

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Seasons' Greetings!

This year, India will be celebrating the 72nd Republic day that honours the day when the Constitution of India came into effect. Our Constitution declares that India is a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic republic. It also gives us our rights and duties as citizens. The core values for this constitution were derived from the country's inspirational freedom struggle—are justice, liberty and equality, along with the promotion of fraternity.

The Republic Day celebrations are an occasion to rejoice in the rituals of democracy whose norms are finely laid out in the constitution that was adopted on this day in the year 1950. We celebrate this day to reiterate the importance of being a universal democratic republic. The Government of India organises a program on this day every year in National Capital, New Delhi, where a special parade is organized at India Gate. In the morning, people gather on the Rajpath to witness this great event. To showcase 'Unity in diversity', different states of the country display their culture, traditions and progress.

Unity in Diversity is the mutual understanding and harmony among groups of individuals with a multitude of differences in terms of culture, religion, ethnicity, race, language etc. The term has originated ever since the rise of the first human civilizations thousands of years ago and has certainly resulted in the ethical and moral evolution of humanity. We have learnt to live in diversity, and our geographical features further solidify this bond.

On this Republic Day, I hope that no matter who we are, rich or poor, a powerful politician or a regular citizen, we continue to respect the basic principles and values given to us by our constitution. As we move forward and continue to build this nation, let us not leave behind the foundation on which our country is built.

Jai Hind!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh

Marie Banu

ARE YOU DIS-EASED?

"Whatever the tasks, do them slowly and with ease, in mindfulness." — Thich Nhat Hanh



Ease of being, thinking and doing could be the new year's mantra. Ease and not easy. Easy would mean simple and comfortable. Ease means a mental state where there is freedom from pain and suffering, despite inevitable ups and downs and difficult circumstances. Not living with ease shows up as dis-ease. Dis-ease of the mind is busyness, relentless activity and that of the body is ailment.

A life of ease- what is it? Getting into ease is an active engagement with the reality, it is not a "whatever" attitude, it is about absence of unnecessary effort.

Ease in the mind is the ability to be focused and creative- effortless. As though the mind is expanded and more can be absorbed and "processed" without anxiety and worry. Ease in the body means, the muscles are flexible, relaxed and there is vitality in the body, free from constraint.

Living with ease is striking a delicate balance between alertness and restfulness in everything we do. We live life with an either/or principle. On one hand it can be alertness and a lot of doingness where restfulness takes a back seat and on the other hand it would be rest where work takes a back seat.

Yours Energetically

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.

She can be contacted at bhuvaneshwari@teamthink.co.in for arranging Positive Energy training and Coaching sessions.

When you make ease your companion, it is a choice. We need to make ease a partner. It does not come by default, it is a process of "taking a stand" or making an intention to choose ease- hustle less, flow more. Do not try to earn ease—that means, I will be at ease if I complete my work or I will be at ease after taking care of my parents. Ease is an ingredient and not an end result.

The way to choose ease is.....

1. Remember that things and situations need not be easy. Things take time. Face the bumps in the road.
2. Be grateful
3. Do not have a narrow view of everything you do. See the big picture.
4. Take help and support when needed
5. Drop perfectionism, do not judge yourself and others
6. Enjoy what you do

ALBEIT ALBINISM



Discrimination has evolved in modern days and society finds new modes of treating specific groups differently. Reasons could be many but the fact is, discrimination in one form or another is a social habit. Personal experiences can teach an individual many things about his identity but discrimination goes right down and hits at one's confidence. "It has become so effortless in making somebody feel worthless, that too for factors they are not accountable for. This is exactly what happens to albinos – people affected by a rare skin disorder called albinism," laments S.Ezhilarasan, Founder of Dreams Trust in Chennai.

Ezhilarasan was raised as a typical Chennai boy. His under graduation in Sociology gave him perspective and he was able to embrace his own discrimination objectively. Coming from a supportive family, this was not difficult for him. "This may not be the case with other albinos. Ultimately one has to interact with the society, with the system outside their close social eco systems and traverse challenges to achieve their dreams," he adds. Soon after graduation, Ezhilarasan worked with different organizations like Bharathiya Jeevandhara, Netrodaya, Banyan and MASS (Manpower Awareness Social Services Trust) to gain insight in to working with specific target groups. Gaining an extensive field experience, he was now ready to establish his own trust.

Absence of the pigment Melanin which gives color to skin, hair and eyes makes albinos appear white or pink or even yellow in some cases. This genetic disorder can be present from birth or appear later in life as melanin wades away. Irrespective of the category, albinos look different externally. But they are individuals with their talents, strengths and aspirations. Ezhilarasan thought that awareness was a serious issue and if people were educated they were bound to learn and change their behavior towards albinos. But little did he realise that albinism was a condition that was nowhere to be found in the Tamil Nadu Gazette.

Dreams Trust was founded in 2010 to help albinos who are disadvantaged physically, mentally, socially and economically. Extremely sensitive to light and photophobic, they are unable to work efficiently for long hours on computers or under the sun. "Computers, laptops are an important part of any job we do these days. Simple changes can help albinos but no

organisation thinks of adapting few changes to help one or two employees work comfortably and productively. They just prefer hiring candidates who can fit into the systems they have long used," says Ezhil, who emphasizes that the resultant stress is disturbing and discouraging. To be able to advocate help, Dreams Trust wanted to be sure of the population it was trying to reach.



Ezhil was shocked to learn that there was no official data on albinos anywhere. His Right to Information application to the Social Welfare Board and Department of Health about albinos in Thiruvallur district. "There is no information about albinos or even albinism's prevalence in the Gazette. How can the government not have data about its people," he says, still reeling in that shock. So now, the approach was to create awareness and find albinos in the process. A series of awareness programmes in schools, colleges over a period of six months helped Ezhil identify 85 albinos.

Ezhilarasan also pursued a graduation in Psychology and was trained in Positive Mental Attitude, Non Violence Communication and Brain Power Development. His career as a trainer progresses simultaneously, honing his communication skills and

building his confidence. Dental camps, road safety weeks, rural camps, etc are organized to spread community awareness. "Awareness and data collection had to be planned together because my mission was something only a handful of people could relate to. A condition that causes disability but not recognized as one, is not acknowledged anywhere. So, from where will support systems come up?" wonders Ezhil who had to start from the scratch.

Although moving one step at a time, his long term goals are very clear. He strongly vouches for the need to establish a research institute focusing on albinism holistically. Research and adaptation mechanisms have a strong value when told by an acknowledged institution. "My efforts till then have to shed light on educating and sensitizing the public about the struggles of albinos," he adds. Having come across experiences that he also associates with racism, Ezhil has raised and moulded himself to bring visibility to the issue.

Single-handedly managing the operations of the Trust, he finds it a lonely journey but is very sure of the rewards he may reap soon. "I know this is hard; I know how this is going to be. All I intend to do is to create a network of albinos we have identified. It is also a tough task for them to associate because of the stigma and family pressure they are used to," understands Ezhil. Eventually, he hopes, they will also realise that families and friends may try to help, sympathise,

but cannot empathise. Coming together could help them explore options like vision goggles or eye surgery, for instance.

Ezhil feels that CSIM redefined his perception of social work and the concept of beneficiaries. "Dreams Trust and I – we are each other's strengths and the group we are building are not beneficiaries, rather our partners/peers who can help us understand the issue profoundly. Huge knowledge gap hinders intervention but CSIM taught me that an individual's strength and group's strength must be derived from what they can contribute and not from what they desire to change. This is a big life lesson for me as an individual and I also share this with my audience at personality development programmes," he shares.

Shanmuga Priya.T

KATHALAYA: BRINGING STORIES TO LIFE



“Stories give a healing touch to people who hear them” says Geeta Ramanujam, Founder and Director of Kathalaya, a unique initiative dedicated to the cause of story-telling, using it as an educational and communication tool for impactful social change. Founded in 1998, Kathalaya has trained over 93,000 people from all walks of life - students & teachers, entrepreneurs & corporate executives, parents & moms-to-be, nurses & doctors, tribals & village folk, NGO heads & changemakers and many others - in the delightful art of story-telling.

Geeta’s initiation into the world of stories began in her childhood in Mumbai, when her mother told her little tales in Tamil to teach her the language and her father narrated stories of the brave and the strong to prepare

her for life’s challenges. Evenings and weekends were often spent attending theatre, dance and music performances, Hari-kathas or going to the movies. Looking back, Geeta says, “Each of these performing arts offered rich lessons in effective speech and communication, voice modulation, acting, emoting and use of body language, which she subconsciously imbibed.”

Geeta discovered within her, when she was young, the ability to mimic human and animal sounds that made her a popular entertainer among family and friends. These are the very skills that make her a master story-teller today!

It was in her first job as a nursery teacher in a Bangalore school that Geeta thought of using stories in

the classroom, to capture the attention of her very young and naughty pupils. She discovered that stories had a mesmerizing effect on them – they made them calm, joyful and attentive. She explored the effectiveness of stories further when she taught English and History lessons to higher classes and found that her students learnt better and even got enthused to read more. Needless to say, the popularity of the teacher who brought the magical world of stories to class, grew day by day.

As the potential of story-telling as an effective educational tool began to unravel at the school and through the workshops Geeta conducted, her craft received attention and recognition, and with that, invitations to train teachers poured in from schools across the country.



The time was ripe for the birth of an initiative dedicated to story-telling. “It all began one rainy evening. Two of my colleagues and I stepped out of the school and set up Kathalaya, with support from the India Arts Foundation with a mission to use story-telling as a universal tool to educate under-privileged children in rural schools and in special schools,” she says.

Tales for Better Learning

Kathalaya’s activities in field of education include story-based curriculum development for diverse student groups and subjects, teacher training, and conducting story-based learning sessions. Further, the Trust created picture stories for the hearing and speech impaired, and evolved effective voice techniques to narrate stories to the blind (story sessions were offered by the Trust at the Ramana Maharishi School for the Blind in Bangalore). Weekly story sessions for Social Studies and language classes were also offered to schools. In a program called Stories on Wheels, which was implemented in 25 rural schools, story-based learning on different themes was facilitated by organizing educational trips to factories, farms, local silk weaving centres etc. Since the government of Karnataka’s objective was to make learning joyous in schools, Kathalaya’s story-based curriculum and methods were welcomed by the education department of the state.

Kathalaya’s teacher training program subsequently reached 14 states, including Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Odisha, with funding support from Tata Trusts and Ford Foundation.

“Going to the grassroot level and training teachers was a very satisfying experience” says Geeta. Kathalaya’s work with the Santhal tribals in the

Keonjhar district Odisha, for example, was an extensive multi-dimensional project which involved documenting Santhali folk tales, creating story-based curriculum for first generation learners and training mothers to teach their children, using puppets made of locally woven cloth, tribal musical instruments and folk songs. “The strong, energetic and agile Santhali mothers were great story-tellers” she adds.

Stories for Social Change

It was with strategic guidance from funders that Kathalaya began offering its services to NGOs – primarily to use stories as a tool to address social issues. Stories were evolved to address issues like women empowerment, child sexual abuse, gender sensitivity and child marriage. In a project in Koppal, Karnataka, with an NGO called Sampark that sought to address the issue of child marriage, stories of hardships came from the community women themselves, and the bold and outspoken among them were trained by Kathalaya to spread the message against this practice. Most of Kathalaya’s work with NGOs was training and creating content and lesson plans.

As Kathalaya’s services grew, there was a need to evolve a strategy for sustainability. Kathalaya International Academy for Story Telling was then set up as a commercial venture, from where 30% of revenues are assigned to the Trust. The Academy, offers Diploma and Certification Courses in story-telling for those interested in the craft. Besides, the Academy also works with companies, hospitals and urban schools. Companies have engaged the Academy’s services for Leadership Training, Diversity and Inclusion and

Human Resource Development.

The Academy has international affiliations with story-telling organizations in the United States of America, Scotland and Sweden. Geeta considers the collaborations important because of the learnings that story telling traditions around the world have to offer. She is the pioneer of story-telling movement in India, and now there are many organizations that have mushroomed all over the country.

The pandemic has posed new challenges for story tellers for this is a craft that relies deeply on physicality, body language and eye contact, and a powerful though intangible, connect with the audiences that live interactions create. Much of Kathalaya’s work has continued online in the last 2 years, over video call platforms and YouTube. Describing the challenges, Geeta says, “One can’t expect interaction and showing action on screen is difficult. Also, people’s attention span is low.”

On the 24th of January, 2022, Tales from the World, an illustrated volume of twenty stories will let readers into the magical world of stories from Russia, Japan, France, Tibet, India, Korea, Scotland etc, as retold by Geeta herself. The book, she says, also contains one of her most loved stories called The Mountain & The Bird that has moved audiences everywhere from Brazil to Mumbai and Japan to the United States. Much like the bird in the delightful tale, Kathalaya’s journey with stories has been one that has healed and brought hope, joy and empowerment.

*Usha Ravi
(with inputs from Jayashree Govind)*



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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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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FOR THE CHILDREN



For over 13 years, TARA India has looked after children in urgent need of care and protection, often thanks to violence, abuse, and neglect. Since 2008, the organization's outreach programme also supports vulnerable children, including school dropouts. In this period, the organization has developed an after-care programme to support and guide young adults who have lived life in TARA homes to become self-sufficient, successful, and productive adults. Today, the organization has directly and indirectly impacted 750 and 2,300 beneficiaries, respectively.

"When we started in 2008, we had only 16 children. By 2021, we had about 150. In 13 years, TARA has successfully established and ran three children's homes, an aftercare program, and an Outreach Centre, all of them catering to the needs of vulnerable children and their families," says Basanti Caroline Roublin, Executive Director, TARA Child Protection and Empowerment, "A Training Centre

which operates across TARA programs guarantees that all employees offer informed professional care and support to the children."

In order to prevent institutionalization of children and promote their education, TARA's outreach programme has helped support twice the number the children than those in a TARA home, at reasonable costs and parental cooperation. In fact, a 2017 study concluded that the programme should cater to the community in Saidulajab village that had its share of challenges and lack of institutional support. "A follow-up study was conducted in 2018-2019, where a team of 4 field investigators interviewed 300 households in 11 slum settlements. The results allowed TARA to better understand the situation and the needs of the children," Basanti adds.

Owing to interruptions due to the pandemic, the programme in question has adopted an adaptive approach based on the needs of the community. "The activities included the weekly distribution of rations

to 50 families in 2020 and close to 35 families in 2021, educational activities through digital means, awareness drives on the pandemic, safety measures for domestic violence, and weekly phone calls with the families to keep a check on their health and the overall situation at home," says Basanti.

TARA has over the years, aligned its purpose with the sustainability development goals of the United Nations Organization. "We believe that by providing children with quality education, and by being strong proponents of gender equality, we can contribute to reduced inequalities in the communities we support and have an impact on empowering our children to have access to decent work in their future," Basanti says. It is however, a daily challenge to work with children suffering from trauma, differently-abled children and those with learning impairments.

"Given the fact that large institutions are prone to generate violence when they exceed their maximum capacity, we admit only 20 children per home, since

our priority is a safe and secure environment with a family-like atmosphere," she adds.

TARA's model is known to be firmly rooted in the belief that quality education is key to empowering children. "We ensure that every child is enrolled in good schools and that there is a sound knowledge of English to access a wide range of employment opportunities," says Basanti.

"We also encourage the children to use English as their medium of communication with the staff, teachers and volunteers."

Extra-curricular activities like sports, art, and craft have been given priority by TARA. The organization also conducts "child representative elections" to instil responsibilities that will help children understand the importance of advocating and articulating their opinions.

"TARA Homes' policy regarding the families of children is to nurture the bond between parents and children. It is their fundamental right and this



proximity is much needed for the child's development and identity," says Basanti. "We encourage families to visit and call the children, but maintaining this bond is not always as easy or as self-evident as it may seem. Children get placed in TARA Homes for reasons in which families often play a part."

TARA is also committed to ensuring that only qualified and committed personnel be employed to work with children. Salaries are structured so as to guarantee a certain standard of qualification, while training and refresher programmes are continuously provided to staff members. TARA's accounts are audited and published annually, to comply with a strict anti-corruption policy.

"We envision a world where all children are protected and empowered to achieve their full potential in life," says Basanti, adding that TARA will start a female-centric module in TARA Outreach Centre, for the teenage girls in the community. "Through the female-centric module, we hope to provide skill-based training, equipping the children with legal documents, teaching necessary life-skills essential for self-empowerment, conducting programs on women's rights and opportunities, and implementing a self-defense training programme," she adds.

Based on a survey of children's medical needs TARA will set up health check-ups for children and their families. "In the next two years, we plan to expand the program TARA Big Birds, as many teenagers in TARA Homes will complete their schooling and would then likely become a beneficiary of the program," Basanti says. Today, TARA is actively planning to expand its training centre by collaborating with organizations either working directly in the field or indirectly associated with the social sector. The organization's expansion will depend on building a network with local and state authorities, and setting up a well-trained group of staff members to regularly monitor the operations, not to mention raising sufficient funds to launch and keep the home running.

"TARA's goals are always oriented towards children and their wellbeing. So keeping the children and staff safe and happy has been a priority, in midst of the pandemic," says Basanti. "TARA Outreach Centre ensures that children, who mostly go to government schools, actually go back to school and can cope up with the gap created by 2 years of the pandemic. On the larger scale, we wish to increase the exposure to TARA activities and make our model more accessible to the public and within the sector."

While solely operating in Delhi today, TARA might consider expanding to other states and more rural areas in the future. "Some of the expansion challenges are, of course, due to the pandemic," says Basanti. "Staff burnout due to extended lockdown periods is something we are expecting. However, we are doing our best to avoid that, through regular discussions and training of the staff."

Other challenges for the organization include fund-raising and increasing its donor network. The organization is working towards increasing awareness and gathering more individual donations.

MANY FACETS TO DEVELOPMENT



Akhil Bharatiya Gramodyog Seva Sansthan (ABGSS) is an NGO working in Bahraich district of Uttar Pradesh. Bahraich, located around 128 kilometres north-east of Lucknow, shares a tiny border with the neighboring country of Nepal. Not the least due to inclement weather (severe winters and even worse summers), a number of socio-economic problems tend to arise in this region. In an attempt to address some of them through voluntary efforts, founder Shiv Saran Lal Bajpai started ABGSS in 1985.

“I have been passionate about social service since my youth. In the mid-1970’s while studying in Lucknow University, I started volunteering with various charitable organizations. I was particularly interested in giving lectures, giving talks about social issues. I was frequently called upon to talk on occasions such as the Independence Day celebrations of local organizations, wherein I had to deliver an address on issues such as the importance of education, substance abuse and other things,” says Bajpai.

Bajpai went on to study Law. It didn’t take him too long to figure out that legal practice was not for him. However, he did notice that of every hundred clients he would meet during his legal practice, only one or two were able to write their own signatures. The rest were completely dependent on someone else to do the reading for them. Says Bajpai, “It made me think hard about what I could do to make sure people were able to read and write on their own. So, I started a few night-schools in my area. A larger non-profit organization noticed our work and asked us to apply for

grants through a government scheme. Although that didn’t work out, due to various reasons, it pushed me to start my own organization in 1985.”

ABGSS has over the years taken many forms and has undertaken projects in several thematic areas. “In the first years, through Khadi Gramodyog, we received some funds to set up a work unit, producing shoes and slippers. The objective was to use profits from this unit to do charity. I faced a great many challenges in running this unit because I wasn’t aware of the nitty-gritties of running the unit. Just as a man stepping into farming with zero knowledge of the subject, my foray into business led to a product-dump. We had too much of it and it wouldn’t sell. I accumulated massive debt.” explains Bajpai.

Soon after, he was visited by representatives of the Council for Advancement of People’s Action and Rural Technology (CAPART). In an effort to learn from his past failings, Bajpai initially hesitated to indulge them in the request for a partnership. However, the CAPART representatives saw an opportunity to utilize the equipment, the factory set-up and labour from the existing work-unit to manufacture other items, such as a hand pump. Hence, they provided funding to start a drinking water project, for which ABGSS helped put together literature on water conservation and helped execute the project.

Since then, the organization has kept on evolving through various partnerships, working in tandem with such organizations as the UNICEF, Catholic Relief Services, DFID fund and others. In partnership with Path

India, for the past couple of years, ABGSS has been distributing blankets and rations among people in the district. A few medical camps are also conducted from time to time. Currently in association with Jeevodaya Foundation, a free education and milk distribution project is ongoing. Starting in December 2021, free sessions are being conducted for school going children, covering moral education, sanitation, hygiene, physical training, sports and exercises. ‘Masoom’ a child rights project is also underway. Newer projects being planned with Jeevodaya in remote interior regions of UP.

Programs and funding have been severely impaired during COVID pandemic. With difficulty, ABGSS was able to secure a sum of INR 6,00,000 to distribute basic rations, both dry and fresh produce. However, some opportunities have been put aside due to the ongoing pandemic. “I was supposed to meet with UNICEF to start a new project. Due to the latest covid wave, that has been postponed. It’s easy to weave stories about strife, but living in this reality is very difficult. People appear self-sufficient in this region, but when you take a closer look, they won’t have even a day’s meal to survive on. Migrant labourers have suffered from returning to their homes from far away workplaces. They have nothing to look forward to during their day. The government is supportive, but the problems are still there” says Bajpai.

Nevertheless, Bajpai is content with the progress made so far. “I’m happy that the issues that individuals like myself worked on, have mostly been adopted by the government. There has

been a revolution in education, in public attitudes towards sending children to school. Not long ago, there used to be schools with more teachers than students. Dropout ratios were high. Now, a lot of students are going to school, especially a surge of girl children being encouraged to go to school. There is also a sizeable increase in the numbers of Montessori schools, English medium private schools in the region,” says he.

ABGSS is promoting ‘Aadhi Aabadi’- a forum for supporting the education of the girl child. Girls take part in competitions, are encouraged to put themselves out there. There is improvement in the number of women participating in education-related activities.

Earlier ABGSS had a few staff on my payroll. Due to funding fluctuations, Bajpai says he’s unable to pay to keep staff. The organization mainly works with volunteers.

This year, a Kishori Mahila Project is scheduled to begin. Young women will receive training for running a menstrual-napkins manufacturing unit. The project further hopes to train and create awareness to the girls on gender-based problems they might face, and equip them to overcome those.

“We also have an idea for mushroom cultivation. It could be a women’s livelihood option as much as a man’s. Provided we get funding for it, we may go ahead. We are looking into sustainable marketing methods of the mushrooms as well,” says Bajpai, looking to the future with optimism.

Archanaa Ramesh

ENTERPRISING YOUTH AND COMMUNITIES

The rural-urban divide impacts the lives of youth and children in multiple ways and the one field where this difference is apparent, misinterpreted to be the reason behind incompetence of students from rural background, is education. “There are a range of factors that come along with rural background—determining the performance and capabilities of youth from villages. Their slower growth within organisations is not due to incompetency but lack of exposure at the right age. The exposure the rural youth gain after college is something urban kids are used to from school days. What if they also had the exposure and opportunities right from school days?” wondered Mr Yugandhar Reddy Dodda, Founder and Chief Enabler of V-Reap (Volunteers for Rural Entrepreneurs Advancement Programme) Foundation, a social enterprise based in Hyderabad.

Culminating from diverse experiences, V-Reap identifies rural unemployment with windows of opportunity in skilling rural children, creating livelihood avenues for women and making youth employable. “These are usual, rather easily relatable problem statements when you work in villages. V-Reap attempts to identify and mentor those individuals who can build/create opportunities for others in the village. Social entrepreneurship evolved in the process,” he adds. Going beyond identifying and hand holding entrepreneurs, V-Reap endeavours to build a supportive ecosystem around the entrepreneurs which becomes an interface between them and their communities, thereby enabling impactful community development.

V-REAP is building a network of qualified, competent and trained rural volunteers who will work as educators, enablers and counsellors, while being entrepreneurs themselves. From the numerous awareness programs, VREAP identifies youth diligently through a 13 parameter tool and selects those who have an aptitude for learning, interested in village development, and look for a consistent income. The Youth’ responses to this tool also helps VReap comprehend the needs of the population and accordingly customise the services on offer. Thereafter, the volunteers go through the exercise of doing a small survey in their village, which makes them conscious of the opportunities in their villages. What follows is a facilitators’ workshop after which, interested candidates are helped in launching their enterprises. Village orientation programs for village community are done to establish the selected youth in their village. He/she is supported by VREAP platform to further his/her entrepreneurial journey for impact.

Every service or programme from



VReap is routed through these entrepreneurs, thereby delivering income to both stakeholders. Be it the establishment of learning centres in the village or skill training programmes, the volunteers turned entrepreneurs are now equipped with the skills to identify their beneficiaries objectively. They have also evolved to become points of contact for rural commerce promoting products from their networks.

The After School Engagement programme packs contemporary skills with fun filled activities and sessions where children are encouraged to learn by doing/designing themselves. With each day of the week focusing on different themes like Robotics, communications skills, speed maths and science experiments children not only look forward to new classes but are able to better relate to concepts that are taught in schools and apply them to routine tasks. The enthusiasm goes farther during the summer camps where children are exposed to games and activities that enhance their logical thinking abilities. These programmes are run and managed by the volunteers from the villages who are trained to be

skilled facilitators. Their inputs in designing activities and experiments are highly valuable and this open communication helps VReap build upon its existing resources.

Youth interested in skilling themselves and those who aspire for competitive examinations are all guided and trained through customized programmes. Linkages with industry and other impact organisations allows the youth to experience real time skills like decision making and crisis management. Career counselling, assistance in job search and entrepreneurial skills are imparted thereby enabling the youth decide about their future course of action.

Women executives for women empowerment programme has completed three seasons now and the result is very impressive. Be it the do-it-yourself products training through webcasts or the customer executive training programmes, women have clearly made a decision about what they preferred and what they looked forward to. “This decision making is the primary step in self-reliance. In the absence of proper guidance, women and youth

from villages are unable to take this call and move further. VReap has bridged this very strategically,” says Yugandhar. VReap volunteers select interested women and assist them in applying for the training sessions, after which they are placed in job opportunities through the placement cell.

The idea is to look at communities from the eyes of entrepreneurs, because as they evolve they will also be able to delve into what needs and services suit their communities, and the network that builds in each village guides aspirants appropriately. For example, a woman who completed her training as help desk and customer executive couldn’t start work soon after as her husband died due to COVID. VReap social entrepreneur’s guidance helped her to take up a job at a super market and she is now capable of managing her family’s needs. “What we now see is a wide realm of services administered by our entrepreneurs themselves for the best interest of their communities. VReap continues to be there as a partner, mentor and the integrating channel that facilitates the services and upgrades demand-supply in every service. We are not an incubation centre; rather an integrating platform which is self-sustainable and mutually beneficial. Of the 19 services we have deployed thus far, 17 are revenue generating,” he informs.

For a three-year old organization, VReap’s presence in 157 villages in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, is an incredible feat. Yugandhar feels that VReap is still in the minimum viable product stage and in the next five years will reach out to 9000 villages in the four states of South India. All this ambition for this impact platform comes from the strength of the ecosystems it has built in every village.

Shanmuga Priya.T

SUPPORTING THE WEAVERS OF LUISIANA WITH A BASKET OF BREAD

As COVID-19 affects the livelihoods of Pandan weavers in Luisiana, Maria's Kitchen aims to create a community to support this artisanal craft.

Each day, Maria's Kitchen, a bakery in Laguna, sells tray after tray of ube cheese pandesal (cheese and yam infused bread rolls) and other breads and cakes.

But there is more to these baked goods than belly-rubbing yumminess; the simple and elegant pandan leaf boxes that bear them tell a story of their own.

The boxes are the meticulous work of weavers from remote villages in Luisiana, Laguna (a four-hour drive from Manila), who have honed the skill of weaving pandan leaves over generations, making bags, boxes and various crafts from the leaves of 100-year-old trees.

And in the midst of COVID-19, where demand for their craft has dried to a trickle, the boxes are providing steady, much needed income for the weavers.

"The pandemic really took a really big hit on us. Our past customers never came back," shares Nenita Racoma, a 59 year old weaver who was taught the craft at seven years old.

A bakery that warms hearts

The idea of using the boxes came from Kwin Garcia-Anino, one of Maria's Kitchen's three founders, whose mother-in-law is from the same village as the weavers.

A long-time fan of pandan crafts, she previously set up a business in 2017 to sell their products, but stopped to focus on raising her children.

Fast forward to 2020, when the pandemic took the world by storm. Kwin, who was working as a financial advisor and event organiser, saw her income drop. Together with her friends Kristine Garcia and Zyra Porca, they decided to start a baking business.

"Since we like to eat, obviously, why not try exploring the food business?" says Kwin with a laugh. "It turned into a passion and took my mind away from the pandemic."

Maria's Kitchen was a success, creating a "happy problem" for its founders. "When more orders started to come in, our packaging supplies could not hold up," Kwin recalls. "We decided to return to pandan packaging as it was our first love."

Pandan, she explains, grows plentifully in parts of the Philippines, and offers a more eco-friendly alternative to single-use plastic packaging.

And as Kwin would discover, it would become a lifeline to weavers in a time of crisis too. "When I met the weavers in these remote areas, they told me they really had a hard time with less orders and transport restrictions. So I told my partner, we'll use pandan packaging so we can help the weavers in Luisiana."

Where altruism and artisanal meet

Pandan weaving requires skill and dedication, from cutting down leaves from the trees, to removing the thorns and shaping them to the required size, to drying and softening them on presses that weigh over 1,000kg — all before anything can be woven.

The result is a durable, reusable material that can be made into items like baskets, boxes, hats, mats and more, customised to the users' needs.

Before the pandemic, weavers made about 500 pesos (US\$9.90) a day for their craft and labour — enough to help support their families.

"I am very proud because weaving helped us survive...you can see that weaving is the main source of income here. There are big houses and you will see there pressing machines below. Those pandan leaves sent



their children to school," says Rose Rondilla, a weaver.

Even though times are tough, Rose and Nenita try to make sure everyone in the community has a chance to earn. "If I have orders, I do my best to share the workload with them. I also purchase their products so they don't need to sell it to marketplaces far away. I understand the struggle, so whatever I earn, I share it with them, says Nenita.

When the orders are ready, Kwin and her partners will drive the long, narrow bumpy roads to the villages to collect the boxes. "We don't mind the hassle, we really just want to be of help with their livelihood," says Kwin.

Although many weavers have been forced to lower their prices amid low demand, Kwin is steadfast in honouring whatever weavers quote her. "I have an idea

of what the struggle of losing an income is like, especially during the pandemic, and I do not want to add to their suffering," she shares.

It is a spirit that resonates with Maria's Kitchen's customers. "When we told our customers that every purchase with pandan packaging could help the weavers of Luisiana, we received a lot of support from them," says Kwin. "The customers are happy because they want to support the community we are helping."

Nenita hopes other weavers will take heart and press on. "Don't lose heart and just continue making those bags. Every problem has a solution," she says.

In the long run, Kwin hopes to see newfound appreciation for the weavers' craft. "Pandan weaving is a cultural representation of their town that can be passed on to the next generation. I hope we can help them in preserving that."

ABOUT MARIA'S KITCHEN

Maria's Kitchen is a bakery in the Philippines that uses eco-friendly packaging woven from pandan leaves for their popular home-made breads, to reduce their plastic waste footprint while giving pandan weavers a new stream of income amid tough times. Through sales of their baked goods, they hope to grow support and interest in the craft of these weavers.

*A story by Our Better World
(the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore
International Foundation
www.ourbetterworld.org)*

WOES TO WOWS - RAY OF LIGHT SEEPS INTO DARKNESS

*“The most precious light is the one that visits you in your darkest hour!”—
Mehmet Murat ildan*



The light is precious not because it is a new entrant or anything special. It is precious because of the darkness before, making the light noticeable. Often, we don't accept the darker clouds and curse them. We think they come into our lives to destroy us. But the dark clouds have a hidden water body that can rejuvenate and renew the earth to allow new green space to grow. It will come in the form of rain, but there is only more life rejuvenated on earth at the end of it all.

The pandemic and journey with COVID have been so too. I have been observing people move from initially celebrating the sudden vacation and working from home to gradually moving into frustration, boredom, blame game, anger, non-acceptance, and rebellion to adhere to the restrictions in six months. All had some ray of light struggling to seep in. Some noticed it and were afraid to believe in it. At the same time, some embraced it and moved into another paradigm, changing the orbit and creating a new society, a new normal, and a rejuvenated path for further growth.

I would like to share the changes with a simple classification –

Physical

It had been so hundreds of years back, and now again, the social distancing has brought to our

knowledge that our body is the temple of the soul, and we can greet each other without having to mix our energies. We retain our energy and control dropping off the additional energies from others through a bathe with saltwater every evening. The good practices of not wearing the previous day's outfits and washing hands and legs when we enter the houses have taken attention. They looked simple at first, but the people have realized the value of these practices in the last two years. Cluster living in cities has been questioned at the deepest level.

Emotional

The sudden lockdown and working from home left behind a significant time on hand to get in touch with their and others' emotional states. The Nava rasas (9 basic emotions) explicitly bridge relationships and heal past experiences. While emotional abuse and hurt have increased in some spaces due to proximity, it has also thrown open new conversations between family members. The youth, who would prefer to engage more with the outside world, has gone home to stay with their families. While increasing friction and making it dark, this also has a silver lining: seeing one's emotion at close quarters and understanding the other person living with them better.

Social

The one big grumble of every human during a pandemic is the loss of social interactions. Humans have used technology very efficiently to reach out and connect to people that otherwise they would not have put effort into. Technology has penetrated villages, too, connecting families. The world has shrunk and brought people closer to each other. Empathy had another face to it in the last two years when we lost the close ones to COVID and left us huddling closer together virtually.

Medical

In the medical field, health care workers have been seen as Saviours. There is a paradox that has emerged. People began to question the severity of their ailment before seeking a doctor's attention. The so-called alternate medicines like Ayurveda, Siddha, and Homeopathy got their rightful place, proving long-term benefits. Especially in cities, where quick fixes were rampant, curative and time-tested eastern medicinal practices are seen with respect and go-to solutions.

Innovation and community reach out

If Pandemic has left behind something substantial, it is the innovation and entrepreneurial possibilities in the multi-age group – be

it students who are 15 years or senior citizens who are active and enterprising. In our school programs, students from 10th grade came out with innovative social action projects to make a difference to the people around them.

Concept of life, happiness, empowerment, vision, and goals

The two words life and vision are clichés, and I am afraid to use them. Yet, the Pandemic has awakened both sides of the coin and given new pathways to see oneself. The concept of happiness, sharing, gender identification, goals to pursue have been challenged due to high uncertainty.

I am sharing only a peek into the changes in the world in the last couple of years. This series in the coming months will also bring out the silver lining that we often miss in trials and tribulations. The larger goal of penning these is to let us reflect and get in touch with those subtle nuances that weave into the fragment of life, making evolution a certainty even in the darker days.

Dr. Kalpana Sampath

"Redington is one of the few corporates having empowerment of differently-abled as its focus area."

Arun Prasad shares with Marie Banu Redington's CSR programmes

AB Arun Prasad is a CSR Professional with 18 years of experience working with both corporate companies and not-for-profit organisations. Arun has implemented impactful CSR initiatives in various thematic areas including Livelihood, Women Empowerment, Education, Health, Sports for Development and Environment; in eight states across the sub-continent.

He has excellent interpersonal, communication, leadership, analytical and trouble shooting skills with proven ability in establishing long lasting relationships.

Arun has a Master's Degree in Social Work with specialisation in community development from Madras School of Social Work in Chennai and has completed his research in Corporate Social Responsibility at Department of Sociology, University of Madras.

Currently, he spearheads the CSR Function for Redington India Limited, PAN India. Redington India adopted a strong CSR agenda in the year 2015, by forming a separate Public Charitable Trust by the name "Foundation for CSR @ Redington." At the core of this initiative lies a steady focus on education, preventive healthcare, and environment. It also endeavors to address rural development needs, development of slum dwellers, and women empowerment.

Prior to this, Arun was heading the CSR functions of Siemens Gamesa Renewable Power Private Limited.

In an exclusive interview, AB Arun Prasad shares with Marie Banu Redington's CSR programmes.

Can you tell us about Redington's CSR programmes?

The CSR programmes of Redington India Limited are implemented through 'Foundation for CSR @ Redington'. Since 2014, we have impacted more than 100,000 individuals through our initiatives in Skill Development, Education, Empowerment of Differently Abled and Environmental Care.

Redington is one of the few corporates that has 'Empowerment of Differently Abled' as one of its key focus areas. This is the flagship project for Redington Group, under which we sensitise the rural populace on the importance of early identification of disability. We provide therapy to the differently-abled children at their door step through our Early Intervention on Wheels

programme. In addition, we offer skill training to the differently-abled and enable them to be financially independent.

Through the skill development programmes, we provide opportunities for youth to become job-ready. So far, we have placed more than 3,000 youth and college students in suitable jobs. Being a leader in the Supply Chain Industry, we also focus on providing customised training to youth to avail job opportunities in this sector. In the area of education, we have equipped rural schools with smart boards and science labs to facilitate technology-based teaching to students and have so far reached 60 schools across the state of Tamilnadu and Delhi NCR.

For our environment programmes, we partner with expert not-for-profit organisations and install roof-water harvesting in schools, recharge and renovate water bodies, desilt ponds and increase the height of bunds.

Any interesting programme you wish to share?

Although internet and social media has penetrated into most remote villages, people are still unaware and not giving importance to monitor the development of their children which leads to not identifying the disability at an early stage, if any.

Early intervention has a significant impact for children who have delayed development in physical, cognitive, emotional, sensory, behavioural, social and communication domains and with quality early intervention children can live a meaningful life.

Redington has launched the 'Early Intervention on Wheels' programme to provide therapy for the differently abled children at their doorstep.

In this, a 12-meter length bus is equipped with a driver cum community mobilizer, a special educator, a speech therapist and a physiotherapist. The bus also has facilities like physio table, play area,

wheel chair access facility and a washroom. We have two such buses and implement this project through our NGO Partners VOC Educational Trust at Tuticorin and GV Pillai Trust at Chidambaram.

The project's main objective is to sensitise parents on early intervention; assess the development delays of children (0 to 6 years), and provide consistent therapies (physio or speech or occupational) to reduce the disability levels and increase pre-school going children.

Till date, we have helped 150 children with development delays and have sensitised more than 10,000 rural women about the need for early intervention. Since the parents of all these children are daily wage earners and cannot afford to buy any aid that would reduce the severity of the identified disability, Redington has provided hearing devices and other therapy materials to more than 100 children till date.

Parents of children with early development issues require special training and we help them provide meaningful and effective pattern of teaching for their child. We, at Redington are focusing on this so that the children can be cared by their parents at home and can gain the potential knowledge from them.

Your thoughts on the National Education Emergency programme?

During the covid-pandemic phase, most of the government school students studying in standard 1 to 8 have not attended any type of schooling—whether regular or online mode. This is confirmed in a recent survey report published by National Coalition on Education Emergency. The survey was conducted in schools across 15 States and mentions that more than 77% of the school children studying in State Government run schools have not attended any form of schooling for the past 24 months. The worst affected are children of migrant workers and scheduled tribes.

Students who are vulnerable are those studying in grade 8, as they have missed their regular academics for two years and should face the board examination in the coming year. This might result in stress and other consequences.

Girl students in grade 10 are in a more vulnerable situation, because failure in the board examination would lead them to a daily wage job. Few might have no option but to get married at an early age of 18, when they are not prepared both mentally and physically.

This is the situation which our nation should address with immediate effect. They should have proper planning and consider the views from academicians, parents and corporates who are involved in education projects as part of their CSR activities.

Redington is also planning to address this issue in the best possible manner in the coming year.

What is the criteria for selecting your implementation agencies?

For selecting the implementation agencies for CSR projects corporates need to follow the NGO selection guidelines set by the Ministry of Corporate Affairs.

Redington also conducts due diligence of the organisation who has proposed to be our implementing partner. Our in-house team verifies the credibility of the organisation and their capability to manage the CSR funds efficiently. We also check if there are any negative news about the organisation in the media (including social media) and seek views from other corporate partners.

We ensure that their Board of Directors are not affiliated to a political party and are secular. Further, we conduct a field visit and interact with their current beneficiaries to gain their opinion.

