

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

“No Religion is Higher than Humanity.”
-Abdul Sattar Edhi

Humanity is an important part of life which is regressing today. We live in a world which is limitless. People can travel anywhere, see anything, experience every feeling that ever existed. Still, we are not satisfied.

One is always remembered for his or her good deeds and it is essential to understand that there is no better deed than providing services for humanitarian causes.

Serving the poor and needy is one of the greatest humanitarian help an individual can provide in his or her lifetime. It indicates that you have more than enough resources at your disposal. When we realise the fact that we are extremely lucky to have everything we desire at any point of the time we need, it opens up our minds to new possibilities.

Humanity means caring for and helping others whenever and wherever possible. It means forgetting your selfish interests and helping others at times when they need the most. You do not need a hefty bank account to contribute towards humanitarian activities. Lifting the heavy bag of an old woman is humanity, helping a disabled to cross the road is humanity, helping your aged parents in doing work is humanity; in fact helping anyone who is in need is humanity.

Every religion talks about humanity, peace and love. It means extending unconditional love to each and every living being on earth. One of the most outstanding examples of humanity has been portrayed beautifully by Mother Teresa. When we understand the importance of humanity in our day to day lives, the purpose for which we are on earth is fulfilled.

If God has made us humans there has to be some reason behind it. Let's start by doing a small act of kindness today!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

CANCER CRUSADER



Dr. V. Shanta was an Indian oncologist and the chairperson of Adyar Cancer Institute, Chennai. She was best known for her efforts towards making quality and affordable cancer treatment accessible to all patients in her country.

She was associated with Adyar Cancer Institute since 1955, and held several positions, including that of the director of the institute, between 1980 and 1997.

Known for dedicating her life to cancer research and making treatment accessible and affordable to patients, Dr Shantha played an instrumental role in the development of the 12-bed cancer hospital of 1954 into a full-fledged institute with 423 beds and state-of-the-art facilities today. From being a resident doctor to becoming its Chairperson, Dr Shantha's journey was remarkable for several reasons and her contribution to the field of oncology, immeasurable.

She dedicated herself to the mission of organizing care for cancer patients, study of the disease, research on its prevention and cure, spreading awareness about the disease, and developing specialists and scientists in various subspecialties of oncology.

Dr Shantha also ran an NGO, Avvai Home for orphan girls and aided institution attached to the Home in Adyar. She served as a member of several

national and international committees on health and medicine, including the World Health Organization's Advisory Committee on Health.

Her work won her several awards, including the Magsaysay Award, Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, and Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civilian award given by the Government of India. Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhanai offered her Sadguru Gnananada Award in (year) for her yeomen service in making cancer treatment affordable and accessible to patients.

We learn that she told her hospital administrators a few days before her demise to sprinkle her ashes all over the institute as she did not want to leave the hospital premises.

na jaayate' mriyate' vaa kadaachin naayam bhuthva bhavithaa na bhooyah: / ajo nithyah saasvato'yam puraano na hanyate' hanyamaane' sareere'

The Spirit is neither born nor does it die at any time. It does not come into being or cease to exist. It is unborn, eternal, permanent, and primeval. The Spirit is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.

Dr V Shanta will be remembered as a Cancer Crusader! We believe that her spirit will continue to guide us!

Om Shanti!

Making the Samaritans 'Act'

Lessons on civic sense are an integral part of a child's upbringing. As children grow and begin to realise the value of these principles, they also witness the obstacles in practicing what they have been taught. "This is exactly what happens during road accidents. In spite of the desire to help the victim, people step back out of fear for the consequences. "The Good Samaritan Law that protects the rights of such kind men is a breakthrough. However, I do feel disheartened that a law was needed to encourage people to show care for fellow men," says Mr Radhakrishnan, Founder of Thozhan Trust in Chennai.

As a young boy, Radhakrishnan aspired to become a civil servant. He dreamt of influencing the concept of care and concern for fellow human beings. His parents' demise affected his education and he had to work to support his education expenses. With challenges everywhere, Radhakrishnan managed to complete his graduation. The prospects of a job and higher studies and the ensuing observations in society rekindled the spirit of care in him, compelling him to act. "My friends paid my fees when I was pursuing my diploma. It was a collective effort where each one of them contributed as much as they could. While I worked hard to bring in money, their efforts helped me realise the strength of collective effort for a good cause. I was overwhelmed!" says an emotional Radhakrishnan.

Thozhan Trust was established by a group of four friends who spent time in orphanages and homes for the aged during weekends to help the needy. They registered the Trust in 2007 and began to engage themselves in different social causes. In 2013, the idea of 'Accident Free Nation' came up and the team organised group efforts to sensitise the public about how critical their participation could be in saving the life of an accident victim. "We witnessed an accident where the victim, a college student died on the spot. We, four friends, were appalled by an inactive public and how they held themselves back from becoming a part of this accident story," he reminisces.

Thozhan was founded to change this public behaviour. Their first awareness campaign in 2013 at T Nagar signal in Chennai was successful. With some commuters showing interest to volunteer for such efforts, Radhakrishnan and friends invited them to join hands. "Little did we

know that we would grow into a movement that was backed by thousands of volunteers across the state today," Radhakrishnan exclaims.

Thozhan's chain of support grew and they became more visible in the traffic signals. Weekly and weekend traffic awareness campaigns in more than 36 areas gave them the visibility they endeavoured to build to pass on the message. They became more visible in public places like parks and beaches too. Successful traffic awareness campaigns in 100 signals on same day at the same time with the help of volunteers, students' groups and public for three consecutive years (2014, 2015, 2016) was a big milestone for Thozhan. With such a dedicated team, the dream of an 'accident free nation' became their mission and the Good Samaritan Law that was passed in March 2016 to protect the rights of good samaritans who help save many lives during the critical hours, initiated a new phase of operation for the Thozhan Trust.

From 2017 to 2019, Thozhan focussed on creating awareness on the aforesaid law and training volunteers and public on the 'Golden Hour' First Aid methods. "This was very critical. To be able to help, one must know how to help and the priorities to focus on while attending to an accident victim before he reaches a hospital. This training that was organised in 75 parks was another big milestone as

we came to know about many individuals who stepped back earlier out of fear of doing something wrong. That is when we saw the role of early education in building life-saving skills," he notes.

Radhakrishnan learnt about CSIM from a friend and felt that an external source might help him evaluate his work. "CSIM did more than that. Engaging volunteers and contributions in line with work objectives was the first step and I was surprised that I could go further and strategise the same. Theoretically and practically, I began to understand the impact my organisation could create. I learnt to run Thozhan with a sustainable fund where money was invested in priority areas. I worked on principles that ensured volunteers followed what they preached," shares Radhakrishnan. Recognised by many like-minded groups, traffic department and concerned personnel, Thozhan's team of Accident Warriors not only promoted what they practiced but also initiated a chain of learning within their families and social circles.

Adding around 8,000 volunteers to their base every year, Radhakrishnan feels that his principles are not a test, rather a preliminary ground for them to see what they were insisting the public to follow rigorously. In August 2020, Thozhan organised the first ever, large scale, digital awareness campaign in India on road safety, engaging around 2800 participants from across the country, from different age groups.

School and college students, retired teachers, senior citizens and others pledged to help accident victims. "I was heartened to see that people care about their fellow men. I am proud to see that Thozhan is helping them face their fears and insecurities," says a contented Radhakrishnan, embracing this long journey with confidence and grace.

Shanmuga Priya.T



CHANGING HUES: Awaken the Queen within

Faith and Resolve – the inner strength

Ring...ring... "Hello, Reena I am going shopping this afternoon for Christmas. Do you want to join me? You can help me choose gifts!" Padma said to Reena, one morning. "Yes, aunty! I would love to hang out with you. I finish college at 1:30pm. Shall we meet at the college gates? We can grab a bite to eat and go shopping!" came the excited voice of Reena. Reena was a bundle of enthusiasm and joy! So full of energy! "I hope the work-life doesn't turn her into a robot later on in life," thought Padma to herself as she went to prepare breakfast quickly.

"Aunty, I am here" yelled Reena from across the driveway as the car stopped in front of the college gates. She was sitting on a bench next to the beautiful driveway of the college along with two of her friends. Soon, she was in the car chatting about her boring sociology classes that morning and how they had to manage not to sleep during the study. They drove into one of the small cosy restaurants, which was Padma's favourite for the past two decades. "Don't think this is a small place; the food here is amazingly fresh and delicious. I used to come here quite often with my friends when I first started working." They placed their order and sat down comfortably to continue their chatter.

"Aunty, who are you buying Christmas presents for? What kind of presents are you thinking of buying?"

"Reena, it's for some friends who celebrate Christmas. Also, something that my friend from college will love to receive. She lived in India and went to settle in the USA after her marriage. She is a symbol of resilience, courage, faith, and perseverance. She has never lost hope in life despite all kinds of adversities. She has shown us how to believe in God and in ourselves. This is a way to celebrate that spirit, Reena."

"Aunty, I am amazed at the way you can see people, their lives, and continuously learn from who they are. I agree women are generally strong people inside when faced with adversity. But I want to know more about this friend. Let's have story time until our food arrives." Padma smiled, and her eyes were misty as she turned the pages of the past to reach 'Gracie.' With a sigh and faraway look in her eyes, Padma brought out the lines from her memory.

"Gracie was born Indian and grew to be an adorable, happy, intelligent child. She was keen and focused on anything she learned and therefore stood first in class right from school. Gracie did her Masters in communication studies and began to work on several projects that involved writing. She grew up in an environment at home where faith in God guided their life. She was her parents' pet, and friends loved her for her



commitment and intensity in relationships. Gracie had a happy marriage and flew to the USA with her husband, who worked and lived there. She had a baby girl after a couple of years. We never had mobile phones or WhatsApp those days. So mails and posts were the way to keep in touch. Christmas and New Year were the usual times to talk and write to each other. On birthdays we exchanged cards and wishes. I remember a few visits to India to meet her parents she had made with the little girl.

Life wasn't easy for Gracie. She also had a second child after a few years. Quite early in life, she was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease that would trouble her entire body muscle

functioning for the years that followed. There would be pain and inability to move on some days. Then there was the attack of rheumatoid arthritis of the eyes. Gracie had a full family to take care of. She also had many other complications in the body that kept adding to it. Everyday chores became tough to do. Driving, cooking, managing the home, writing, working on her projects were all a problem. Added to it, she was living in a place where she had taken up home-schooling her child. She was developing her own lesson plans and taking care of all the child's needs. She was also very good at everything she did, which made it difficult for her to compromise on anything.

With everything that pushed her to do

less, she only accepted the situation and saw spaces where she could do what she wanted. She brought out many new ways of doing home-schooling, wrote about it, and shared with many parents who were home schoolers. She carefully planned her movements and ensured that her elder daughter missed nothing due to her illness. She had made good friends who stood by her and her family. When illness gripped her to bed, she did not resist or sulk. She would take the needed rest and would be up again with the limited time to set right the house and complete her to-do list.

As days passed, Gracie had to be laid up in hospital and at home days in a row together. She had made so many friends by then that the entire community reached out and helped her. Meal plans were set, and people were supporting her during her hospital visit days. Prayers were always flowing from every quarter for her to live life with less pain. Whenever I have called her on phone, I have not heard cribbing or disheartening conversations. She would first start with, "hey! How are you, Padma? How is work and family going? Tell me about your love life" She would joke with me and pull my leg, taking me to those college days and forget about the current situation. If I mentioned about health, she would say, "Let's talk of positive things. Today I am alive talking to you, so good!" There would always be an air of faith and confidence in that voice.

"You know Reena, once I visited and stayed with her during my work travels. She was amazingly cheerful, calm with an inner courage and formidable strength. At that time, she was going through the additional challenge of taking care of her elderly mom suffering from Alzheimer's. She could not drive long distances, so the hospitals they had to go to were all around the area. I stayed with her for almost a week. She was then chatting with me happily and asking me to cook good south Indian food for her and her family. I could see the pain she went through during winters. Sometimes doctors gave her hope, and at times it would be sad news. Recently another shock of the possibility of Parkinson's setting in shook the family. Gracie also took excellent care of her mom till she breathed her last. I did not see her losing her resolve to live life fully, whatever the situation."

Both Padma and Reena had teared up. The saving grace was the waiter who came with their soup and starters. "Aunty, seeing food, I suddenly feel hungry. It smells good too," exclaimed Reena. Padma's thoughts were still fondly with Gracie.

After two sips, Reena went back to where they left off. "I wonder what would be the life of the two girls to see



their mom struggle." Padma's face brightened at the thought of Gracie's little daughters. "You know Reena, how beautifully they have grown to be compassionate, strong, confident, sensitive human beings. Gracie has always shown them hope and possibilities in life. Even during this pandemic, I didn't see Gracie breakdown. She was vulnerable but managed it well. The girls are a lot more independent, and the elder one does a lot of social work support

projects in various places to help the needy. Gracie has a dog who has an unconditional love relationship with her and her companion when her husband and children are out of home during the day. The faith and trust in God and the ability to seek, receive, and give help and care are evident in their upbringing."

Reena, I have heard people crib, be annoyed and irritated for many small things. This lady reminds me to be grateful to God and people in

the Universe and live a life on the foundation of thankfulness. The woman who could face adversity not just by fighting but by surrendering and standing firm with an inner resolve."

The main course arrived, but their minds were still reflecting on Gracie's life. There ensued a silence that felt uncomfortable. Reena broke the silence, "Aunty, I have heard my mom remark many times that a woman as frail and weak as she seems is actually strong and confident within. It is unfortunate sometimes the adversity in life has to bring it out than her own belief in herself." Padma nodded in agreement. "True. We wait for others to tell us who we are and for circumstances to push us to a corner to make us shine the inner light. The Universe, which gives us adversities, also knows we can handle them. We need to believe in that."

"So, Aunty, what do you want to shop for Gracie?" Reena enquired.

Padma smiled knowingly and added, "She mentioned she loved the housecoats that she wore in India, and they felt home for her. I plan something on those lines that would be Indian and remind her of the home away from home. Chalo, let's eat quickly and go do our shopping. I want to reach home before the peak hour traffic."

*Dr. Kalpana Sampath
Illustration by Deepthi Narayan
and Prathiksha P*



Reflect:

- Do I allow the circumstances to dictate who I can be in life?
- Do I trust myself and know the Universe loves me enough to support me to overcome my adversities?

Dependency



The doctor bent over the lifeless figure in bed. Then he straightened up and said, "I am sorry to say that your husband is no more, my dear."

A feeble sound of protest came from the lifeless figure in bed: "No, I am still alive."

"Hold your tongue," said the woman. "The doctor knows better than you."

Explicit Learning

- We have been conditioned to believe in the experts' opinion, rather than the reality.
- Experts need not be right always.
- We tend to go by experts' opinion, rather than by facts.

Introspective Learning

- What is an expert?
- In the process of my depending on experts, do I miss the reality at times?
- Do I question experts? If not, why?

REPLACING HUNGER WITH HOPE



The Annamrita Foundation feeds lakhs of school children across India, enabling higher attendance in schools and breaking the vicious cycle of hunger and illiteracy.

Did you know that India holds the 94th place out of 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index severity scale? This undeniably worrisome position is thanks to an underwhelming score of 27.7, which indicates acute hunger—a standing embarrassment for a country that claims to have made huge strides in development since achieving independence over 70 years ago.

“Recent reports state that over five million children are at risk of falling in the wasting category of malnourishment, while an additional two million children are at risk of being pushed into the severe wasting category,” says Anurag Bhatnagar of Annamrita, an NGO dedicated to the cause of ensuring that children do not go hungry. “In total, a staggering 14% of India’s population is undernourished.”

The reports that Anurag refers to also indicate that India recorded a 37.4 percent stunting rate (low height for their age) among children under five, and a wasting rate (low weight for their height) of 17.3 percent. “The under-five mortality rate stands at 3.7 percent,” he adds. “At this rate, the number of severely under-weight and wasted children is expected to increase by 268,767 and 166,342 respectively in just a few more years.”

Dedicated to eliminating these worrying statistics, Annamrita began its journey in 2004, by feeding mid-day meals to just about 900 students in Mumbai. Today, the organization operates 21 kitchens across seven states, and serves up to 12 lakh meals per day. “Since our inception, we have already served more than 3 billion meals across 6500+ schools of Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Maharashtra, Delhi, Rajasthan, West Bengal, and Jharkhand,” Anurag says.

In partnership with other NGOs, Annamrita has carried out multiple surveys on the impact of mid-day meals on attendance and the cognitive abilities of children.

And they’ve found some interesting results. “We’ve seen a huge improvement in children regarding attendance, sports participation, better STEM results, and fewer cases of children fainting in schools due to hunger,” says Anurag.

Although the NGO doesn’t track the progress trajectory of individual students, schools that Annamrita partners with have reported many success stories, on a regular basis. Part of this reportage also includes sharing attendance records on a monthly basis—records that have revealed an encouraging improvement in school attendance thanks to mid-day meals.

“The undernourishment stats are in the public domain for comparison of status from 2004 till date, but as our presence is currently limited to 21 cities, in only 7 states, we have to go a long way to make a substantial impact on the national figures,” says Anurag. “Our mid-day meal programme, which aims at improving the nutritional status of school-age children nationwide, has been one of our most effective initiatives. Before the pandemic-induced lockdown, the recipients of our mid-day meals primarily consisted of children from urban slums, rural and tribal areas. And most of the time, the food we served was the only meal these children received during the entire day.”

One of the factors that made the midday meal scheme effective and an astounding success is the inherent simplicity for donors to reach out and contribute. “Individuals could make a donation on our website with just a few clicks,” says Anurag. “We set a very low threshold for donation at just Rs 750—the cost of meals for an entire year for a child.

Another factor in our success is our excellent network of volunteers, staff, and donors across India—all of whom continue to be deeply invested in our anti-hunger programs.”

All these strides notwithstanding, Annamrita’s biggest success story was scripted in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. “On March 25, when the nation came to a standstill to contain the spread of the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of people lost access to income, resources, and daily meals,” said Anurag. “At this point, the Annamrita Foundation decided to leverage its kitchens across the nation to deliver healthy and hygienic meals to those stranded by the lockdown.”

That initiative was the start of something new—Project Annamrita Karuna—a COVID-19 relief initiative that has, till date, delivered more than 2 crore cooked meals and 6 crore dry ration kits to migrant and poor families impacted by the lockdown.

“As an NGO in India with a robust network of donors, partners, and volunteers, we are delivering hygienic and nutritious meals to emergency medical teams, patients and their relatives, quarantined families, underprivileged children, and daily wage laborers in multiple states. We follow strict adherence to WHO guidelines on maintaining social distance and personal hygiene while sourcing, preparing, and delivering food,” says Anurag. “With the support of State Government bodies, Corporate, Institutions and well informed individuals, our food donation campaign has been able to replace hunger with hope across India.”

Although NGOs like Annamrita have been ceaselessly performing yeoman service via their anti-hunger programs, estimates suggest that at the current rate, it could well take between 23 and 50 years to completely eradicate hunger in India. “The only way to reduce the consequences of this monumental challenge is by safeguarding and promoting access to nutritious, safe, and affordable diets to the vulnerable populations of our country,” Anurag says.

“Considering the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic looming over us, we intend to collaborate with various State Governments to fight pandemic-induced disruption and hunger by efficiently supplying nutritious food,” says Anurag. The plan of course, he says, is to improve nutritional status and coverage of the organization’s recent Kit of Joy initiative over the next few months.

In a post-pandemic scenario, Annamrita will fall back on its main objective—increasing enrollment in schools, reducing malnutrition, and ensuring education for all by increasing their mid-day meal reach from 1 million daily meals to 3 million daily meals by 2025.

“We are in the process of expanding our reach to more Indian states and improving the impact in the states we are currently operating,” he adds. “We hope to extend absolute food security to underprivileged communities and rural school children in the next 10 years. “With a presence in seven states and an expansion plan in the works, Annamrita is plotting further expansion into the North East and Eastern geographies, aside from branching out into other states as well as expanding to more cities and towns in states that Annamrita is currently serving.

To know more about how you can help fight India’s growing battle with hunger, please visit <https://annamrita.org/get-involved.php>



Dear NeW-I, my child has a chronic illness...

The NeW-I app offers a safe space for parents of children with chronic and life-threatening illnesses to process their journey.

“As a mother, I wished we could have exchanged places.”

In a single sentence, Noorlela Abdul Hamed sums up the years spent watching her son Irfan go through a childhood of tubes inserted into his body, medical tests, blood transfusions and eventually, the removal of his spleen at age six.

This, as she also juggled financial difficulties coping with Irfan’s medical bills, work, and caring for her other children and family members.

Now 18, Irfan was born with thalassemia major, a life-threatening blood disorder that leads to serious anemia. Severe cases can lead to organ damage, which can be fatal.

Positive and forward-looking by nature, Noorlela’s sunny demeanor belies the considerable challenges she had to navigate while caring for Irfan. “I have parents who stay together with me, then I have other children...the youngest who’s having asthma as well, my step mom was having a stroke then my dad who was just a cancer survivor...A lot of things happened,” shares Noorlela, who goes by Lela.

She adds: “Of course I don’t want to see my son suffering. It’s very painful. [Irfan] needs blood [transfusions] for the entire of his life. Because he has no spleen now, he needs antibiotics until the end of his life.”

Caregivers, she notes, often do not know whom they can turn to and trust with their feelings. “Sometimes they keep it to themselves. You know, you think you can swallow alone but at the end of the day, you choke,” says Lela.

It is this group of parents that NeW-I, a cyber counselling tool in the form of a mobile app, seeks to help.

CAREGIVER EMOTIONS THROUGH A NEW EYE

Developed in Singapore by a team of researchers from Nanyang Technological University (NTU), NeW-I, or Narrative e-Writing Intervention, is currently being tested as a pilot funded by Temasek Foundation under its SMF Research Grant Programme.

Over four weeks, participants pen their thoughts in short writing exercises on the app, which are structured to help them reflect on their caregiving journey and process their emotions, with input from a counsellor.

Participants’ entries are compiled and edited into an illustrated digital “legacy book” at the end of the exercise, which serves as a memory of their thoughts, feelings and experiences of caring for their child.

Currently, the NeW-I team works with Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore, Club Rainbow (Singapore), KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital, Muscular Dystrophy Association (Singapore) and Rare Disorders Society (Singapore) to bring participants onboard the pilot.



According to the NeW-I team, typical challenges faced by parent-caregivers of children with chronic life-threatening illnesses include psychological distress and emotional pain regarding the diagnosis, feelings of loss and grief on a daily basis as they cope with their child’s deteriorating health, financial concerns and the struggle to dedicate time to their relationships with their spouses and family members.

They may also unintentionally neglect their other healthy children, while frequent communication with healthcare teams may cause anxiety and distress if they do not feel sufficiently engaged in making care decisions for their child, shares Dr Oindrila Dutta, Co-investigator of the NeW-I research team.

As Associate Professor Andy Ho, Principal Investigator of the research team, puts it, “The quality of care patients receive is only as good as the quality of health of their caregivers.”

The app aims to provide psycho-social support and useful resources to parents, while giving them an opportunity to reflect on their journey — time they otherwise might not carve out for themselves amid the day-to-day demands of caregiving.

Through the pilot, the researchers are collecting data, including examining the design and feasibility of the app and monitoring outcomes. Outcomes of the pilot so far showed that after completing NeW-I, parents report an improvement in their quality of life, overall spiritual well-being, their inner sense of meaning and peace and feel more optimistic about the social support that is available to them. They also report reduction in their caregiver burden.

The findings of the pilot could help inform potential larger-scale implementation of NeW-I in the future, thereby being available to, and supporting more parent-caregivers in

Singapore.

Some 54 participants have enrolled and completed the pilot, among them is Lela.

A LEGACY OF LOVE

Lela had found solace in writing a letter about her grief over unexpectedly losing her younger son Zikry a few years ago.

The pain and shock of losing Zikry had been a powerful one. “I can’t describe it in words but the nearest I can say it’s like you are tearing your own skin and you are pouring salt on the broken skin,” says Lela.

On hearing that Lela had found writing to be a good outlet for her feelings, a social worker from Club Rainbow encouraged her to write about Irfan in the NeW-I app, to document her experience as a caregiver to a child with a chronic and life-threatening condition.

In writing about her years caring for Irfan, Lela focused on the positive moments — the positivity she has tried to instill in Irfan in dealing with his condition, the special moments they share together over meals and holidays, the loving support of her husband and mother in managing the ups and downs of her journey.

“I’ve always felt that every day is a special day. Spending time alone with him is important. Sometimes we do go out, spend our time together, like [we are] dating. All these important moments are very precious,” she says.

The experience of writing on NeW-I was a cathartic one. “After I pour everything out, of course I feel more stronger. I feel like oh, I’ve been through all this.

“I can see that, I’m strong, and it really comes out as a beautiful story. And I really will keep [the legacy document] for the rest of my whole life,” says Lela.

Although Irfan is now old enough to manage his health well, Lela has her moments of worry. “Yearly, Irfan must

go through the MRI. So that’s also a very crucial point. They are looking for any change in size of the organs,” she explains.

“That’s the worst fear. If he goes off before me, I can just be thankful for the precious moments that I have with him. He’s a good boy,” she says.

Pausing as she becomes emotional, she continues: “I think he is strong enough to be where he is today. As a mother, I only can pray for the best.”

Having cared for Irfan all these years, she understands the emotional weight borne by parents like her, and urges parents to always seek a listening ear. “When you are at the stage of time, when you are having this problem, a lot of things will mess up your brain. But this app will help you to tone down,” she notes.

Irfan, for his part, is proud of how Lela has raised him to come to terms with his condition. “There was one point of time I also realised I couldn’t be the same as others even though I tried my hardest,” says Irfan, a polytechnic student.

“My mum always motivates me, reminding me that even when people are given disabilities, they will also be given special strengths that other people don’t have,” he says. “I feel very appreciative of my mother, for putting all this effort just to take care of all of us. I feel very blessed to have her as my mum.”

Lela, reflecting on her journey, says the NeW-I app summarised everything “in a very beautiful manner”.

“Growing up with Irfan like this, I don’t find it as a burden. I feel maybe it colours my life beautifully, that I have experienced all sorts of things together with him,” she says.

Irfan adds: “To parents who have children with such conditions, don’t give up on your children, because even though they are special in their own ways, they are still able to do great things in the future.”

ABOUT NEW-I

NeW-I, or Narrative e-Writing Intervention, is a cyber-counselling app for parents of children with chronic and life-threatening conditions, developed by a team from Nanyang Technological University. Over four weeks, participants pen their thoughts on the app, which helps them reflect on their caregiving journey and process their emotions with input from a counsellor. Their entries are compiled into an illustrated “legacy book” at the end of the exercise, which is intended to provide solace after their child’s passing. The app is being implemented as a pilot funded by Temasek Foundation under its SMF Research Grant Programme.

A story by Our Better World (the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore International Foundation

www.ourbetterworld.org

HOLISTIC COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

Once known as the Manchester of the East for its prolific textile and labour industries, Kanpur has traditionally been the centre of labour movements. However, towards the end of the 20th Century, the textile industry faced a total collapse and the workforce found themselves starting their lives all over again. It is in this context that in 1986, Ganesh Pandey, who was actively involved with textile mill trade unions since his youth, started Shramik Bharti, a grassroots development organization. His vision was “Sustainable living with equal opportunities for all”. Over the past three decades Shramik Bharti has grown into a community-development behemoth, helping rural and urban communities organize themselves into self-help groups, pursue alternative livelihoods, attain water and food-security, adapt to renewable energy, and increase literacy levels through promoting education.

Community Organization

Women’s Self-Help Groups (SHG) are at the core of Shramik Bharti’s work in the sustainable development of communities in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. These SHGs engage in microfinance, financial literacy, innovative agriculture, leadership development, as well as in the promotion of local crafts and artisanship. In Uttar Pradesh alone there are over 20,000 women members of SHGs. In Punjab, 11 SHGs have come together to form a craftsmanship company named Virsa Woman Crafts Pvt. Ltd. Another eight SHGs formed the “Umrutsur Food Pvt. Ltd.” A food processing company that sells organic foods.

Waqt Ki Awaz

A community radio station, Waqt Ki Awaz 91.2 FM was formally registered in 2013 to broadcast programs on a wide range of topics including socio-economic development, water security, gender equality and local governance among other things. The unique feature about this community radio is that its programs are all conducted in local dialects of rural Uttar Pradesh. It caters to an audience of 5,00,000 listeners from 300 villages in Kanpur Nagar and Kanpur Dehat districts of Uttar Pradesh. Heading this radio station is Radha Shukla, a social worker, who is also the most popular voice on it. She trains youth to bring in stories, prepare scripts, produce and broadcast programs as well.

“Solar Didi”

Pushpalata Rathore, a.k.a Gudiya, is a young widow who came to live in her parental village of Hadha in Kanpur in 2010. A mother of two, she had been hustling, taking tuition-classes for children, cycling 15 kms to be a tailor



and earning enough to support herself and her children. In 2013, when Shramik Bharti introduced training sessions for “solar-mechanics”, as a part of their larger renewable energy mission, Gudiya approached them and expressed an interest to be trained in what is a largely male-dominated profession. She now installs solar lights and fumeless cook stoves in the villages surrounding her home, and also looks after the maintenance and repairs of solar equipment, earning the popular title, “Solar Didi”.

Shramik Bharti undertakes the installation of solar street lights, home lighting solutions, solar lantern charging stations, and installation of solar micro grids, A/C grids, irrigation pumps, and smokeless cook stoves. Their green skill training programs help youth such as Gudiya to acquire skilled trades.

Water Security Program

Shramik Bharti promotes equitable and efficient water management through capacitating communities and the local governments (Panchayat) in the development of Water Security Plans. They help in bringing to the fore, water security issues in the Gram Panchayat Development Plans. They help build rain water harvesting structures, recharge wells, rejuvenate and clean ponds.

Natural Farming

Since 2015 Shramik Bharti has promoted Zero Budget Natural Farming. Natural farming has been able to improve natural resource use-

efficiency as well as rekindle the interest of small and marginal farmers in pursuing farming and food production activities. A bouquet of activities lend themselves to this purpose such as kitchen gardens, community seed banks, model farms, processing and storage facilities.

Allied Agriculture Activities

Backyard Poultry and goat rearing has emerged as simple yet effective means of nutrition and additional income to marginalized households. Mainly managed by landless women SHG members, each household is provided 20 local breeds of chicks or 2 pregnant female goats respectively. Some beneficiaries get entrepreneurial with their poultry or livestock, making some additional income to support their households. Mushroom farming is also promoted, with seeds, materials and training provided by Shramik Bharti.

Other Holistic Programs

Since 2008 Shramik Bharti is working towards building a supportive environment to achieve change in behaviour related to sanitation and hygiene such as handwashing behaviour.

They are also working towards strengthening infrastructure and improving teaching skills of teachers of government primary schools in Uttar Pradesh & Punjab. Through capacity building of volunteer educators, innovative teaching learning materials are introduced in 21 Government schools in 4 districts of Uttar Pradesh &

in 12 villages of Punjab. Aanganwadi centres in Uttar Pradesh & Punjab are also improved to create a fun learning atmosphere for pre-school goers. Shramik Bharti is engaged in mobilization & capacity building of Gram Panchayats in Uttar Pradesh. Additionally, Community Grain Bank, a community-owned initiative is playing a crucial role in ensuring food security.

CEO Rakesh Kumar Pandey says, “The communities in which we work are marginalized, exploited by markets, political parties, religious leaders, the system at large. Gaining the trust of the community is itself a huge challenge. Further their risk-taking ability has become negligible or zero, so when it comes to persuading them shift to sustainable practices (for example to natural farming or use of renewable energy etc.), it becomes even more challenging.”

As for the current global pandemic, Mr. Pandey says, “There have been sweeping changes in funding for such interventions. A large part of our donor fund was moved to the PM Cares Fund. Added to this is the recent change in FCRA to receive grants from Foreign / International Organisations. It has drastically reduced inflow of international funds for NGOs.”

“At Shramik Bharti we are and will always be committed to ecologically sustainable human development. We will continue to build capacities of deprived communities to improve their quality of life”, says Mr. Pandey as he signs off.

Archanaa Ramesh

POVERTY – SEEING VS RESOLVING

Poverty is multidimensional issue, which cannot be defined or seen under specially selected parameters. The World Bank's poverty definition says, "A person is considered poor if his or her income level fall below some minimum level necessary to meet basic needs." It sets this minimum level, or international poverty line, as living on less than \$1.90 a day. This standardization is termed as Extreme Poverty by World Bank, but extreme poverty is more than just a number. USAID defines extreme poverty as "the inability to meet basic consumption needs on a sustainable basis. People who live in extreme poverty lack both income and assets and typically suffer from interrelated, chronic deprivations, including hunger and malnutrition, poor health, limited education, and marginalization or exclusion."

In last two decades global development agencies have classified poor as active poor, ultra-poor, extreme poor and so on. Changing definition of poor is not changing the definition of poverty but is creating a separate segment, who is poor? Defining is one aspect and designing policies to bring equality or to curb down poverty is another side of the story.

It is known fact that policies can be made on the basis of some evidence, and evidence need verifiable facts and data. The larger problem than defining poverty is resolving poverty, data is being collected from the set of effected population and is used by researchers to bring out statistical references. Data is collected by various agencies including government and civil society organizations to help analyse issue and then design solution to handle poverty. The data help researchers and development organizations to prove or disprove their hypothesis.

The above backdrop is set to make readers understand the fact that too much data is collected for any large poverty eradication project, or any other issue of social sector development. Now, let me bring another aspect of this. WHY THIS DATA COLLECTED IS NOT SOLVING PRIMARY ISSUES?



In democratic political establishments, development policies are designed to deliver benefits to large section of society. Successful development projects and learnings therein can then be translated into policies or programs.

The complexity of poverty is for policy makers and not for the people who are living in it. People living in deprived situation know effective solutions for their problems, as they know the cause of it. Policy-makers try to solve it from a distance, hence try to design general solutions for poverty, making it 'FIT FOR ALL'. From the Governance and implementation point of view, the solution for poverty elimination need generalization with some commonality. But this is because we often see poverty as a project and try to define it in convergence to fund allocated by government or other international organizations. It gets a good fit, due to the fact that anything and everything can be intelligently

hooked up with poor and deprived communities.

Another important phenomenon related to data collection in social sector domain, especially with regard to poverty eliminating projects, is not keeping poor at the core of policies while designing them. Data is collected keeping the problem at core, as we see, observe and define it. While making policies, we often leave out poor community as implementers of projects, we see them as beneficiaries with no role to play in devising solutions. Data collected is used for proving any hypothesis or doing analytics, while the need is much more.

The solution to poverty starts with understanding it, defining it, creating effective solutions, designing program/project around effective solutions, implementation of activities and then realizing the full potential of the project. Governments and implementing organizations are doing this for quite long time, and the data proves it all.

From 1.9 billion people (36% of world population) living in extreme poverty condition in 1990, we were 730 million (9.9% of world population) in 2015.

Theoretically it is like this - convert idle land to agricultural land, farmers are encouraged to grow crop, get their produce aggregated, add value to their produce, sort, pack and sell it in the market; as a result, all in the value chain will earn an income and government will gain taxes out of this business thereby adding value to our national income. This increased income can support farmers and their families through better financial services or products, improve agri-infrastructure, strengthen value chain enablers and create more conducive ecosystem for the sector.

Seems easy, right? Well, it is not as easy as it sounds though. Previously, MDGs and now SDGs are designed to solve this daunting global issue. Countries where natural resources are idle and non-convertible to other income generating resources, need seed funding even to make these already available resources work for their economy. There is high probability of imposing already set definition of 'poor' and 'poverty' to deprived economies and also dump the solutions to solve it. Who will look into the customization of these solutions for the host economies?

In the process, all stakeholders including development practitioners, policy advocates, political parties, administrators etc. have to be careful about the allocation of free resources from developed nations to these vulnerable economies. There is a chance of allocating free funds towards large unhidden agenda of mobilizing natural resources for some specific reasons. Therefore, countries need to be vigilant and have to do cost-benefit analysis of all long term as well as short term ideas imposed by donors and multilateral development organizations.

Dr. Agyeya Tripathi, PhD.



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS). It is a learning centre that promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship.

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non-profits to facilitate them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives. www.csim.in

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CSIM also facilitates Social Accounting and Audit for social enterprises, CSR projects, and NGOs through Social Audit Network, India (SAN India).

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EMPOWERING WOMEN AND CHILDREN FOR A BETTER FUTURE



Organizations supporting women and promoting equality and fairness in wages and with the opportunities have spent many years putting women's rights at the forefront of their missions. One such organisation is Grace Peter Charitable Trust based out of Madurai.

Grace Peter Charitable Trust is a non-profit and non-religious voluntary organization established in 2000 by a team of committed individuals. It is a premier partner with GiveIndia and Give Foundation, World Health Organizations, GlobalGiving, U.S.A., Milaap, Guidestar and many other organizations.

The trust has been actively functioning for last 20 years servicing in its path of development intervention for the poor and needy hailing from both rural and urban areas.

The Trust has aimed to achieve the maximum result for the development of target beneficiaries living in Madurai and other districts of Tamil Nadu. It currently works in 92 villages in Madurai focusing on creating an empowered and equal society that enables the less privileged to live with dignity irrespective of caste, colour, language, and religion.

Since its inception, Grace Peter Charitable Trust has created small business opportunities for more than 800 poor women. Sewing Machines,

Training in tailoring, Designing, management and technical skills were offered to women. Er P.Pandiaraju, Director of Grace Peter Charitable Trust says, "We have given Job Training in Computer Courses for more than 350 poor women with placement assistance so that they can make a good career for themselves and become financially independent".

Grace Peter Charitable Trust is diverse and has wide-ranging interventions that includes education, child health care, environment protection, health, gender related issues and economic empowerment of women. So far, 22,240 poor people living in Tamil Nadu have benefited from the Trust activities.

Sharing more about the Trust and its future plans, Er P.Pandiaraju says, "Our main motto underlines our future plan, i.e. to make rural India healthy and prosperous. We propose to embark on more 'Women Empowerment Programmes' that will not only enhance the growth of the rural women, but also bring cheer in the faces of Rural Women. We propose to adopt more children educational schemes that will bring more rural children into the educational stream and decrease the number of school drop-outs. We want to extend schemes that will benefit the HIV/AIDS affected children too. We will also bring a scheme that will make Rural India clean and dust free".



The Trust organises events every month. and distributes nutrition food for the identified Children on this occasion.

Sharing stories of people who have benefitted from the resources provided by the Trust, Er P.Pandiaraju says "Many women face personal issues they are the sole bread winners of the family. With the help of sewing machines and kits provided by us, many women and widows have managed to start their own tailoring units. Today many of them are successful and earn enough to take care of themselves and their children."

"Sudha, one of the Trust's beneficiary, is working in a good company and has a regular job. We had trained her in basic Computer science. Like Sudha, we identify students in our school networks

and provide them with training according to their talents and interests."

Over the years, Grace Peter Charitable Trust has conducted several awareness programmes for Farmers, Students, Women and Girls, and the Public awareness programs on Environment, Biodiversity, Climate Change, HIV/AIDS awareness, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Awareness and COVID-19 safety and precaution.

During the COVID-19 lockdown period, several families were affected financially due to loss of job leading to no household income. To help those vulnerable and in distress, Grace Peter Charitable Trust distributed essential grocery and sanitation items.

Aatika Kouser

“CSR have emerged as an effective way to supplement the efforts of the government in an impactful way.”

Shri. V.P. Nandakumar shares with Marie Banu Manappuram Foundation's CSR programmes.

Shri. V.P. Nandakumar is the MD & CEO of Manappuram Finance Ltd., one of India's leading NBFCs and the pioneer of the institutionalised model of the gold loans business. Shri. Nandakumar took over the reins of a single branch family business in 1986, and over the next three decades presided over its growth and transformation into a financial sector powerhouse. His vision, values and leadership were instrumental in scripting this story that today touches millions of lives in India.

Manappuram's origins go back to 1949 when it was founded by the late V.C. Padmanabhan, father of Shri. Nandakumar. In those days, the firm was into money lending, and pawnbroking carried out on a modest scale at Valapad, a backward coastal village in Thrissur district of Kerala. After taking over in 1986 (the year his father expired), Shri. Nandakumar soon set about expanding the business in line with his ambitions and vision.

In 1992, he incorporated Manappuram Finance Ltd., and within three years (in 1995) managed to get the company listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange. Since then, he has led from the front to transform Manappuram Finance Ltd. into a leading NBFC present across India with 4,611 branches in 28 states and UTs, with Assets under management (AUM) of about ₹269 billion, and a workforce of over 27,000.

In recent years, Shri. Nandakumar has resolutely steered the company's diversification into microfinance, home loans, vehicle finance, SME and personal lending to reshape the company into a full-spectrum NBFC. Today, about 30 per cent of the company's total business comes from the non-gold side.

Shri. Nandakumar's achievements in business have earned him national recognition. On May 26, 2018, a special issue of the Business World magazine profiled him as one among 40 of India's most valuable CEOs. Besides, Manappuram Finance Ltd. has emerged as one of the leading wealth creators in the Indian stock market. In December 2019, the Economic Times newspaper published the ET500 list of Top Wealth Creators of 2019 with Manappuram Finance Ltd. as the chart topper.

Other than the focus on business, the cause of the wider community is central to his vision. He established the Manappuram Foundation at Valapad in 2009 to drive the corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme of the Manappuram

group, even before the Companies Act made it mandatory. Today, the Manappuram Foundation oversees a wide range of projects in education, health care, and overall development of the rural communities.

Shri. V.P. Nandakumar was born in 1954, holds a post-graduate degree in science and additional qualifications in Banking and Foreign Trade. He is a managing committee member of leading trade and industry associations such as FICCI, Assocham and FIDC. In January 2019, he was appointed to the Board of Governors of the Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode. In July 2019, he was elected as an International Director of the Association of Lions Clubs International at its Milan (Italy) convention.

In an exclusive interview, Shri. V.P. Nandakumar shares with Marie Banu Manappuram Foundation's CSR programmes.

What inspired you to initiate CSR before the ACT was passed in 2013?

The CSR projects and initiatives of the company are mostly routed through the Manappuram Foundation, a charitable trust we had set up back in October 2009, well before it became mandatory for large companies.

I would say our CSR is part to a wider quest to build sustainable businesses that create both market value as well as lasting social value. The Foundation brings resources and commitment to select projects that enrich people's lives

and make a visible difference to their lives. With this objective, the Foundation works in close co-ordination with local government official, social workers and NGOs, to promote programmes that advance well-being of disadvantaged sections of society. In this way, by integrating social imperatives into our corporate processes, we are trying in our own way to shoulder those extra responsibilities expected of a good corporate citizen.

What made you choose rural development and education as Manappuram Foundation CSR focus areas?

As a company, we are deeply rooted in the coastal village of Valapad because this is where Manappuram began its journey in 1949 and this is where we have our head office. Therefore, the predominant focus of CSR has been to try and improve the lives of the local people who are mainly into fishing and agriculture. To this end, efforts are largely directed towards rural development and education levels of the local population.

Traditionally, agriculture and fishing were the main sources of livelihood in these parts. Migration to the Gulf in search of jobs began in the early 70s and intensified within a decade. Many families benefited from the Gulf wave but those who belonged to socially and economically backward sections and lacked skills and were left behind. This section of people depended on traditional activities like fishing and coconut harvesting for a living and they suffered even more when the Gulf boom led to a decline in agriculture and consequently the demand for unskilled labour. Today, we believe that rural development and education will help reshape the future of those sections left behind in society.

How were you able to contribute to the rural communities during the COVID pandemic?

We have contributed generously through our professional, technical and financial interventions especially in the coastal belt of Thrissur District. The early focus was on creating awareness and dissemination of information to prevent spread of Covid-19 through posters, boards etc. We distributed such material to most of the Government offices including Health Centre, Police Stations and Gram Panchayaths.

Announcements regarding prevention methods and the importance of social distancing were made in the remote areas of Trissur District in collaboration with IMA Thrissur.

As part of

preventive measures, the Manappuram Foundation distributed Sanitizers, Gloves, Face Masks, N95 masks, three-ply masks, etc. through Gram Panchayaths, local Health Centres and Police and Fire forces. The Foundation donated 42 cots and 55 mattresses (for quarantine purpose) along with 5,000 face shields, thermal scanners, sanitizers, gloves, masks etc. to the police force. To minimise disruption for school students from poor families, 20 televisions were donated in the coastal area of Thrissur and a further 500 televisions were donated through the Lions Clubs International District 318C. A High Dependency Unit (HDU) in Kannur Medical College was implemented in collaboration with Lions Clubs International District 318E. Community Health Centres and Primary Health Centres were supported with sanitizers and masks, while 60 litres of Sanitizer and a 100 hundred Pulse Oximeters were handed over to Alappuzha District Collector. Besides, over 400 poor families were supported through free supply of grocery kits.

Do you think CSR in India has augmented development and helped in resolving social issues?

In relatively poor countries such as India, where the government has limited capacity to take care of all the pressing needs of its people, projects under CSR have emerged as an effective way to supplement the efforts of the government in an impactful way.

For example, soon after the Manappuram Foundation came into being in 2009, the first major project it implemented was to extend free health insurance (up to Rs.60,000 per family) to 20,000 BPL families extending benefit to approximately 1 Lakh individuals in the coastal belt of Thrissur district. Essentially, the project was about deploying manpower and other resources to ensure that the benefits of existing government health schemes like RSBY (Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana) and UHI (Universal Health Insurance) were properly extended to people who otherwise were not even aware that such schemes existed, or were unable to pay the nominal premium required to be met.

How has the Social Audit of Manappuram Foundation help in realigning the CSR deliverables effectively?

Social Accounting and Audit conducted for the period 2016 - 2018 by SAN INDIA helped us to analyze the social impact of our CSR activities and to realign the CSR deliverables with the mission and vision of the Manappuram Foundation. As part of the Social accounting exercise, we could identify that education is the sector most deserving of attention by the Foundation. The suggestions shared by the team were well accepted and it's being implemented across primarily education, health and community welfare activities.

