro-friendly living. “A simple example lies in the way we use our water,” he explains, “Today, it’s incorrect to use the term ‘waste water’. At Exnora International, we call it grey water. This could be water that’s left after washing utensils or the waste water from anyone’s kitchens. This water can be used as organic soap water, and also be used to water plants, for instance. That way, it isn’t wasted and finds its own purpose and function.” Apart from these initiatives, Nirmal has also taken it upon himself to promote the use of bio-toilets. “Bacteria are extremely beneficial to all of us. So, owning a toilet that’s eco-friendly and causes minimum damage to the environment, is most certainly the need of the hour.”

Nirmal believes that the need to conserve stems from the fact that India needs a lot more environmental-awareness than ever before. “Consider this stat: only 14% of our drainage systems are closed, while the US has all of its drains closed,” he says, “This shows you how open and easy drainage is one of the problems we are left to contend with.”

Today, looking back on the NGO’s three-decade journey, Nirmal is a satisfied man. Ask him which of Exnora International’s achievements lets him beam with pride, and the answer is instantaneous: “Just the fact that we are today, a school subject. That itself is a testament to the kind of work we have done and have been doing.” He continues: “The Government recently launched the Swach Bharat plan, but I’m happy to inform you that we began the initiative as part of Exnora International, several years ago. We really did have a vision before Swach Bharat.” It’s some of these lofty achievements that Nirmal hopes will propel Exnora International into history books. “We’ve had several revolutions that have resulted in a system that was much better than before. Dr Kurien was the Father of the White Revolution. I believe the work we at Exnora tirelessly do, could well qualify us for a Green Revolution.”

In the last thirty years, by way of its existence, Exnora International has been not just keeping surroundings clean, but also caring for the environment. Needless to say, the stellar contribution of individuals like Nirmal have contributed to this renewed priority of the organisation. And why not? The next Green Revolution may not be too far away.



6. GiveAway

CLICK HERE TO GIVE

A couple of years ago, three friends who went by the names of Mohamed Asif MH, Nareshwar Sivanesan and Fahd Khaleel Wallajah were spending a day at Chennai's Marina beach when they chanced upon an elderly person rummaging through a pile of garbage, in search of food. Not far away, middle-class family was tossing leftovers from their meal. "This was a full-plate meal that could have easily fed at least two hungry people," says Fahd, recollecting the incident, which paved the way for the trio to start GiveAway. Two years since its inception, the organization has been one of the most successful crowd-sourcing platforms around, focused on social causes. In a nutshell, GiveAway's mission is simple: provide for the needy by sourcing from excess. "We started by collecting leftover food from households, wedding receptions, restaurants and parties in Chennai," says Fahd, "We personally went to these places, collected food and ensured that it was packed in a safe and hygienic manner before being delivered to the beneficiaries."

In just five months since its inception, GiveAway began catering to

500,000 people in Chennai alone. This included at least 1,000 homeless people who were fed every day. And this, even the company began growing with zero marketing costs. “Individual contributors helped the startup stay afloat,” says Fahd. He continues, “Our real breakthrough came with the devastating floods that washed out Chennai in December 2015, which saw us brainstorm and chance upon the idea of crowd-sourcing, which took form and shape next year.” The company began operations with its share of challenges, though. “Convincing different corporate enterprises, negotiating and bringing them onboard, was our greatest one yet,” says Fahd.

When the floods left thousands of families homeless and hungry, GiveAway began realizing that it had bigger tasks ahead. “We contacted nearly 10 corporate enterprises who could come to the rescue of the hundreds of people affected by the floods,” says Fahd. From names like McDonald’s (donation: Rs 10 lakh worth of coupons) and e-grocer BigBasket (crowd-funding campaign on the GiveAway platform, raising essential groceries worth Rs 22 lakh), there was some semblance of a response. Soon enough, Foodpanda chipped in with a crowdfunding campaign to source Biryani for 20,000 people from various restaurants in Hyderabad, with local travel company, Parveen Travels helping transport the food through six Volvo buses, even as others sent essentials for 5,000 families who lost their livelihood. “In total, GiveAway sourced around 200 tons of food and essentials, valued at nearly Rs 5 crore,” says Fahd.

The success of its Chennai Flood Relief distribution got the trio to realize that they were addressing crises on a global level. “Our team decided to work on a platform that would connect donors to the beneficiaries, and allow them to donate the bare necessities,” says Fahd. Today, GiveAway has joined hands with e-commerce platforms like BigBasket and Snapdeal. “These companies can list their products at a discounted rate on the GiveAway platform, and donors can then make purchases of products they’d like to donate.” The products are then sent to verified beneficiaries. By registering on the platform, donors can track the quantum of their contribution, and the subsequent impact they have made on the beneficiaries. “Corporate partners cover shipping and handling costs, and deliver the products pledged by the donors to the

beneficiaries,” says Fahd.

How does GiveAway’s business model work? “We generate revenues by being a facilitator between the donors and the beneficiaries,” explains Fahd, “Neither the donors nor the beneficiaries are charged. Our commission model ensures that our corporate partners get extra sales, because of which their business is oriented towards social causes, which in turn creates value for them.” But challenges are still, aplenty. “They lie in facilitating demands of each orphanage, especially since most beneficiaries do not have supporters, which calls for effort on our part towards creating awareness and bringing supporters on-board,” Fahd adds.

Bootstrapped thus far, GiveAway now says it’s looking for funding from venture capitalists and impact investors. The money, it says, will be invested in talent, digital facilities for homes and orphanages, infrastructure, and logistics. “We want to get all orphanages, old-age homes, children’s centres and the like, under one roof,” says Fahd, adding: “In the next three quarters, we want to get every home and orphanage in South India on our platform and then focus on strengthening our pan-India presence. We also plan to introduce geo-tagging to let you find an NGO or cause that is in your locality.”

With a team strength of 12, GiveAway says it has impacted the lives of over 700,000 people thus far, across the country. The start-up was also associated with other major causes, including the Maharashtra drought in 2016 (in association with Snapdeal) and Cyclone Vardah in Chennai and the Gujarat Floods earlier this year. “We are also launching a feature for special events,” says Fahd, “For instance, a person can donate food during special occasions to various homes and orphanages. GiveAway has a consolidated a database of 2,000 such homes, with an average size of 50 members per home. Most of these homes are spread across major metropolitan cities in India.”

While most of GiveAway’s major campaigns run successfully on corporate platforms, with enough social media presence, the start-up has also evolved as an independent platform over time. As on date, the platform is hosting over 12 campaigns. “The main goal is to bring every home or orphanage in this country into one fold and give them a digital

voice,” says Fahd, “Our vision is to create a global platform, which connects every person in need to a person who can address it, through technological and disruptive innovations.”

With civil wars and global terror dominating the ongoing narrative, GiveAway says that millions of dollars spent on rehabilitation programmes do not reach the actual beneficiaries. “This is where GiveAway, a startup which does not accept cash donations, could play a pivotal role,” Fahd says, “We look forward to undertake major sustainable developmental projects, such as solar-powered water pumps, rural electrification, and medical assistance through our hospital partners.” The start-up is planning to expand in East Asia, the Middle East and Africa. “At the end of the day, all we hope is our startup gets the backing of renowned impact ventures, as we strive towards change,” Fahd signs off.

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7. Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani

A LEGACY TO BEHOLD



Earlier this month, The Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS) Trust lost its greatest pillar—the Founder Shri P N PND (PND)—who was in many ways, the rock that served as the sure foundation for the trust. Through the years, his yeomen service to society, and the resolve with which he built not just the spirit of social entrepreneurship but cultured the concept of social consciousness, will no doubt forever remain etched in the minds of his followers and keepers of his legacy. “A true visionary, PND brought to the social sector immense wealth of business and corporate experience,” says Bhuvaneshwari Ravi, MSDS Trustee and daughter of PND, “His views focused on meeting unmet needs and unleashing human potential to address social divides. He was particularly focused on integrating working for the society as a daily part of every individual’s life.” Those attitudes and that approach continue to hold great relevance today. After all, PND encouraged every individual with a social consciousness to make the leap of faith. Placed on priority, was the 4T focus-sharing: talent, touch, time and treasure. This included encouraging and developing capability in people – young and old alike – to become servant leaders, creating neighbourhood initiatives – serving causes in the neighbourhood and responding to local social causes, and laying emphasis on scaling out as opposed

to scaling up. Bhuvaneshwari adds, “PND would often say: ‘small is beautiful, do not scale up and collapse under your weight, scale-out, encourage, enrol more social entrepreneurs to develop your ideas’.”

Early in its journey, MSDS Trust toiled hard to define and propagate the concept of social consciousness – the awareness that we are all servant leaders. In acknowledging this, lies the capability to grow beyond our needs and empower ourselves to eliminate and reduce social divides. Through the years, MSDS has supported social consciousness in individuals by building capabilities in budding social entrepreneurs through Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM), providing fellowships (monetary support as monthly living expenses for a period of three years) to early social entrepreneurs and celebrating social change agents, particularly women social change agents. “Through these initiatives, MSDS brings together a cross section of society to engage in and witness social impact and contribute to society,” says Bhuvaneshwari.

MSDS has also successfully encouraged social citizenry by donating dal, oil and sugar every month (called the DOS programme) to NGOs supporting children, women, senior citizens and the differently-abled. The idea of social entrepreneurship promoted by MSDS rests on developing human capital. “And when we refer to ‘human capital’, we mean servant leaders who would relentlessly serve various social causes with humility. It is about kindling within individuals the spirit of service and combining it with organizational or business skills to start, manage and grow sustainable organizations,” says Bhuvaneshwari.

Through this journey, PND has always stood out as the greatest contributor to the Trust’s journey. “He had many strengths—planning & Flawless execution, compassion, and was an embodiment of giving—but the first of these that comes to mind was his openness to learning and sharing the knowledge learnt,” says MSDS Trustee, Latha Suresh. “He was an avid reader and would apply the knowledge gained from the books he read immediately. I remember him marking the important lines and pages and asking me to read them or to document it.” But that was not all. “His non-judgemental attitude and desire to find a good quality in every individual motivated his team to revere him.” Latha also recalls PND’s incredible memory: “He never forgot a single person

with whom he worked or interacted, irrespective of whether it was a staff or the head of an organization. His empathetic nature, always made him say something to whomever he interacted with and they would never forget him or his observations. All these strengths aside, perhaps the greatest legacy that PND has left the MSDS Trust with is in Latha's words, "the legacy of giving". She recalls, "Giving was in his DNA and he preached the concept of giving to one and all. 'Giving a little of your little' and 'Each One Reach One', were his mantras to promote giving."

Over the years, MSDS Trust has won itself several laurels, and many an achievement. It began with the Dal-Oil-Sugar (DOS) distribution scheme and Annadhanam schemes. "Over 20,000 kilograms of commodities are distributed every month to around 40 NGOs in Chennai," says Latha. Felicitating social change agents with the Sadguru Gnanananda National Awards, and supporting budding social entrepreneurs with Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowships is also a keenly cultured initiative of MSDS. "Over 115 social change agents across India have been felicitated, seven fellows have completed their fellowship and nine are currently pursuing it," Latha adds. Other achievements include building learning centres that promote social entrepreneurship through Centre for Social Initiative & Management (CSIM), with over 1000 people having been oriented to the concept of social entrepreneurship in CSIM centres across Chennai, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Bangalore, Coimbatore, Hoshangabad and Devrukh. In all, over 200 social entrepreneurs have been groomed by CSIM. "We have also taken steps to promote the social accounting and audit process amongst social enterprises across India through Social Audit Network, India," says Latha, "Over 75 organisations including NGOs, For-profit social enterprises, CSR projects and NBFCs have been audited by SAN, India." Last but not the least, the Trust has also given special focus to educating the disadvantaged, educating around 25 trans genders and 20 Narikurava tribal children.

The vision for MSDS is quite clear: open 100 CSIMs and groom 1 lakh social entrepreneurs across India. "We are networking with many Colleges and Universities to start Social Enterprise Skill Labs that would offer both training on Social entrepreneurship and also enable incubation of social enterprises," says Latha. CSIM's goal involves reaching out to

more budding social entrepreneurs and offering fellowships to at least ten a year. “The strategy is to network with corporates and make them sponsor one social entrepreneur for three years,” Latha adds. All of this will no doubt, make for a fitting tribute to PND, whose vision for social entrepreneurship has resulted in the many achievements of the MSDS Trust.

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8. OSCAR Foundation

IT'S ALL IN THE GAME

Growing up in Cuff Parade's Ambedkar Nagar slum opened Ashok Rathod's eyes to a few of life's realities. Having witnessed, first hand, how a number of his classmates dropped out of school either on account of lack of interest, or the need to earn for their families, Ashok realized that a lack of focus on education was plainly apparent. "Most of these students also fell into bad company and became addicted to drugs," he recounts, "To make them responsible, their parents thought it best to marry them off at an early age, and this intergenerational cycle of poverty and illiteracy continued." As a means of motivation, Ashok then began actively mulling the prospect of using football, to help these children become better individuals. "That's when I realized that sports could be used as a powerful medium to impart life-skill training to street children, and encourage them to keep studying," he continues. That's how the OSCAR Foundation began in 2006, with a batch of 18 students, with Ashok observing a one-percent drop in the dropout rate over the next year.

The OSCAR Foundation is abbreviated to read 'Organization for Social Change, Awareness & Responsibility'. Today, the organization has several programmes, but with football as a connecting link and a route

to enrolment. “It helps children aged between 7 and 22 who want to play football and learn to value education and handle social issues,” says Ashok. It caters to school drop-outs, victims of child labor, child marriage, drug abuse, and juveniles. OSCAR provides regular football coaching for children and youth and through the sport, has tried to develop life skills to help them overcome these problems and become role models for the community. “We try to build their confidence and complete their education,” says Ashok.

The activities at OSCAR also include taking children to LIVE matches, helping them participate in various tournaments, enabling career guidance workshops, taking them out to movies and even overseas trips. But the questions remains: why football? “With any other sport, you often require expensive infrastructure, which is not the case with football,” says Ashok, “It also made sense for us to continue with the game more so because kids from under-privileged communities won’t be able to afford expensive equipment.” According to the OSCAR model, children engage in various activities through football. The creation of this opportunity, Ashok says, has created avenues for these children to display talent and skill. “Whoever signs up for football is provided a basic education so as to benefit from these informal classes,” he says. The foundation employs coaches for the football, with coaching camps spread across Mumbai, Delhi, Karnataka and Jharkhand.

By way of the OSCAR model, the organization currently works with 3,100 children across India. “We’ve also managed to strike a healthy gender balance,” says Ashok, “Forty percent of our children are girls. It has been our belief that gender equality is a critical ingredient to availing the value of education. In the future, we hope to have a 50-50 gender ratio, at OSCAR.” Currently, the organization has set its sights on training 170 girls and 288 boys as part of its ‘Young Leader Training’ programme.

Back to the football, OSCAR’s coaching has produced some visible results. “Our youngsters go on to play for clubs, banks like IDBI Bank and Union Bank, organizations like the Western Railways and Air India, and even football clubs like Mohun Bagan,” says Ashok, referring to one of the organization’s alumni, Kishan Sulegai. “Kishan joined OSCAR as a senior player and is now working for the Income Tax department in

Gujarat.” Ashok continues, “Kishan has played the Santosh trophy, and has also represented Mumbai FC.” OSCAR’s Young Leader programme has allowed half its youth take up coaching as a career, thereby choosing football as a profession and a career avenue.

More recently, three children from OSCAR went for special training in London, while 15 children from the foundation are presently selected for a UK School tour later this year. But Ashok’s goals don’t end here. “I now have my eye on scaling up the OSCAR programme in three more states — Goa, Rajasthan & Uttarakhand,” he says, “At some point, we would like to reach out to 20,000 children across India, and in doing that, aim to train at least 3,000 young leaders.” Partnerships like one with the Association of Indian Football Federations and collaborations with international football clubs like Manchester United are also on the anvil. The foundation also hopes to start a football Academy for underprivileged children, and thereby replicate the OSCAR model across geographies. “I hope to continue utilising sport as a means of education and empowerment, especially to address social issues,” says Ashok, “And this is largely because I believe sport can be a medium that does not discriminate among people and instead one that brings people together.” He continues: “At OSCAR we have our own curriculum, which is a life-skill curriculum that covers several social messages. The sport we play helps us provide the necessary support towards imparting this social message, and reduce the dropout rate in our communities.”

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9. SMILE FOUNDATION

REASONS TO SMILE

With the firm belief that education is both an end and a means to a better life, The Smile Foundation began its journey in 2002. “Ever since, it’s the need to keep working for the children that has been our prime objective,” says Santanu Mishra, Co-Founder and Executive Trustee, Smile Foundation, “Children are the future of a nation. For an emerging country like India, the education of its underprivileged children holds the key to progress. However, the caveat is that education for children cannot be achieved without ensuring the welfare of the family.” It was with this understanding that the NGO has prioritized the well-being of a child’s family as much as the child itself. “A child can go to school regularly only when the family, particularly the mother is healthy and empowered, says Santanu, “It’s important that the family has a decent livelihood and a steady income.”

Smile Foundation began by adopting what it calls a “lifecycle approach” with programmes focused on family health, livelihood and women empowerment, all of which help children, their families and the community as a whole. “Thus on a broader perspective, Smile Foundation focuses on education for children, healthcare to the families,

livelihood for the youth and empowerment for women,” says Santanu, “Currently, we are reaching out to more than 400,000 underprivileged children, youth and women directly every year through 250 welfare projects circumventing education, healthcare, livelihood, and women empowerment, across 25 States.” In the development sector, there is a notion that the potential for change is so large that whatever is done, seems just about insufficient. “The requirements are just so vast,” says Santanu, “So we acknowledge the fact that we at Smile Foundation have a long way to go and expand by way of involving civil society as a partner of change and to reach out to as many deserving children, their families and communities as we possibly can.”

One fact is amply clear. The NGO says it measures its parameter of success by gauging its efforts towards providing universal education. “This in turn creates the process required to streamline the underprivileged children into the mainstream schools in a more sustained manner,” says Santanu. “By extension of this, we create a pool of young and independent people from the marginalized section, through skill enhancement in tandem with market requirements and create employability for them.” As a means of reaching out to more people, Smile’s mobile hospital Smile on Wheels, is taking curative, preventive and promotive healthcare to the doorsteps of urban poor and underserved villagers. But there’s more when it comes to gauging parameters of success. “Empowering the girl child and women who are denied even their basic rights like health, education, employment and a respectable status in society, is one,” says Santanu, “Transforming lives of underprivileged and disadvantaged people is never easy, particularly in the complex socio-cultural and geographic context of India, where the sheer numbers are awe inspiring, is another.” She continues, “In such scenarios, whenever I come across a success story, every story inspires me and they are extremely close to my heart. These are stories of grit, inspiration, and those that come out from the vicious cycle of poverty.”

Needless to say, when The Smile Foundation began in 2002, there were initial challenges. This included identifying a working model to ensure good governance and a sustainable mechanism to achieve the developmental results. “The absence of a dependable financial

mechanism for the development sector was scary,” says Santanu. Taking a cue from the business model of venture capital, an innovative model called Social Venture Philanthropy was evolved as a means of powering genuine grass-root initiatives. Over time, Smile Foundation also developed an understanding of how the corporate sector functioned. “Over the years, a bridge was established – linking the needs of development initiatives with the business needs of corporate entities,” says Santanu.

The next few years will see Smile continue to endeavour towards empowering children, youth and women. This, it hopes to achieve through education, healthcare and market-focused livelihood programmes. “We want to focus on developing and deploying the best possible methodology and technology for achieving ideal SROI (social return on investment), promoting our practice of good governance more widely, linking business competitiveness of the corporate with social development initiatives and sensitizing privileged children, youth and citizens in general to promote civic-driven change,” says Santanu. Smile has said it’s reaching out with its programmes to geographies with the most requirements. “Continuous need assessment across India is an ongoing process of Smile Foundation,” explains Santanu, “We are reaching out to more than 400,000 underprivileged children, youth and women directly every year through more than 250 welfare projects in 25 states and would like to spread across villages, the remotest pockets and urban areas of India.”

While NGOs work towards making a difference, Santanu is quick to admit that this process cannot succeed in isolation. “Not unless civil society comes forward to support the initiative,” he says, “To keep the good work going, funds are extremely crucial.” Smile follows a dual approach for fund-raising: corporate fundraising and individual fundraising. “The major challenge the development sector is struggling with for a long time is trust deficit,” says Santanu, “People are still apprehended about sharing their wealth whereas transparency and credibility remains the criteria for corporate partnership.”

When Smile began, things were far from easy. But through determination, commitment and hard work, the NGO has begun seeing the fruit of its work. “We started raw with only a vision to do something for society

development with no definite goal or big plans,” says Santanu, “During this journey we had our learning’s by facing rejections, challenges and today when I look back from where we started and where we have reached now, I feel contained. I guess the major goal that I have set for myself and for Smile Foundation is to reach out to as many deserving children, their families and communities as we can.”

— JS

10. SOCH

LOST AND FOUND



Manoj Kumar Swain grew up at a small village in Odisha. On graduating college, Manoj went to the Tata Institute of Social Sciences where he pursued a course in Child Rights and Social Entrepreneurship. Soon after, Manoj joined SATHI, a national-level NGO working towards rehabilitating street children. A few years later, in 2012, Manoj would go on to start the Society for Children (SOCH) with the help of likeminded people. “We began in July 2012, and are operational in three locations of Odisha — Bhubaneswar, Berhampur and Puri — up until date,” says Manoj, “The main focus of SOCH is child rights, our core activity being rescue and resettlement of runaway, missing, abandoned and abducted children (Project Rakshyak). We at SOCH also work towards behaviour modification of street children (Project Punarjivan) and mainstreaming of youths from difficult backgrounds (Project Pankh).”

Since its inception in August 2012, till October this year, SOCH has recorded the rescue of 3759 children from vulnerable situations and has boasted of successfully reuniting 2666 of these children with their families. Working in coordination with CWC, GRP, RPF, Railway

Authorities and other government bodies, SOCH is currently engaged in the rescue and resettlement of about 80 to 100 children from various difficult situations. “When we began, we had just one room for an office,” Manoj recalls.

In the last half-a-decade, SOCH has managed to cause quite the impact among NGOs in the same space. Such has been its success in a relatively short span of time that the organisation has been acknowledged as Best Children’s NGO for 2015 at the Giving Back Awards held in Mumbai. SOCH also bagged top honours at the CSR Implementing Agency Challenge at the India CSR Summit 2016, in addition to being recognized as a “Punya Utkal” organization for its role in social contribution.

As on date, statistics suggest that SOCH re-settles 70% of the children it rescues. “The key words to the work we do are ‘outreach’ and ‘networking’,” explains Manoj, “Outreach is all about policing railway platforms, observing every child, taking note of their activities, behaviour and their company.” This process is usually followed by an informal interaction to confirm the authenticity of the suspected runaway, missing, abandoned, abducted or trafficked child as the case may be. “Network-building then ensures that through awareness meetings and sensitization drives with key stakeholders present at rail way stations, the process of resettlement occurs smoothly and efficiently,” says Manoj. In this case, stakeholders may range from porters at the station to the Railway Protection Force (RPF). Vendors, autorickshaw drivers, cleaning staff and watering staff are potential stakeholders too. “All these individuals are vital in tracing and identifying such children owing to their regular presence at stations and platforms,” he adds, “They are instrumental in referring missing cases.”

In Manoj’s experiences with resettling children, he says that 80% of the reasons that these children come up with for leaving home, are trivial. “Among the more serious reasons for running away from home are Peer Influence, attraction of the city, child labour, education, child abuse and child trafficking,” he says. “Running away from homes in search of

work tops the list of reasons while ‘city attraction’ and ‘escape from scolding by parents’ follow in at a close second and third,” Manoj adds. The table below lists out these reasons, with their frequencies.

What happens when a child is “discovered” at a railway platform? Surely, once SOCH and its stakeholders zero in on an abandoned child, there must be an SOP that is followed? “Yes,” confirms Manoj, “Many a time, the child himself or herself volunteers to part with information, and comes up with the parental address. This usually happens when the child in question shows a basic will to return home, after counselling sessions.” But by Manoj’s own admission, the challenge almost always arises when the child is adamant and ends up not parting with any contact details. “There might also be a situation where parents are abusive or unfit to take care of the child due to poor financial conditions,” he says, “Then there are the cases where either the child is an orphan or is too young to remember their address, or even situations where parents are not fit enough to receive the child.”

When reunions do occur though, it usually happens under the jurisdiction of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), which in turn refers these children to Government-sponsored shelter homes like Home Shelter (usually done on a temporary basis) or Child Care Institution (done until the child attains the age of 18) on a case-by-case basis. At present, SOCH finds itself in three locations around Odisha, but Manoj admits that there is scope for expansion. “Based on our surveys, there are plenty of prominent railway stations like Khordha Road, Cuttack, Rourkela and Angul to name a few, where there is scope of expansion.”

Donations are often the bedrock of any NGO, and so is the case with SOCH. “Our Rescue to Resettlement process for each child accounts to Rs 4,000, and on an average we rescue 80 to 100 children per month,” says Manoj, “This accounts to a budget of Rs 4,00,000 per month.” For a while now, SOCH has been working through support of individual sponsors and also the fact that Behrampur is supported by the Tata Trust. Both cases underline the importance that donation plays in the day-to-day functioning of the NGO, and the work it does.

11. Sristi Foundation

Including them

An inclusive society in its true sense is still an elusive dream. In our society, we have been trying to comprehend and realise inclusivity since independence. Different strategies, different interventions; yet we have a few sections always left out of mainstream. We have come a long way forward, yet there are some sections of the population for whom inclusion is ‘made to seem inappropriate’. One such section is the intellectually challenged adults. “Even after going through a special school and adapting themselves as much as they can to the mainstream practices, intellectually challenged persons are not treated as capable individuals. This apathy led me to dream of a space exclusively for them,” says Mr G.Karthikeyan, Founder and Director of Sristi Foundation in Kunamangalam village in Villupuram district.



Unable to support his education, Karthikeyan’s parents admitted him in an orphanage. This is where he got to spend time with children and adults with intellectual, developmental disabilities. He saw that the idea of inclusion was practiced here in routine life. Living with differently abled and intellectually challenged, he realised the struggle for social integration each one had to face. “While children like me had a set trajectory to follow from schooling to employment and then social integration, I saw them struggling with every phase. They did not get enough opportunities and were restricted to their routine lives within the orphanage,” he laments. As children, nobody realised the differences between them – all children played together and fought against each other. “As children we were all equal. We all had the same rules. I used to fight with the intellectually challenged mates as well. In my teens when I realised that they were different from me, I felt guilty for all my

mischiefs, but today I am very proud of those incidents,” he asserts.

Intrigued by their lives and the treatment they received from the society, Karthikeyan decided to pursue his graduation in Psychology. In 2004, he became the Director of the orphanage where he was brought up and observed that there were no special programmes for the differently abled. He thus established the Baby Sara Special School to hone the skills of these children and mentor them for an independent adulthood. However, after spending years at the special school, they hardly had anything to do in the outside world. “Everything outside seemed normal and content without them, while they, on the other hand, were looking forward to mingle with the outside world and contribute their part,” he says. Therefore, the onus was again on them to prepare themselves, this time in technical education so that they can qualify for professional work.

Now that the inmates tried and got qualified, the potential employers threw new excuses at them, questioning the safety aspects of letting them work with machines independently. “There was fear and hesitation everywhere,” he says.

Karthikeyan eventually gave up all his efforts in enabling the general public to understand the capabilities of the intellectually challenged persons. Losing all hope in changing the attitude of the community, he decided to prepare his inmates to face the society. Vocational training brought in new avenues to engage them productively, but the attitude of buyers disturbed him again. “Marketing was very tough and all those who purchased our products did not see the value in the creation, they did so for charity. Is there no value for their skills?” questions Karthikeyan, who was disheartened to see all his efforts at providing livelihood turn futile.

Karthikeyan travelled across India in search of a model or an approach that could be replicated, but found that the problem was universal. There were special schools and learning centres, but no answer to their dependency in adulthood. While brainstorming options to engage them, one girl saw the orphanage staff bringing vegetables from the market and asked Karthikeyan: Why can’t we grow our own vegetables? An instant liking to the idea gave birth to their kitchen garden.

Karthikeyan was happy to see their interest in gardening and responded to all their intriguing queries on how plants grew and produced vegetables. “One boy did not believe that a huge plant came out of a small seed. I just told him to water the seedling every day and see what happened. When leaves came out, he thought it was magic and was more devoted to plant maintenance. That was the moment of change. All of them followed their roles and responsibilities. And then the day of harvesting arrived. Our inmates were so excited about their produce. They approached the chef confidently and declared that they will decide the menu based on what they produced in the garden. Their confidence, involvement and the growing knowledge on soil health, water management and weather details amazed all of us. We gave them a responsibility and they gained their respect,” he recalls satisfactorily.

This development encouraged Karthikeyan to set up a village where abled and differently abled could live together in harmony, as equal residents. He believed that a dignified life was everyone’s right and differences in ability cannot undermine one’s right to a dignified life. He undertook a seven-month long training in Kerala and soon embarked on the journey of establishing the Sristi Village in 2014. After a long struggle for funds, he acquired ten acres of land and started the farm activities. After a survey in the complete block, he estimated the number of intellectually challenged persons who could become a member of Sristi family and accordingly planned further development. Zero budget natural farming was practiced and inmates, along with volunteers played a significant role in operationalizing the five layer model developed for Sristi village, now equipped with a dairy farm and vermin-compost pit. Eco friendly, energy efficient huts for inmates and volunteers, pipeline for irrigation and other facilities were set up one by one, making Sristi a sustainable village. Presently, there are 40 residents that includes 20 intellectually challenged persons, 10 volunteers and 10 support staff. Frequent events are also organised at the village reaching out to the parents of intellectually challenged persons. “Each one of them had a responsibility and they gave it their best. They knew the significance of their roles and therefore respected each other. They all got the space to do something and Sristi is delighted to see the transformation in them,” says Karthikeyan.

As Mailam block had no school or centre for the intellectually challenged children/adults, Sristi Foundation also established the Sristi Special School and Sristi Vocational Training Centre in Thazhuthali village. The progress and reach in a span of five years also encouraged Karthikeyan to advocate farming as an entrepreneurial venture through the Sristi Farm Academy. Given that our economy is primarily agrarian, he wanted the farm academy to provide systematic farm and agricultural-based training to people with intellectual disabilities and the marginalised non-disabled, empowering them with the confidence and skills they need to initiate their own entrepreneurial projects.

“Being self-reliant is any individual’s biggest achievement, so too for the intellectually challenged. It gives them the confidence to move ahead in life. It allows them to distinctly identify needs and responsibilities. To enable this cycle of realisation, we need to give them their space. Sristi village is one experiment that has demonstrated the possibility and potential of this idea,” concludes Karthikeyan, emphasising that we can be an inclusive society.

— Shanmuga Priya.T



12. Swatantra Talim Foundation

A school of a kind

Education as a fundamental right has made a lot of difference in the lives of underprivileged children. However, there is a new concern that is dominating the debate on Indian education—its relevance. How easily can children associate what they learn with real life situations? Are some sections of the society forced to learn what the others do? Why should it be so? Can they not learn it in ways that suit their routine lives? These and other pertinent questions in the context of rural education forced Ms Ridhi Aggarwal, Co-Founder of Swatantra Talim Foundation in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh to develop a model after school for rural children. Today, it is an after school that every one of us wished were a part of.

After her schooling in Lucknow, Ridhi graduated from the Delhi School of Economics in Delhi. Soon after her post-graduation, she worked for Edelweiss Capital in Delhi. All along, she was also involved in different social activities and her constant engagement made it clear that she would do something for children. And evidently, she was more content with her volunteering commitments during weekends and looked forward

to spending time with those children. Encouraged by her husband, Mr Rahul Aggarwal, with whom she co-founded the Foundation, she gave up her corporate job and embarked on a journey of volunteering with different organisations in the Capital. After about a year and a half, she realised that she wanted to work in the field of rural education.

“I hate and despise rote learning. It is not education in any sense. I was interested in arts and crafts but the limitations they faced in promising a standard income made me wonder why everything was linked to earning potential. After an accident during my school days, I became an under performer and saw a complete transition in the way my teachers treated me. Attitude of teachers, friends and others around me changed suddenly. That is when I realised that academic performance determined way too many things than it should actually be doing. This led me to explore how education was perceived by different sections of the society and most of all, children. Do they really get to do what they aspire?,” questions Ridhi whose volley of questions then led her to pursue an M.A in Elementary Education from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

During her course and after, she got to visit many organisations working in rural education. Soon, she joined the Nalanda in Lucknow, managing the rural education programme for girls in 150 villages of Uttar Pradesh. Ridhi was now working with people from NGOs, people from the community and experts from outside, learning each of their perspectives on rural education. Her husband who accompanied her during the village visits also saw the way of things and felt that rural education needs to be different and easily applicable so that parents also saw the relevance in letting their children continue secondary education without dropping out. Rahul too gave up his job as a Chartered Accountant and the couple together worked in Krishnamurthy School to gain formal experience in the sector. In 2013, they founded the Swatantra Talim Foundation in Lucknow.

They began working in a village called Ramduari, as they were familiar with the villagers from their days in Nalanda. While some of the villagers were eager to get their girls educated as a result of the previous programme, there were also others who found education irrelevant to their children as they were anyways destined to work on their fields.

The couple were working hard to develop simple, hands on tools to help children learn different concepts through activities. But every time they came across parents who questioned the relevance of education for their children, they wondered what they were trying to do. “Every such conversation baffled us. We became uncertain about what we must do for these children. Parents’ concerns seemed reasonable but daunting too. We felt lost,” recalls Ridhi.

During a class on alternative sources of energy, the girls exclaimed: “Is the energy from sun so powerful? Can these sources of energy solve our day to day problems?” The girls wanted to know if these renewable sources could charge mobile phones. Further probing, Ridhi and team realised the girls’ concerns. Most of the men in this village were artisans who stayed outside due to work and mobile phone was the only mode of communication with their fathers. They and their mothers walked ten kilometres to charge their mobile phones. The girls then decided to make a solar mobile charger and successfully made it, gathering inputs from videos, e-books, books and journals in the afterschool’s library. “When villagers saw the solar mobile charger up and running, they were intrigued. They said that what we taught was actually of some use to their children. That is when we also realised that the need of the hour was a model that can showcase the relevance of education apart from job security,” smiles Ridhi.

On learning that children loved to explore, they devised a curriculum with unique methods that stimulated their aptitude and temper for new innovations that can improve their lives in the villages. Their model comprised of three stages – Khojdabba, Khojaalaya and Khojshaala. Khojdabba, meaning lab in a box is a collection of experiments and activities for children from classes 1-5 to help them learn age appropriate concepts through hands on activities. “Children complete the tasks and activities to come up with the concepts. Once they are clear with the concepts, which is facilitated through more activities at each stage, they graduate to Khojaalaya,” she adds.

Khojaalaya is a library where a variety of content is made available for children to read and make models they choose. As they are exposed to online content also, children develop the habit of exploring features of their models depending on their choice. They decide what they want

to make, they decide the features and utility, then accordingly look for inputs that can lead further. Once children pass this stage, their areas of interest is clear to them and Ridhi's team. We then guide them through their choices in higher education. "Two girls from our first batch have decided to pursue medicine," says a proud Ridhi.

Khojshaala means lab in a community, where children identify specific issues in the village and work towards resolving them. Recently, children are developing a simple machine that can mechanise the task of cutting feeder crops (crops cultivated to feed the cows) from the field. Until now, this was done manually with a heavy axe that consumed both time and energy. In order to reduce the time and effort spent on this, they developed a machine using a cycle. The cycle's chain was adapted to work like a conveyor belt, attached to blades, wherein the cutting activity is taken care of while one rides the cycle across the field.

Swatantra Talim Foundation now runs two established learning centres in Ramduari village and Lucknow, reaching out to 180 children in all. With the success of these centres, Ridhi and Rahul are confident of their model and wish to integrate this with regular curriculum in schools. "We have begun our talks with some government schools and also low income private schools. The idea is to make Khojdabba as part of their curriculum so that more children can benefit from this model. We can never substitute formal schooling but can definitely work out simple models that can add more value to what children learn in schools. That is what we are trying to do," she explains.

Ridhi is now also focusing on developing next line of teachers in her centres, by training girls from the same communities. She believes that a second line of teachers from the very community will help improve the model and ease its presentation to children. She is content with her girls' results in the state board examination. "Two girls scored 85 percent and two others scored 75 percent. The success of our girls is a message that hands on learning does not take too much time, as it is popularly misunderstood to. They proved it. Enabling them in the process, we at Swatantra Talim Foundation have become an integral part of the communities," smiles Ridhi.

— Shanmuga Priya.T



13. Timbaktu Collective

SEEKING OUT SUSTAINABILITY

When The Timbaktu Collective was merely an idea back in 1990, the aim of the organisation according to its founder CK Ganguly, was “to understand the production system”. He explains, “We wanted to start with farming. The site for this quest was ‘Timbaktu’, a barren 32-acre plot jointly purchased by me, my partner Mary, and our close friend John. We wanted to understand how to protect and regenerate the forest. We began realising that if you have good forests, you have good farms and vice versa.” The trio began by planting saplings to protect the hills around Timbaktu from overgrazing and forest fires. Soon enough though, they realized that running an agro-forest habitat meant the land needed healing.

It was after this that Ganguly says the collective began tackling the issue of sustainability on the needs front (ecological, social and economic). “We wanted to understand difference between modern and traditional agriculture and aspects of traditional agriculture that make it sustainable, with no high dependency on capital and inputs. That was the first notion of sustainability that we had.” By this time, the

Timbaktu Collective was registered as a Not-for-Profit Organisation. “The women’s thrift and credit activities started in 1994. Mary started visiting the neighbouring villages and talking to women who said that they didn’t have enough money, and that impacted on their aspirations.” The problem was simple to understand. Banks wouldn’t help in the absence of credit-worthiness. ‘Chit funds’ however, were popular. “But it wasn’t sustainable since loans had to be broken and redistributed, with interest rates of up to 50% because there was a system of auctioning the collected savings,” says Ganguly, “The challenge was how do we make the cooperatives and people’s institutions self-sustaining, autonomous and financially independent?”

The other big challenge was the DWACRA programme started by the State Government which brought in money from outside. “Our principle was that the people’s money should come from within and should be circulated from within,” explains Ganguly. “When they started the DWACRA groups, they gave around Rs. 15,000 per group from which the women could take loans. They then started giving loans at ridiculous rates. Then there was the Microfinance boom and lots of MFIs started flooding the place. However, they started making the women significantly indebted as the loans that are to be paid back at interest, which in turn flows out to the lending institutions of the MFI.” He continues, “One of the most important points of sustainability is that we need local resources for local purposes. It is important the money remains within the local economy, as the presence of money can generate more money.” There were other issues too: like arid land, low or scanty rainfall, mono-cropping of the groundnut crop, lack of ground water, forest fires, overgrazing and poor soil health. The big challenge for The Timbaktu Collective was to turn a fragile ecology – with marginalised lands and people – sustainable.

As on date, The Timbaktu Collective has introduced six working models towards its work of sustainability, all of which have resulted in Cooperatives. “Our work with children, while slightly different, is just as important,” explains Ganguly, narrating how providing an education and developing a child’s economic rights, is part of shaping the future.

In 1995, the Andhra Pradesh Mutually Aided Cooperative Societies

(MACS) Act was passed, allowing for greater scope of independence. “Soon, we then registered the first women’s cooperative in 1998, even as the MACS Act signalled a policy change, which happened at the right time,” says Ganguly. He continues, “While their model had no class bias, ours did. We wanted to work with only small holder farming families, artisan families, Dalit families, and especially the women from these families.”

Why has the Timbaktu Collective restricted itself to the Anantpur region, though? “Our whole idea is to remain in a small area and work as intensely as possible in ensuring that people have a good life,” says Ganguly. Fair enough since one of the organisation’s principles states that whatever is done with the local population, in Ganguly’s words, “we should have already done it ourselves”. Learning about it before proposing it to someone else is the guiding principle behind such undertakings. “The expansion of the cooperative model to other thematic areas was based on the experience of setting up women’s cooperatives,” says Ganguly, “We started practicing organic farming in Timbaktu in 1997. It took us till 2005 before we had the courage to go and start promoting organic farming in the villages.”

What the Timbaktu Collective does not believe in, is replicability. “We have no blue print since every place and people have different ways of doing things. There are geographical, cultural and economic differences,” explains Ganguly, “There is no such thing as replicability. Our work can only inspire. There are also certain aspects of our work which are universal truths and can be followed: like how we talk with people and not to people.” Another concept Ganguly says he isn’t a fan of is an “exit policy”. “There is no such thing as going to a place, working for some time, and then exiting. Development is a continuous process with no clear end,” he says.

Till date, the Timbaktu collective is committed to working towards local dignity and local pride without parochialism and caste or gender divisions. Ganguly explains, “The self-worth of a farmer or any other village resident is based on whether one can make your ends meet, whether one’s children can go to school, or whether one can receive proper medical care. The objective is dignity.”

So, with its task cut out, the focus now turns towards creating self-worth, a good life and continued sustainability. “While we are expanding our work on our thematic areas, we are not planning on moving to new areas at the moment,” says Ganguly of his conservatism, “There are important challenges like sanitation and health care. These are things that we may get into, but that depends on our ability to take up the challenge, as also on people, funding, and long term staff commitment.”

— JS



14. Villgro

WILL TO GROW

An emerging economy like that of India’s has had a history of “pain points” to deal with. With a teeming population, less-than-desirable access to basic requirements like healthcare and education, these pain points have, over time, become more pronounced. To help accelerate development in some of these sectors, and thereby contribute to poverty alleviation, one of India’s first social enterprise incubators, Villgro, was established in 2001. “While India has been known as a ‘traditionally agrarian economy’, agriculture in this country suffers from a painful lack of innovation, especially at small farms, which constitute a majority of our farming establishments,” says Paul Basil, Founder and CEO, Villgro, taking us through how far his organization has come. He continues: “On the healthcare front, a majority of our population don’t have access to basic healthcare or health cover, with out-of-pocket expenses pushing more people deeper into poverty. As far as education is concerned, there are concerns around low enrolments, poor quality of teaching, lack of assessment tools and high dropout rates.” The fact that these pain points continue to exist today, remains the reason why 16 years into its inception, Villgro continues to focus on four focus areas: agriculture, education, and healthcare.

“At Villgro, our focus is on solving what we believe are the most pressing challenges for the country,” says Paul, “Solving these problems will go a long way in poverty alleviation.” And that is perhaps

why the incubator has been at the forefront of supporting agricultural innovations that help farmers boost their yield and also innovate newer avenues as income-generators. In fact, even as Tamil Nadu currently reels under unprecedented drought, Villgro has focused on innovations on the irrigation front, to help the State's farmers cope. "One of the subsets within agriculture that we focus on is innovative irrigation solutions that could potentially help farmers in drought-hit areas," says Paul.

As an incubator, Villgro says it measures success by the number of social enterprises it has helped attain success. "Our mandate is poverty alleviation and the impact we help our portfolio companies create, is what we get in return," Paul explains, "The more successful these companies get, the more confidence donors will have on social entrepreneurship as a model. "As a result of this, Villgro has dedicated its energies towards incubating early-stage for-profit businesses, with a thrust in one of its four focus areas. The process of bringing a start-up under Villgro's wing is extensive and done with the greatest diligence and care. "We conduct a detailed diligence on any enterprise we incubate," he says, "This includes detailed interviews with the founding team and their colleagues or associates, extensive technical investigation into the accuracy and effectiveness of a product, site visits to understand the workings of a product or solution up close and to interact with the customer or beneficiary segment." But it doesn't stop just there. Villgro also conducts extensive consultations with sector specialists and business experts, to test the viability of the model. All of this constitutes a process that could take a month, or more. "This is a highly critical step that we don't compromise on," Paul adds.

On the healthcare front, Villgro's incubate companies have engineered breakthrough innovations. Villgro says these innovations could not only bring down healthcare costs, but also improve access to "life-saving medical interventions". Paul says these innovations include dealing with conditions like anaemia, hypothermia and needless blindness. "This, even as our agriculture incubated companies are helping small farmers with newer, more efficient market linkages, and innovations in the areas of precision farming, and mechanization," says Paul. Not to be left out, Villgro's education incubated companies have their priorities clear in that teacher training, school assessments, K-12 education

content and delivery, and vocational training continue to be focus areas, here. And the reason Villgro targets early-stage companies? “We want to help them perfect their business model, find markets and scale their business,” answers Paul.

Interestingly, it’s not just the focus areas of healthcare, education, agriculture and energy that Villgro participates in. From time to time, on a case-to-case basis, the incubator steps outside the comfort zone of its core sectors, delving into non-core sectors too. “We step outside of our core sectors when we see an exceptionally high degree of innovation that can have massive impact on low-income communities,” says Paul, explaining the criteria that governs this crucial call, “We have supported an enterprise helping low-income Indians bridge the digital divide through speech-recognition solutions, a fin-tech enterprise enabling access to capital, a clean cook-stove company creating solutions for highway kitchens, among others.” In all cases, Villgro’s assessment of these models focused on the “potential for impact” that these respective businesses came with. “In all cases, the impact was massive, as was the business case,” says Paul.

Moving forward, Villgro wants to keep fortifying its core sectors, so as to add more value to its portfolio companies. It hopes to do this, even as it charts out an ambitious expansion plan on the geography front. “We are the lead incubator on an ambitious initiative that aims to unearth social enterprises exclusively from the low-income states of India. To do so, we are training four existing incubators in social enterprise incubation best practices,” says Paul, “Villgro Kenya is establishing itself as a health incubator of choice for social enterprises in the region. We are also expanding into Vietnam and The Philippines. “

So, while healthcare, education, agriculture, financial inclusion and sanitation will continue to pose challenges in India, Villgro’s innovators are at work — finding solutions to challenges in these sectors. “Entrepreneurs who can build a well-rounded team and can demonstrate a viable business model will eventually attract funding from impact investors and be able to create impact at scale,” says Paul as he signs off.

15. Weaver Bird

Weaving Livelihoods

Sustaining traditional livelihoods is a challenge the present generation has to confront, in order to protect and revive them. For, they are not just skills or practices that can be understood in isolation, but an assembly of layered practices in a holistic system, that struggles to survive in the era of mechanisation. “Members who depend on such a system are ultimately forced to give up and look for other means of livelihood relevant to the market conditions or lose all hopes of surviving in the economy and become nihilistic. It



is a very dangerous predicament for our artisans and the economy of job creation. We have already seen the crisis farmers are going through,” warns Ms Medha Shah, Founder of the social enterprise ‘Weaver Bird’ in Vadodara, Gujarat.

Medha hails from a family rooted in the values of non-violence and sarvodaya (upliftment of all masses). Having seen her parents work for farmers’ welfare and advocate organic farming to ensure sustainable agriculture, seed sovereignty, she was always aware of the lives of small, marginal farmers. “Farmers over the time, have become plain workers in the field who fulfil market demands. And the market dictates are inconsiderate of what these farmers have to go through. Although organic farming was catching up, the farmers who go through a cycle of compromise and a lean transition period, do not benefit from the treatment market gives to organic products. It is farmers who know the actual value of their creation and therefore they cannot be forgotten after procurement,” says Medha.

While this inclination to think for farmers was natural, given her family background, Medha was interested in pursuing textile designing. She graduated from the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design in Jaipur and began her career with small projects in her hometown. Medha's vision for her career changed when a farmer enquired her father if she could do something with the organic cotton they produced. Until then, they were not given any premium for their organic produce. She started working with the farmer in 2012, procured cotton from him, processed it through artisan groups and sold the finished products at exhibitions. She also shared the profits with the farmer. While this continued for three years on a small scale, Medha also worked on other freelance projects. "I was managing my survival and social responsibility at the same time. Bringing them together was very appealing yet the challenges that might come along put me on hold. Not for long though," she laughs.

She was completely aware that working with more farmers meant protection of livelihood for so many farmer groups. However, the production challenges and the responsibility of finding new buyers gave her doubts. "When I started working with one farmer, he expected only 10 percent premium and the amount of work, labour and time in selling the produce was minimal. It was all manageable within my resource limitations. Later when five more farmers showed interest on learning the share of profit and premium, I was forced to think of a strategy that can engage more farmers over the years, progressively," recalls Medha.

She called for a meeting with interested farmers and attempted to learn their expectations in terms of premium, which was 30 percent. While Medha agreed to this, she also asserted that it would be her discretion in terms of profit sharing. For, she was not yet completely aware of the time and work required to market all the produce. "More products meant that I might have to go to more exhibitions in different cities. I may also have to hire a help. Promising a share of profit might discourage them if I do not manage to find new buyers. I could not afford that," she says. As the farmers agreed to such an arrangement, Medha left her job and began engaging here full time.

Thus was born Weaver Bird in 2016, a social enterprise to promote the use of organic, hand spun and hand woven cotton as a conscious fashion choice. Her famers' groups in Rajkot cultivate cotton

organically, which is then purchased by Weaver Bird for a premium. The artisans' groups then process the cotton using natural dyes and herbal wash with shikakai and reetha to soften the fabric. Handling the designing responsibility herself, she is overwhelmed with the creativity and ease with which farmers and artisans understand the significance of sustainable livelihoods. "Every time I interact with them, I sense that they see this venture as their social responsibility too. It motivates me," she says.

Medha herself is amused by the chain of impact her brand has created on the farmers' and artisans' groups. Being the most polluting cash crop and now becoming the largest single organic crop, she is very hopeful of promoting Weaver Bird on a large scale.

Weaver Bird's collection includes apparels for both men and women – kurtas, tunics and stoles. Apart from the range of products, raw fabric is also sold in some places. Since revenue from organic cotton is export dependent, she feels that it will take some time for the domestic market to come to terms with the potential of this fabric. "There is awareness and that is the reason why market for organic produce is growing fast. While it was impelling to look at organic food, organic clothing will take a while, but will surely take roots. Weaver Bird now needs to focus on networking to reach out to the right buyers," says Medha, hoping to set a trend in the culture of sustainable clothing.

— Shanmuga Priya.T

I have been a regular reader of the ‘Conversations Today’ and hence know that the readers of this book ‘Unsung Beacons’ will have a lot of takeaways and lessons to learn from.

The stories featured here are interesting and are real facts grouped into Alumni Talk, Inspiring Conversations, NGO profile, Positive Energy and Trend setters. Every article is unique and has a different message to convey. I am particularly impressed with the brevity with which every episode is penned and edited, so that the reader can complete one message in a few minutes.

I would simply describe this book as ‘Light from many lamps’. I am sure that many people will draw inspiration from this book and inspire many more people.

**Dr. Sylendrababu. IPS
Add. Director General of Police**



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391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar, Alapakkam, Chennai - 600 116.

Phone: 044-42805365 | Website: www.csim.in