

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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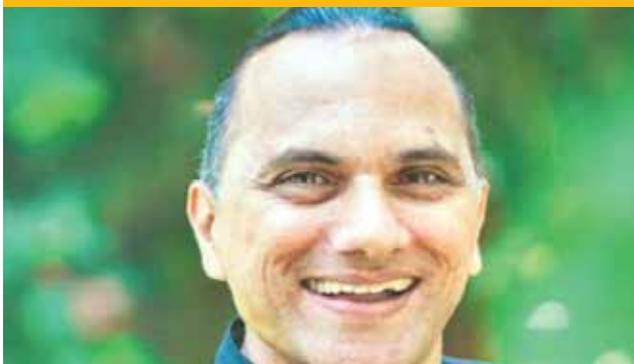
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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Of the many social challenges we face globally today, there is one that is a much larger threat than others. That threat is about the increasing population around the world. This is an issue of concern as it affects the social, economic, and environmental, aspects of humankind.

It took until the early 1800s for the world population to reach one billion. Now we add a billion every 12-15 years. The United Nations expects world population to rise to more than 9 billion by 2050, and more than 11 billion by 2100.

Where are all these nine billion persons going to go? What is their effect on the increased usage of resources and livestock on the planet? How do we develop our infrastructures to support this rapid growth? These are some questions that we need to ask.

According to Census of 2011, India's population has crossed 121 crore and it is at second position after China in the world. Adding to this, around 21% Indians are below poverty line as a result of uncontrolled population growth.

As is the case with almost every developing country, there are several reasons that contribute to the increase in population in India. One of the main reasons being illiteracy. People from the uneducated and poor class are seen to bear more children as this means more number of hands to work and earn money for the family. Secondly, most of them are not aware about the birth control methods. Early marriage also results in greater number of children. The growth in population could also be attributed to low death rate. Treatments and cures for various illnesses have been developed and thus the increase in life span.

Increase in population causes increased unemployment which affects the economic development of a country. Efforts are being made in India for improving the economic condition of people, but it can bear no fruitful result if population is allowed to grow unchecked.

Population growth also plays a key role in environmental sustainability as it can lead to deforestation, water pollution, and air pollution. These have a negative effect on the environment and also has an effect in our daily lives.

Due to consistently increasing level of population, poverty is also growing in many countries. People are bounded to live under limited resources and supplements. We find high illiteracy levels, poor health services and lack of resources in the rural areas.

We should educate the global population about the dangers of the increasing population and its effects on humankind.

A country can only get success when its citizens are healthy, and live a happy and content life. Change will occur only if we take action. Let's act now!

—Marie Banu

here and now.

Here and now is a simple phrase, yet so difficult to bring into one's experience. Recently, I was part of a learning process which placed emphasis on the "here and now". When the need to be in the here and now was expressed, it seemed logical and innocuous. During the course of the learning process, when participants strayed from the here and now, there was immediate reminder about it. Bringing the "here and now", to the task became elusive. What does this mean? I noticed, in the way I thought, and the words I shared in the group came from a past reference or a future reference. In fact all this was happening to all of us.

From experiential events of doing a primary task related to exercising leadership, in the here and now opened up new definitions and experiences of leadership and personal authority. I could connect into aspects of me that I had kept hidden and the aspects that I overdid which came from my conditioning rather than the need of the "here and now".

Many of my conventional ideas of managing and leading were busted. Working in a "laboratory" like organization along with a mix of people of different origin, gender, caste, age, interests and life experiences with a sharp focus on the here and now, shifted me and has made me

far more expanded in my life outside the laboratory. It brought forward the unconscious parts that I was not tapping into while exercising my personal authority, something that had nothing to do with leadership position or title or what I thought was important. I stepped away from blame, of complaining and belonged to a space of initiation and involvement. The end result mattered but was not overwhelming.

I got access to new learning by a powerful process of drawing myself in to here and now. The process of sharing hypothesis and interpretations when we strayed and belonged to the past or future was very endearing yet thought provoking.

"To dwell in the here and now does not mean you never think about the past or responsibly plan for the future. The idea is simply not to allow yourself to get lost in regrets about the past or worries about the future. If you are firmly grounded in the present moment, the past can be an object of inquiry, the object of your mindfulness and concentration. You can attain many insights by looking into the past. But you are still grounded in the present moment."

— Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Power*

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.

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EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

Giving Sport a Chance

A flourishing corporate career, a deep love of sports and a quest for social change; these things converge, in Sreekrishnan MV, City Lead (Bengaluru and Chennai), Enabling Leadership.

Having lived in Bengaluru pretty much all of his life, Sreekrishnan identifies himself foremost as a “complete Banglorean”. A fitness enthusiast and football lover, he is a die-hard fan of the Bengaluru Football Club. “During the Indian Super League (ISL) season, you will find me at the West Block A stand, rooting for the BFC for all of their home matches” he says. It is his long-distance endurance cycling, that takes Sreekrishnan a long way, over 24000 kms long, to be precise, carrying his messages for various social causes wherever he goes.

A veteran of the corporate world, Sreekrishnan held a successful career in leadership roles with companies such as Titan Group, Timex, and Vodafone, before recently shedding his corporate ‘avatar’ and fully immersing himself in the service sector. Interestingly, it was the employee volunteering program at Vodafone, that got him thinking about using his years of experience and his various interests towards social causes. “World of Difference (WOD), the flagship Employee Volunteering program of the Vodafone Foundation selects 32 Employees (winners) from across the organization to work with select NGOs across the country at the grassroots level for a period of three months, away from regular office work. I was a winner of the WOD program in 2013. I was posted at Vishakhapatnam, where I worked with the NGO Magic Bus.” he explains.

Magic Bus is an organization that dedicates itself to ensuring children complete their secondary education, thus effectively preparing them for a way out of the self-perpetuating cycle of poverty. Sreekrishnan’s first day at a school in Vishakhapatnam got off to a rocky start; delays in transport, a school with dirty walls, broken benches and broken window panes. He noticed, however, that the children in the school were brimming with energy, which rubbed off on Sreekrishnan who, by lunchtime, found himself sharing food with them, eating what he calls “the best lunch I had eaten in a while”.

He started writing about his daily experiences while still working with Magic Bus and after his three-month stint, compiled those writings into a book, “Journey of Discovery”. He sold 250 copies of the book, and used the proceeds from the sales, amounting to Rs. 1.5 Lakhs to build infrastructure for Youth Development Centres of Magic Bus in Mysore. He also raised another Rs. 50,000 for Magic Bus by running in the TCS 10K Run in 2014.

Eventually, he heard about CSIM’s



certificate course in Social Entrepreneurship through a friend of his, who also happens to be an alumnus of CSIM. He says, “I went through the course outline and found it very interesting. The course was on weekends, intense classroom sessions, field visits and lectures by experts in the field. This was exactly what I was looking for and signed up for the next available batch.” When asked what his biggest takeaways from the course were, he explains, “The entire teaching methodology and course content was well thought of. The one thing that stood out for me was the lectures by the experts in the field of Social Sector. It gave deep insights into how the sector works, what are the likely pitfalls to be avoided, opportunities that exist etc.”

While still contemplating how to give more time to his service-related work, a shocking incident jolted Sreekrishnan into action. In October of 2018, a dear friend phoned him, quite uncharacteristically during his work hours. Sreekrishnan’s friend had just lost his wife to a road accident. Sreekrishnan says, “They were a couple who had big plans, with their six-year old daughter being at the centre of those

plans. A bubbling life had been snuffed out in a matter of minutes. A husband bereaved, a daughter yet to understand the gravity of the tragedy. It brought me out of my reverie. I started to look at my priorities in life and to reconsider where I was headed.” He asked himself, “20+ years of the hustle and bustle of corporate life have been extremely enjoyable, but how much more of this? When do I make the transition out of my comfortable corporate life? I could continue to sit in my cabin & keep thinking about the ‘right’ time or take the plunge.” He concluded, “The sand in my hourglass is running dangerously low. For me the ‘right time’ has come & it is NOW.”

After exiting Vodafone in April this year, Sreekrishnan says he wanted to take a three-month break before looking for openings in the social sector. “However, within a week I got an alert through my LinkedIn page about the openings in Enabling Leadership (EL). One role suited my profile and I applied for it. As luck would have it, I was called for an interview & in about three weeks’ time I got my offer to join EL. I officially joined on 3rd June” he says.

Enabling Leadership is an

“The entire teaching methodology and course content was well thought of. The one thing that stood out for me was the lectures by the experts in the field of Social Sector. It gave deep insights into how the sector works, what are the likely pitfalls to be avoided, opportunities that exist, etc.”

international Non-Profit Organization that focusses on “growing leadership through a shared love of music, football and creativity”. Sreekrishnan says “I think as a nation, we are too focused on academics and are missing out teaching life skills, sports etc. to our kids. While academics are definitely important, this unidimensional approach does not prepare youngsters for what life holds ahead for them. After all, life is not just Mathematics and Physics. It is also the ability to handle disappointments, success, failures, decision-making etc. The entire school curriculum needs to be re-looked and sports & life skills must be made mandatory courses.”

What has joining EL fulltime, meant to him, we ask. He says, “EL has offered me the perfect fit where in my love for sports and fitness meets my passion to give back to the society. I look forward to all the learning that it will bring, the small changes that I can bring about and more importantly to keep enjoying as I go along.”

– Archanaa Ramesh

Leader & Leadership Matters...

16.Part 2- People Involvement : key to leaving indelible mark



Shri Swaminathan (Swami), former Executive Chairman of Manipal Health Enterprises and former MD & CEO of Infosys BPO has been discussing the importance and value of people involvement in organizations in Part – 1 of this series. The discussion continues,

To continue our discussion, Swami, can you give me instances of how you handle people in the Organizations you have led?

“I believe it is all about understanding people at an Individual level, their likes and dislikes, partnering them on their journey, opening up windows of innovation and creativity and motivating them to try out new ideas. When individuals experience immersive involvement of managers and are co creating solutions, it has a demonstration impact on others and the entire team gets energized”.

Swami goes down his memory lane and brings forth two powerful examples:

“Several years back a manager reporting to me said about one of his team members - this chap is useless. I have tried everything with him but doesn't seem interested in work at all and so I think we should see him off. I said he has been with us for two years; he is not doing any mission critical work, yet you are discussing this with me. I am curious and I want to meet this guy. When he came to meet me he was a bit nervous. After an initial chat I realized his mind and heart were not at work. I asked him how you spend your spare time. He said, Sir, I play drums. I don't think anyone in the company knew this. So I asked him, what his career aspiration was. He said, Sir I want to be the best drummer ever. I then asked him, if that is so, what are you doing here with excel sheets? He said, Sir I have to earn. But will you make progress, I asked. He said yes sir, I am also thinking what I should do. He said this job is my need, not interest. I said, if you want to push ahead with your passion, maybe you should play in office gatherings & let your colleagues discover your talent. I asked the manager what kind of training and development he was planning for the drummer. He said some technical, soft skills, Microsoft Office and so on. Then I told the manager about this guy's passion for drumming and he was surprised. I told him the job is his need and not his passion. I suggested to the Manager to use the training budget, find a good music school and send him for a 6 month training in drumming as against Microsoft Office. And get him to participate in some events, evangelize his skills. Let's try as a test. Three months later the manager comes back and says, that guy is transformed and committed and has become a hero in his circle. He now enjoys coming to work and is getting better in Excel!”.

In an Auto Company where I worked,



the sales manager said selling was getting difficult and the sales team was demotivated. I looked at the data and saw a salesmen performing very poorly. I decided to observe his selling style and process. When the customer came in, I observed he spoke all about the car, color options, performance parameters, safety, etc. I could see from a distance that the customer was least interested and was losing attention. He just got up and instead of going near the car he went near the financing options board and asked about the EMI options and then walked away. I asked the salesman how it was and his reply was that the customer is not a serious buyer & won't buy since he wasn't interested in the product. I asked him what the customer name, address, and where was he working etc. I asked this with a strategic intent. The salesman had very limited knowledge on the customer details. He had to refer to his papers and then give me the details. I said to him you got talking to the customer without knowing his name, his address and his business and you are trying to sell a car to him. I then told him to pull out from the CRM all information about the existing customers who lived within 10Kms of this “will not buy” customer, which was promptly done. I asked the salesman when was the last time he had spoken/ connected with the customers on that list. He said he sends them the customary season greetings etc. I then told him to send an email to all the customers on that list thanking them for patronizing the company and in case they ever needed any help they could reach out to him. This way even if they had forgotten him, he would be re-establishing connect again. On that mail I also asked him to add a couple of lines and introduce the stationery shop of the “will not buy” customer located in their vicinity and that they could reach out to them for their stationery needs. I told the salesman to make sure that he marks a copy of all the mails to the mail id of the “will not buy” customer. Three days later, the sales guy calls me to tell me that the “will not buy” customer has

indeed bought a car from him. Apparently the customer told him that he had been in business for many years and never had come across a company that was bothered about his business. I then told the salesman If only you had found such opportunities for others, imagine the goodwill it would have created and the volumes you could have generated.”

Swami shares that in every sales process there are 3 things to tick with regard to people orientation:

1. Focus on understanding the customer and their needs.
2. Provide them with the lowest cost and the best value. Don't justify high price saying you are offering greater value. Offer the best competitive price with highest value.
3. Understand the customer's profession &/or business and genuinely work on improving their livelihood. Come up with ideas that will make them feel that you are genuinely concerned in their wellbeing and they will then do business with you. Don't constantly think of how to take money from their pockets and put them into yours. Don't be greedy.

“Your overall support and faith in your team is what pushes your team to do their best...I have seen very few CEOs who get into the level of granularity that you get into and I guess that is your most unique quality. You have given your team 100% freedom to run the show and personally, I have always felt empowered knowing that you are at the helm of affairs...” – PC Ramesh, Senior VP and Delivery Head, Infosys BPO

Swami, I totally agree with you. I myself have experienced your care in our own interaction. You replied as soon as I messaged about this interview. With pressing work and time schedules that you have, you are here talking to me for over an hour and when you came in, you first asked about me, what I am doing currently and my life before we began this interview. It says a lot about your people connect. Your warmth naturally touches the people first.

Meaning of People Involvement in Leadership:

The Leader understands each person who works with him/her, and (s)he is aware of their potential. (LOI, www.discoverself.com). People (employee) Involvement are the ways in which employees take part in making decisions, planning, making sure work is done well. The synonyms of involvement seem to be captivation, immersion and so on. The antonyms are non-engagement, non-participation and so on...

Since when have you picked the people orientation and people involvement? Were you like this in your childhood days?

There was a twinkle in his eye when I said childhood. He reminisced, "I think it is my mom in whom I have seen this attribute in abundant measure and she is the person who has had a massive impact on me valuing people. She was an extremely warm people's person. As a child, at times, over 10+ people would land up at our home and she would insist that they all stay back for dinner. I would see my dad shocked, but she would just avoid looking at him. Anyone who comes over, a neighbor, a friend, or even someone she doesn't know, she would serve coffee or tea. Whenever I ran into some elderly person outside my home, they would always enquire me of my mom. Though seemingly not of much consequence those experiences have stayed with me".

The second significant incident happened very early in my career and in fact it was my second big job. It contributed to some intense and game changing policy making which led to a strategic shift in Government policy and had a significant impact in the industry I was involved with. This shift also helped my company gain significant competitive advantage. Ten days later, I got a call from the Head of HR of the then leader in the industry asking me that the company owner & MD, who was his boss, wanted to see me. I was only an assistant manager then and to be called in by the leader in the industry was to say the least overwhelming. So I went and met him. He offered me a job. I got the joining letter delivered to me at home the very next day. I was shocked to see the role I was offered which was 3 to 4 levels higher than where I was. The offer also included a significant compensation increase, a chauffeur-driven car as against the company Motorcycle I was then driving. Just married and less than 30 years of age then it was too tempting, I told my boss about this offer and the way it happened. He spontaneously congratulated me saying this was an

offer of a lifetime but then asked me to ask the following questions to myself before I took the final plunge.

- Are you enjoying what you are doing now?
- Are you learning something new every day?
- Is the company giving you an opportunity to learn?

He said to me if the answers to the above 3 questions is NO, pack your bag. If they are YES, don't ask yourself the question in terms of designation, compensation, car etc. He said that if the company gives you an opportunity to learn, the company trusts you and a good company which trusts you will also look after you. Except that the timing of looking after will vary. That night I thought about it long and hard and I was sure I would never have been noticed by the competitor if the company had not given me a chance to demonstrate my capability. I stayed in the company for almost a decade thereafter. Great things happened to me in my career and I will thank my boss forever for enabling me to take the right decision.

Swami, what processes or events do you have at your social and family space to ensure people involvement?

"Not really processes but some events. Prema, my wife and I enjoy in keeping the entire family connected. The entire family including a lot of extended family which could be over 15+ families, 3 to 4 generations included manage to meet at least once a year. We book resorts or hotels for a couple of days and stay there. The key to getting people together I have found is accommodating each person's constraints on schedules, requirements and so on, just means, a bit of accommodating & going the extra mile.

For the last almost a decade, about 75 + ex colleagues who used to work together in the Eighties are a part of a group called the "G80" (Gang of Eighties). Though 99% of this group have moved on many years ago, they are still alive and kicking. We call this, the "G-80", Gang with E-motion. About 35 to 40 couples in this group meet once in

6 months alternatively in a location in India and outside India. We have great fun, discuss everything and more importantly track all about the children, families etc. It's like organizing a wedding event, and to take care of all the requirements and idiosyncrasies of people is really a lesson in people involvement. That 18 trips have been achieved in about 9 years is a proof of what can be achieved if people come together with a positive and can do spirit."

Wow, it is indeed a lot of value adding worthwhile work and great learning experience. Can you please give me your mantras for people management?

"When it comes to people management, I talk of the 3Cs:

1. Compensation – pay the person what he/she is worth. Don't shortchange. Compensation is never a win game. But if we can recognize performance and reward meritocracy, everyone understands that it is a fair deal. Everyone is a self-analyst and they know where they stand. Be data based - appraising people on perceptions is a killer.
2. Career – If we are not passionate about helping every person in their careers, we can never get it right. We have to be concerned and work on their careers and demonstrate that we genuinely care for them. Managers have to know their people.
3. Comfort – This is not just physical but is to do more with mental comfort. No one ever worries about putting in hard work, working 24/7, if the environment that is created for them motivates them to give in their best. Give them an environment where they can speak their mind, come up with ideas and implement. Make the environment free from politics and one that breeds innovation & creativity. Building Smile as the DNA of the firm is worth all the effort that leaders and managers can take. If we can constantly work on these 3Cs, the possibility of winning a war is given. Having been a part of Infosys, I

have taken its values of C-Life seriously and have tried to integrate as much of it as possible in my life.

- C = Customer centricity
- L = Leadership by example
- I = Integrity
- F = Fairness
- E = Passion for Excellence

When I look at myself I employ C-LIFE. When I look at people, I employ 3Cs, and when I look at business GDP (Growth, Differentiation & People) is my final mantra.

Swami, what would be your final remarks for our readers?

I believe if we can stay away from this attitude of "I am OK, You are not" syndrome, world will be a better place to live. I believe it is all about leadership. Some leaders have left lasting impression on me and my role model is Mahatma Gandhi. I look at 4 traits in Leaders and I apply this framework to evaluate them.

1. Vision
2. Courage
3. Ethics
4. Realism

I have experienced that sustainable leaders have all the four above in them. When a leader ticks only two or three of these boxes, they are leaders in passing. Lead from the front and demonstrate genuineness, you are most likely to win all battles when it comes to people.

"Your inspiring leadership, passion for the organization, care for people and dream of big thinking has left a forever mark on the industry, company and lives of employees. You would be immensely missed and always be remembered very fondly. Best wishes for next phase for even bigger accomplishments." Rishi Kumar Jain, Group CEO, Infinitus

We have so far explored 16 attributes for Leaders and effective Leadership. We continue with the next article on the value of being disciplined and having context sensitivity as vital attributes for Leadership success.

– Dr. Kalpana Sampath



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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.

For more information, please visit our website www.csim.in

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MISSION SCHOOLING

"We have learnt from our interventions in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and even in remote villages of Bihar that in spite of diversity in regions and cultural specificities and parents have similar aspirations and aspire to see their children going to school."



For a country with a burgeoning population, it comes as no surprise that a large percentage of India's children are engaged in child labour. Oftentimes, these children have no access to academics and quality education. Rehabilitating them from the throes of labour and providing them with access to education, has become a basic need. Since 1981, Telangana-based M Venkatrangaiya Foundation (MVF) has taken it upon itself to achieve this goal.

"MVF has so far rescued over one million children from labour force in India and have followed up with them until completion of class 10," says the organization's national convener R Venkat Reddy. "We have also stopped over 20,000 child marriages." The organization's main aim is to work towards a society free of child labour, or in Venkat's words, "where every child is in school, enjoying his or her right to education."

Venkat believes this can be achieved if and only if a social consensus surrounding deeply contentious issues

like ending child labour is arrived at. Needless to say, this must be accompanied by the societal need to ending gender violence and child marriage as well. "In order to achieve this, we follow an area-based approach to the work we do," says Venkat.

This process often involves following up with every child in an area, whether the child is in school or out of school. "This in turn galvanizes community support and ownership of local institutions, not to forget local bodies to resolve conflicts, and builds consensus in favor of children's right to education until completion of higher secondary school education," says Venkat.

MVF has targeted a rights-based approach, and believes that the state should ultimately be held accountable to children, their protection and their rights. "Therefore, MVF facilitates community-based institutions and local bodies to engage with government schools, Anganwadi centres, primary health centres and the departments of revenue, police and labour at every level," says

Venkat, "It utilizes, and critiques existing laws and policies, where necessary. MVF envisages that schools have a vital role in keeping children safe and therefore it sensitizes and involves school teachers and education system and students in transforming societal attitude towards children."

The organization is currently focusing all its attention on adolescent children, with a clear focus on girl children and gender equality. This also includes rectifying social practices that exclude girl children, which in turn leads to empowerment and facilitation of girls learning the rights they are entitled to. "It helps these girls find their voice, discover their self and aspirations, and also sensitizes school teachers and functionaries, not to forget enhancing the implementation of laws and policies towards protection of girls, gender equality and education," says Venkat. The process ensures that MVF ends up visualizing a long-term normative transformation in attitudes. "This includes attitudes towards girls in the

school, family, community and society so there is zero tolerance of gender violence and where all girls until 18 years complete secondary schools," says Venkat.

The organization says it cherishes almost every intervention since 1991. "We have taken courage from the enormous support it received from poor parents and the sacrifices they have made to enrol their children to school," says Venkat. "We have learnt from our interventions in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and even in remote villages of Bihar that in spite of diversity in regions and cultural specificities and parents have similar aspirations and aspire to see their children going to school."

What has no doubt been a source of encouragement and inspiration is the fact that in every area, village youth have shown dedication and commitment to MVF's cause, even in the face of opposition. "There is the risk to life as well, but they have not lost faith in the



cause for getting every child to school," says Venkat, "They could reach out to the most stubborn employer and enlisted him as a partner to support the cause of protection of child rights. Schoolteachers too showed love and respect for poor and marginalised children. In all its project areas, MVF has witnessed the finest of human sentiments from all stakeholders."

Today, MVF is looking back fondly on its process of social mobilization where conflicts have been resolved and a consensus has emerged in favour of children's rights. "We are currently focusing on changing school cultures, to ensure that poor children are respected and welcomed, where there is no child left behind in his class and all children learn without fear and discrimination," says Venkat. "It is also in ensuring that adolescent children, who have dropped out of school are able to catch up with their peers and pursue education until completion of higher secondary schools. In this effort, MVF's emphasis is equally on girl's education and gender equality."

In the course of its journey, MVF has also charted out an ambitious expansion plan. "We hope to network with civil society organisations, corporate sector and the government to consolidate its efforts on creation of child labour-free zones in the country," says Venkat. "We also want to scale up our work in building pressure for improvement in quality of education in schools." Another goal that MVF has set for itself is to expand its programme on girls' education and gender equality throughout the state of Telangana.

One thing is for sure, with such sustained efforts to getting children in schools and ensuring they stay there, organizations like MVF have taken giant steps towards ensuring that the children of India are in the right place, at the right time when it comes to academics and education. The fact that this is a bottom-up approach — involving consensus-building, and rooting archaic social practices, only adds a great deal of credibility to a movement that is quickly gaining ground.



Photos: Rajendra Shaw

Under the Big Top, a spectacle for social change

Phare Ponleu Selpak juggles art, education and empowerment to change lives



Under the bright lights of the circus tent, Oun Sreynuth moves with hypnotic grace, every gesture unfolding with deliberation. In her elegant costume, her face arrestingly made up, she cuts an enchanting figure as she takes centre stage.

Back in the light of day, Sreynuth is once again a fresh-faced 22 year-old, her voice soft and hesitant as she shares her humble beginnings, and her dreams of becoming a renowned dancer.

“My parents are divorced. They could not afford to send me to school. So I know that I need to learn a specific skill for myself, so that I don’t have to depend on my parents. I can rely on myself,” says Sreynuth.

Sreynuth’s hopes and determination are part of the everyday at Phare Ponleu Selpak, a Cambodian non-profit in Battambang that has made art one of its pillars of improving life for the underprivileged.

Through free programmes that span

from performance to visual arts, the association cultivates students like Sreynuth with the skills to express themselves creatively.

It also provides platforms for employing and showcasing their gifts through its social enterprises, among them Phare The Cambodian Circus. The circus performances in Siem Reap and around the world have attracted over 100,000 spectators to date, helping to sustain the work of the association.

Phare Circus elevates the struggles of ordinary Cambodians into the spotlight, interweaving them with history, folklore and modern influences — reflecting the lives of its students like Sreynuth through artistic expression.

“Art is the soul of a nation. Without art, there is no nation,” says Khuon Det, one of the nine founders of Phare, which began as an art therapy programme for children in the traumatic aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime.

“Art is identity, where we are, who we

are. Cambodia experienced civil wars and during the Khmer Rouge period, many artists were killed,” says Det, who spent his childhood at Site Two, a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border, and left only when he was 22, in 1994.

Through Phare, art becomes the means for healing a nation. “We have trained many young people to be artists, and they will in turn pass down their skills, and teach more people about art, so that art will flourish in Cambodia,” says Det.

Arts has also created opportunities for artists like Houn Sopheak to develop sustainable livelihoods. With Phare, he has travelled to cities in Asia and Europe to perform.

“I know that this is a career that doesn’t last forever. I have to try and earn as much as I can and acquire assets so that I can enjoy passive income in (the) future,” says Sopheak, who has a disability, through sign language.

Adds his sister Sophea, who is also a

performing artist at Phare: “In Cambodia, there are not enough jobs for persons with disabilities. For my brother, I can’t imagine him without Phare.”

ABOUT PHARE PONLEU SELPAK

Founded in 1994, Phare Ponleu Selpak, or “The Brightness of the Arts”, is a Cambodian non-profit that seeks to improve the lives of the underprivileged through art schools, education programmes, and social support. Its social enterprise arm includes Phare The Cambodian Circus, which helps sustain its operations and creates employment opportunities for Cambodian artists. Each year, it supports over 1,000 students through its programmes.

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

Kindling the Spark of Education to the Irulas

The lack of awareness to health and education was always a daunting issue that led to exploitation of various tribal groups across India. The literacy rate of Irula is 49.05 percent i.e., only 5 percent of the 60,000 Irulas living in Thiruvallur district are literate. It was always an uphill climb to achieve something as an Irula. For ages, they have been well known for their exemplary skills in catching snakes. But as time passed by, many of them moved out of this to attain jobs in cities. Over time, we have heard stories of how the irula community have slipped to bonded labour as most do not have education or land of their own to farm nor access to necessities or rights. Irula (people of darkness) inhabit mostly in the northern Tamil Nadu, and some parts of Kerala. Their origin is from ethnic groups of Southeast Asia and Australia. They speak a language closely similar to Tamil and Kannada.

While they are entitled to many benefits from the government, a mere lot is aware of their privileges. For V. Nagan, it was not just the duty towards his people, but also a childhood dream come true to bring about education to the tribal community he belonged to—the Irulas, an aboriginal scheduled tribe of Thiruvallur district in Tamil Nadu.

The birth of Foundation for Tribal Development is in a small village called Ponneri in the district of Thiruvallur. Nagan, along with others, crafted various programs that would not only provide education to the tribal children but also bring forth awareness on various social issues that the tribal community was unaware of.

Initiatives like the Children Parliament helps enhance a child's talent and helps a child improve his/her decision-making skills. Awareness programs on environmental education, food habits that causes diseases, abolishing child labour, child sexual abuse, child rights are discussed in different schools for these children and the elderly tribal folks as well. Medical camps are also conducted frequently.

“For bringing about societal changes, we need to bring awareness especially government policy related awareness” says Senthil (Co-founder of Foundation for Tribal Development)

Being unaware of privileges and benefits of the government takes a toll on them as most face difficulties in obtaining community certificates. “Earlier it used to take 2-3 years to get community certificates, now that the folks are aware of the procedures, they obtain it in a few months' time”, says Nagan, (Founder- Foundation for Tribal Development).

The children are also guided during their 10th and 12th grade on entrepreneurial opportunities that they can pursue through the government. Health awareness is also a major program where children and adults alike are made aware about basic medications during diseases. Also are children taught about hygiene practices and grooming well.



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It has also come to the attention that a lot of female children drop out during their high school as most of the times these children must travel through forest to reach school and after a period, parents are reluctant to send their girl children alone. However, the foundation puts in all effort to motivate parents to send their children to school and are made aware about the employment opportunities their children can achieve after their education and why primary

education is a mandate.

The inception of the foundation was the effort of V.Nagan, Srinivasan and Deepa in 2018. Although there had been considerable amount of work in the area, the official establishment of the foundation happened very much later. “CSIM guided us through different stages that we were unaware of until we got registered.” says Nagan.

The children have vast knowledge on nature and unique skills that is acquired

through generations. They hold close their dance forms and folksongs. Irulas follow a tradition rich in music and dance. There had been a period of oppression for the Irulas and despite the change in laws and ways, people still choose to exploit them. This is frequent as many of them migrate to Chennai outskirts looking for jobs in farms, construction fields, rice mills, brick kilns and other meagre occupations.

There is a large drop out during grade 10 and 12 as many choose to go help their parents in their respective occupations. The Foundation so far have succeeded in filling the gap in education and helping the tribal community understand their privileges. Nagan says, there is still more to be done. And he hopes, in a few years' time, everyone in his community will achieve great.

—Angela Anish

Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

At about 7-30 a.m. Sri Bhagavan was climbing up the hill after breakfast. Padananda went and prostrated, stood up and said, “All right, I have had darsan ... I shall return.”

Sri Bhagavan smilingly, “Whose darsan? Why don’t you say that you gave darsan to me?”

At about 9 a.m. a devotee from Poona (Mr. Parkhi) saluted Sri Bhagavan and read out his ashtaka praying to Sri Bhagavan for Grace. The piece finishes with a prayer for quick liberation (jhatiti mukti) and the devotee emphasised it.

M.: Mukti, i.e., liberation, is not to be gained hereafter. It is there for ever, here and now.

D.: I agree, but I do not experience it.

M.: The experience is here and now. One cannot deny one’s own self.

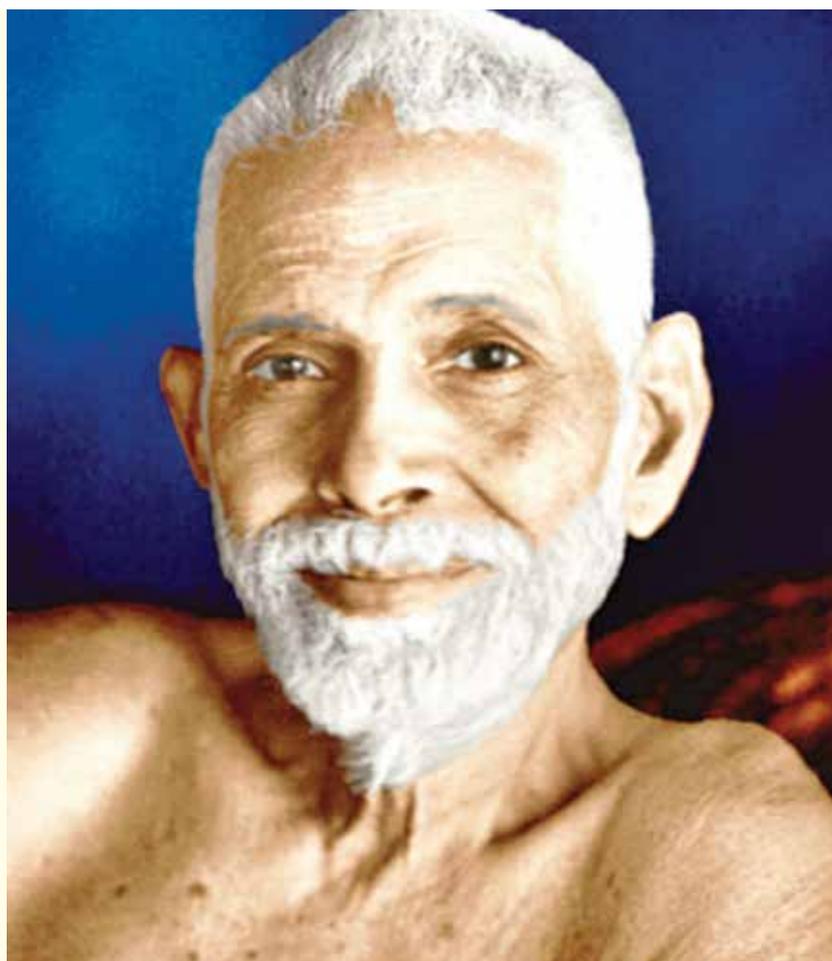
D.: That means existence and not happiness.

M.: Existence = happiness = Being. The word mukti (liberation) is so provoking. Why should one seek it? He believes that there is bondage and therefore seeks liberation. But the fact is that there is no bondage but only liberation. Why call it by a name and seek it?

D.: True, but we are ignorant.

M.: Only remove ignorance. That is all there is to be done.

—Source: *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*



Introspection



Nasruddin, carrying his lamb on his shoulders, was going around asking people if they had seen his lamb anywhere. A friend told him that he had seen it in the well at the northern corner of the village. Nasruddin rushed and peered into the well, and saw in the reflection that his lamb was on his shoulders.

Explicit Learning

- A. Most of the time we are lost in searching for what is very much within us.
- B. We always need someone to tell us what is obviously within us.
- C. Look within yourself and you will find most of the things you were looking for.

Introspective Learning

- A. What is the nature of ‘Introspection’?
- B. What holds me from looking within?
- C. How do I learn to look within?

Launch of PGDSIM at CSIM Chennai

The 19th batch of the one-year PGDSIM - Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative & Management - was launched on 20th June, 2019. 15 Prospective Social Entrepreneurs enrolled for the course. The Chief Guest for the inaugural event was Mrs. Archana Raghuram Executive Director of United Way Chennai.

PGDSIM is a good combination of rigorous theory with fieldwork practice. It includes dynamic workshops and skill development programmes on issues related to the development sector. Prospective Social Entrepreneurs (PSE) present their project proposal to a panel of experts who critically

assesses and guide the implementation process. As part of the orientation programme, PSE's are oriented on the course content, taken on field visits to various social enterprises and NGOs, and attend guest lectures delivered by practitioners. They also attend workshops on Group Dynamics and Street Theatre which enables them to function as an effective group during the course period.

Six core subjects and two optional subjects are handled during each semester. Both theoretical inputs and practical insights to all these subjects are provided by well-trained faculty who are academicians, social entrepreneurs, and subject experts. The classes for these optional subjects are held

on Tuesdays for five weeks, while the rest of the days are dedicated for the core subjects.

Contact classes are conducted on two days a week and concurrent field work is assigned on other days.

At the end of the course, each student is assigned to an NGO for one-month to serve as an intern and understand its day-to-day functioning.

Until now, 18 batches have been completed and in total 345 PSEs have received their diplomas. 71 of them have launched NGOs and 40 NGO heads and 66 NGO staff have been oriented on social entrepreneurship.

If you wish to know more about this programme, please visit www.csim.in or call 044-42805365



Grow Trees, Save the Environment



Kalaiselvi, received a grant at the Pitch Fest organised by CSIM in March 2019 to set up a nursery at Kavanoor Pudukerry, a village in Uthiramerur Taluk. She pursued the Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative & Management at CSIM Chennai in 2016-2017.

Her nursery is functional with 12,000 saplings of Guava, pomegranate, Amla, and teak and are for sale. She has coordinated with the Forest Department in Chengelpet and has been engaging in tree planting with the support of local farmers and SHGs.

Shri P.N.Subramanian, Managing Trustee of MSDS, visited the nursery on 29th June and coordinated planting of 500 tree saplings in the village.

If interested in tree planting, you may get in touch with Ms. Kalaiselvi at +91-9944360942.



“Profit within reasonable limits should be considered as a desirable condition for economic growth.”

Shri T.S. Krishnamurthy tells Marie Banu how the quality of democracy can be improved in our country.

Shri T.S. Krishnamurthy started his career as an Indian Revenue Service officer. He served the government at various levels including Secretary, Department of Company Affairs. He was the first Indian Revenue Service officer to become a Secretary to the Government of India as well as the Chief Election Commissioner of India.

Krishnamurthy won gold medals in History, Economics and Political Science at Mysore University. He also completed a Masters in Fiscal Studies from the University of Bath, U.K.

Post his retirement, he is a board member of various companies and NGOs, most notably, he was the Chairman of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chennai Kendra. He is the author of the book “Miracles of Democracy”, published in August 2008.

In an exclusive interview, Shri TS Krishnamurthy shares with Marie Banu how the quality of democracy can be improved in our country.

How can the quality of democracy be improved in our country?

Unfortunately, Democracy is a misused term all over the world. Many claim themselves to be democracies, but they are run by leaders in an autocratic style. As far as India is concerned, fortunately, there are good as well as bad points as well.

I have made some suggestions in my book *The Miracle of Democracy*. Firstly, we need to change the present electoral system as it is aiding corrupt politicians. This is because of the First Past The Post system, which means that if you have even one vote more than the others, you get elected.

My first suggestion is to change the first past poll system to representation system where minimum 33 and one third percent of the votes polled to be a precondition for success in the election. For example, if you have a constituency of two lakh voters and if ten people contest we need to split the votes proportionately – i.e. 20,000 to each of the contestants. The person with 20,001 votes or more will represent the two lakh voters. The second is about people with criminal records to be barred from contesting elections.

When I was the Election Commissioner, I had put forth a set of 22 recommendations. One of them was: ‘If a person gets a charge sheet from the court of offences punishable with imprisonment for five years or more, such persons should be deemed to be disqualified from contesting the elections’. This unfortunately, was not accepted as all the political parties seemed to be happy with the status quo.

Unless some dynamic political party takes a lead and brings about a consensus, it is unlikely to happen.

The third is to have a separate law to regulate the functioning of the political parties, like many other countries. As there is a law governing Companies, Partnerships and Trusts, we should also have one for political parties who have access to public funds. This law would spell out who can be members, how to deal with disputes, how to maintain accounts - whether the funds should be received in cash or not, and how to properly account for the donations received. Similarly, a regulation of party manifestos at the time of election is necessary as the politicians are promising freebies to a section of the voters without even indicating how they will find the money. In fact, we have told the Supreme Court that the political parties can promise to the voters public good i.e. a stadium or a road or a dam - which cannot be pin-pointed to a particular section of people. But, the politicians today are promising to provide various articles like laptop, grinders, television, etc. which are actually bribes and is different from public goods.

The fourth is about funding the political parties for purpose of elections. Unfortunately, the measure that the government brought in recently – the electoral bonds – is a regressive measure or a measure that is not in tune with transparency in election funding. I have also suggested a National Election Fund to which individuals and corporates can make a contribution (may be a limit can be set), and avail 100 percent tax exemption. In this proposed scheme, no individual or corporate should be allowed to give any donation to any political party and no political party will be allowed to spend any money for individual candidates except from the National Election Fund.

If some of these changes are brought about, the quality of democracy can be improved in this country.

Your experience as Chief Election Commissioner of India?

There is an impression that Election Commission has got all the powers to conduct free and fair elections, but it is not completely true. Although the Constitution gives authority to the Election Commission for conducting free and fair election, there are a number of situations where Election Commission is ineffective. With the existing powers, Election Commission has the authority only to cancel or postpone an election.

We did not have any problems in

conducting elections in Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Orissa and faced challenges in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Karnataka. When compared to other states, Kerala is better as there is no violence or hatred. It is necessary that the model code of conduct which we are supposed to implement gets some teeth.

In Anantapur, recently, a party member broke a voting machine in the polling booth. All that the Election Commission could do in such circumstances is to file a FIR with the police. But, the case becomes meaningless if the person, after the election, is from a ruling party as the lower level courts will quash the complaint.

The Election Commission should have some powers to disqualify or impose monetary penalties in case of serious violations, which could be challenged in the court of law. There were many instances where we had to be tough. For example, in Chapra constituency in Bihar, where Laloo Prasad was contesting we had countermanded the poll. In Haryana, the wife of the Director General of Police was contesting the elections. We asked the Chief Minister to transfer the DGP because he was directly dealing with the law and order situation. As he refused, we sent a message through the Chief Secretary that we would indefinitely postpone the election. In Kashmir, we had the terrorist problem. In order to bring credibility in the elections, we brought Urdu speaking teachers from UP and Punjab to 50 percent polling stations in Kashmir, and likewise in West Bengal. Of course, there were some criticisms. But, we went ahead with our plans and got good results.

How do you find the present electoral system in our country?

I retired in 2005, and things have changed considerably since then. On the whole, conducting an election has become very difficult now. There are more political parties, more politicians and less effectiveness of the State police. Therefore, there is a

demand for central paramilitary forces. These are some of the unfortunate developments. But, if we can bring about some of these electoral reforms quickly, many of the problems could be solved substantially.

There is also a criticism on the Election Commission appointments that they are biased or in favour of a political party, depending on who has appointed them. We have already suggested that the Election Commission appointments should be by a collegium which would include the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice of India or his nominee, and Speaker of the House of representatives or leader of the opposition.

Your thoughts on the present budget?

I was looking for some major economic thrust activities although they are trying to create conditions for the benefit of economic growth. For example, a person who wants to come and invest in India faces a lot of problems in terms of judicial delays, frequent changes in the laws (which at times makes them to pack up and go), and the interference of the government. Once you have given an approval, you should give certain conditions which they must comply with. You can't be changing or interfering with what has been approved on.

Profits should not be viewed as a dirty word. Profit within reasonable limits should be considered as a desirable condition for economic growth. You must give incentives for manufacturing industries that can provide employment. You can also provide incentives for honest tax payers. Capital markets needs to be revived with incentives for ploughing back the profits from sale of shares in the capital market itself.

I would say that the present budget is an interesting document, but I do not find an extraordinary push to engineer growth. The attitude of the people, particularly the regulators, for fear of vigilance or audit action take an impractical stand. Many of them are bureaucrats with no commercial or business exposure.

If they can bring a mix of bureaucrats and people with business experience – business graduates with 10 plus years of experience – and be inducted into regulatory organisations, then there will be confidence for people to do business in India. If there are decisions taken in good faith, you cannot question them.

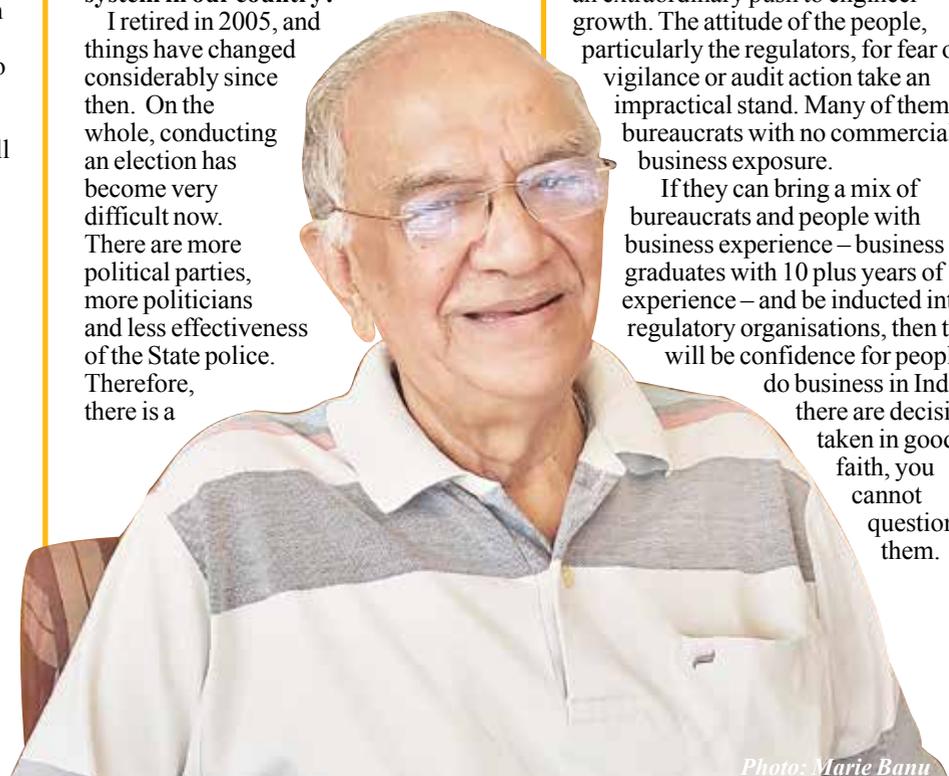


Photo: Marie Banu