

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 8 | Issue 6 | June 2020 | 12 Pages | For Free Circulation Only | www.msdsrust.org



PUBLISHED BY: P.N.SUBRAMANIAN
on behalf of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani,
391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar, Alapakkam,
Chennai - 600 116 and printed by him at
Express Press, Express Gardens, No.29,
Second Main Road, Ambattur Industrial Estate,
Chennai - 600 058. Phone: 044-42805365
EDITOR: MARIE BANU

6 COVER STORY BRIDGING THE GAP About AROH Foundation and their programmes

Alumni Talk



3

Abilities and Rights

About Chezhan (Founder of We Can Social Trust in Thiruvannamalai district) and his efforts to mainstream the differently abled

Profile

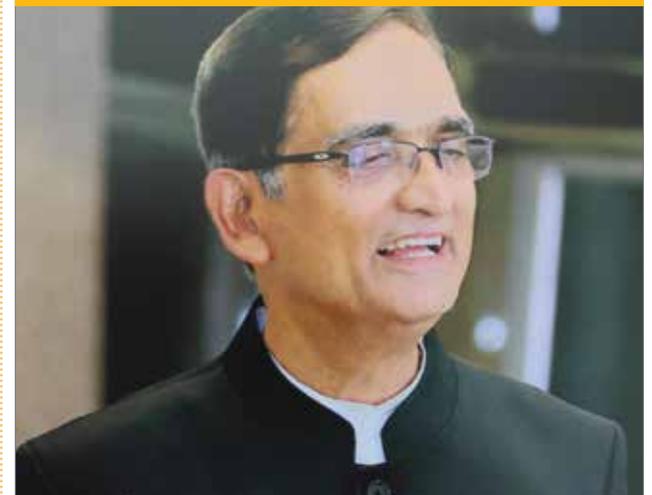


9

Being Current and Culturally Relevant

Aram Porul's efforts to partner with NGOs, corporates and individuals who want to create social impact

Chit Chat



12

"We need growth, but not at the cost of development."

An exclusive interview with Dr. Balaji Srinivasagopalan IFS

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Father's Day is celebrated across the world with the objective of realising and honouring the contribution of fathers in the society. It is a day which celebrates the fatherhood, paternal bonds and the efforts of male parents towards their family and society. The day is meant to recall, recognise and remember the endless efforts, initiatives and contributions of all the fathers around us. It is an occasion to honour all the fatherly figures like Grandfathers, uncles or even big brothers.

There are good fathers and bad ones. Most are somewhere in between, heroic at times, at least somewhat flawed at others. By any measure, fathers have the ability to serve as important role models for sons and daughters and to make a lasting impact on the lives of their children. They become central to our lives and become part of our definition of who we are.

The relationship between father and a child affects healthy development on a variety of levels, from language acquisition and cognition to physical and emotional development. Scientific studies have shown that children who have fathers who care for, nurture and play with them, have higher IQs and stronger language and cognitive skills.

Happy Father's Day to the dads who serve as strong role models who take the time to invest in their kids. Kudos to all the fathers who understand the importance of 'paying it forward' and spending quality time with children. Leo Buscaglia, Author and Motivational Speaker observed, "If there is any immortality to be had among us human beings, it is certainly only in the love that we leave behind."

If you're a father, remember this. How you respond to your child, how you nurture or demean, how you praise or criticize, how you love or withhold, all of these things have a lifetime impact on your child.

If you're a child, remember the power your father has on your life. Embrace the positive lessons rather than obsessing on the negative ones.

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

MOVING FORWARD, STILL CONNECTED



When we want to contribute our ideas, our talent, to the world, moving forward is pivotal. However, this energy can be “pushy” if it’s just about moving forward. The paradox is in moving forward yet staying connected to people and possibilities in the present.

Often, when we want to create something, there are thoughts, a vision, a game plan, everything that will get us from point A to Point B. In this movement we also need others to participate, and they may have their own priorities that join up with our goals and sometimes don't. Here, we can either slow down as we want to “take people along” compromising our moving forward or move forward, and leave people behind. What do

we need to do to transcend the either or dilemma?

Moving ahead needs the energy of a “warrior” and staying connected needs the energy of a “lover”. Embracing the warrior and the lover at the same time can “cause” a transformation within us. These two fundamental forces can either clash or be combined for a wonderful union. The way to do this is to deliberately engage in activities that celebrate connectedness, for example: working with the soil in the garden, nurturing plants; and those that celebrate focus and assertion by engaging in a sport to welcome the purposeful warrior energy. Both these experiences generated on a regular basis will help in welcoming a balance!

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.

ABILITIES AND RIGHTS

Judiciary and democracy are two sides of the same coin. One without the other is impossible and they both share a unique bond as custodians of a country's constitution, keeping alive the faith in the promise of a just, welfare society. In India, there are many cases where fundamental rights and statutory rights have been reinstated with the help of judiciary. Every such case involves skilful evidence building and an active citizenry that voices its concerns and fears. With judicial instruments, citizens have relentlessly attempted to claim their rights. Mr. S.Chezhan's story (Founder of We Can Social Trust in Thiruvannamalai district) can tell us the impact of such efforts and the long term benefits it can bestow on the social status of a community that has been longing for opportunities to prove their capabilities.

Coming from Kadaladi village in Thiruvannamalai district, Chezhan himself is a victim of lack of awareness in rural areas. "I lost my vision due to Glaucoma at the age of 15. Lack of awareness did not allow early diagnosis and thereafter I had to study in a blind school," he says. With a Master's degree, M Phil and B Ed in History, his interest in competitive exams grew day by day. As the three percent reservation for differently abled candidates in Civil Services were not being properly implemented, he could not succeed. "A decade ago, if you had asked about the qualification of any differently abled person, lottery ticket seller, you would have learnt the loss of social capital that the non-implementation of this reservation has led to," laments Chezhan.

With a ban on such vocations which needed no or minimum investment, livelihoods of differently abled persons were taken away without the promise of alternatives. In such a premise, he believes, claiming statutory rights was the most certain way to enable opportunities for the differently abled. Armed with judicial instruments like the Right to Information Act, Chezhan began his journey of public interest litigations, raising concerns in almost every realm where promised opportunities were never provided. His first PIL in 2007 questioned the extent of implementation of reservation for differently abled in the group one cadre of Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC) examination. "This case is still going on. The judgement favoured appointments in the Group Four cadre in 2012 and led to the appointment of 6000 differently abled candidates. I won the case in High Court to claim reservations in Group One cadre, but the Government of Tamil Nadu has appealed for review by the Supreme Court," explains Chezhan, hopeful of a favourable judgement. "When this is the only option I have, I better be prepared with all my homework and stay hopeful," he smiles.



At CSIM, the sense of common good was in the air and the fact that I am a part of all the collective effort made me feel humble and significant

Chezhan founded 'We Can Social Trust' in 2006 to fight for the rights of the differently abled and enable livelihood opportunities in formal and informal settings. Skill training programmes like tailoring, weaving, computer education, cycle repair and others have helped him constantly engage with talent and demand, strengthening his resolve to help the differently abled live a dignified life.

"We have trained more than 2000 rural women in tailoring and weaving alone. Their self-employment ventures are an incredible source of motivation. Their transition from workers in garment factories to being self-employed, from handlooms to power looms, have time and again reinforced my faith in building our country's social capital. Only this can earn them the representation in all formal forums," says Chezhan.

His interest in social work and association with Loyola College got him introduced to CSIM and Chezhan feels that it happened at just the right time for him. Apart from learning the modalities in operating a Trust, it is the new contacts and interaction with people from different walks of life that helped him visualise the potential of building social capital from the bottom of the pyramid. "What we do is important to us. At CSIM I saw why my efforts and success where important for others too. The sense of common good was in the air

and the fact that I am a part of all the collective effort made me feel humble and significant," says Chezhan, who also won the Sadguru Gnanananda National Fellowship Awards offered by Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani.

Working as a teacher, Chezhan's homework is now focussed on gathering information about implementation of reservations for differently abled in LIC and banking sectors. Thereafter a PIL to ensure its implementation is definitely on the cards. "Institutional help like bank loans are still a distant dream for the differently abled. Therefore the opportunities promised through reservations are of tremendous importance to my community. If this was implemented in full spirit, all differently abled persons who are educated will definitely be employed. Only this can motivate others to complete their studies without giving up in despair," he remarks.

Shanmuga Priya . T

CHANGING HUES: Awaken the Queen within

It's 11:30am, and little Padma is fast asleep in the cradle, 3 months now. Seetha is shelling peas for evening dinner, and Paati (grandmother), Seetha's mom-in-law, is relaxing looking out into the backyard garden from the kitchen door.

"Amma, it has been 3 months now at home. I have one more month of maternity leave left, and I need to get back to work on the 1st of March."

"Seetha, you are not getting back to work. I thought you would have seen how much the child needs you now. I need you in the house. You have to resign."

Shell shocked and unable to find her voice Seetha mumbled, "But Amma, how do we manage the household expenses? What he earns is not enough to run the family. We also have a child now, that too a girl child! And, I have the potential to grow and get promoted at work, Amma."

"Oh, home can be managed. I will tell my other sons to give us some money every month. They earn well and can manage our house expenses too."

This felt like a shot below the belt for Seetha's self-esteem and self-respect. She meekly protested, "No, Amma. When I have a well-paying government job, and I have earned much respect and appreciation for my work, I don't want to resign. There is so much I can do and also support Padma's education and future. I don't want to be dependent on anyone."

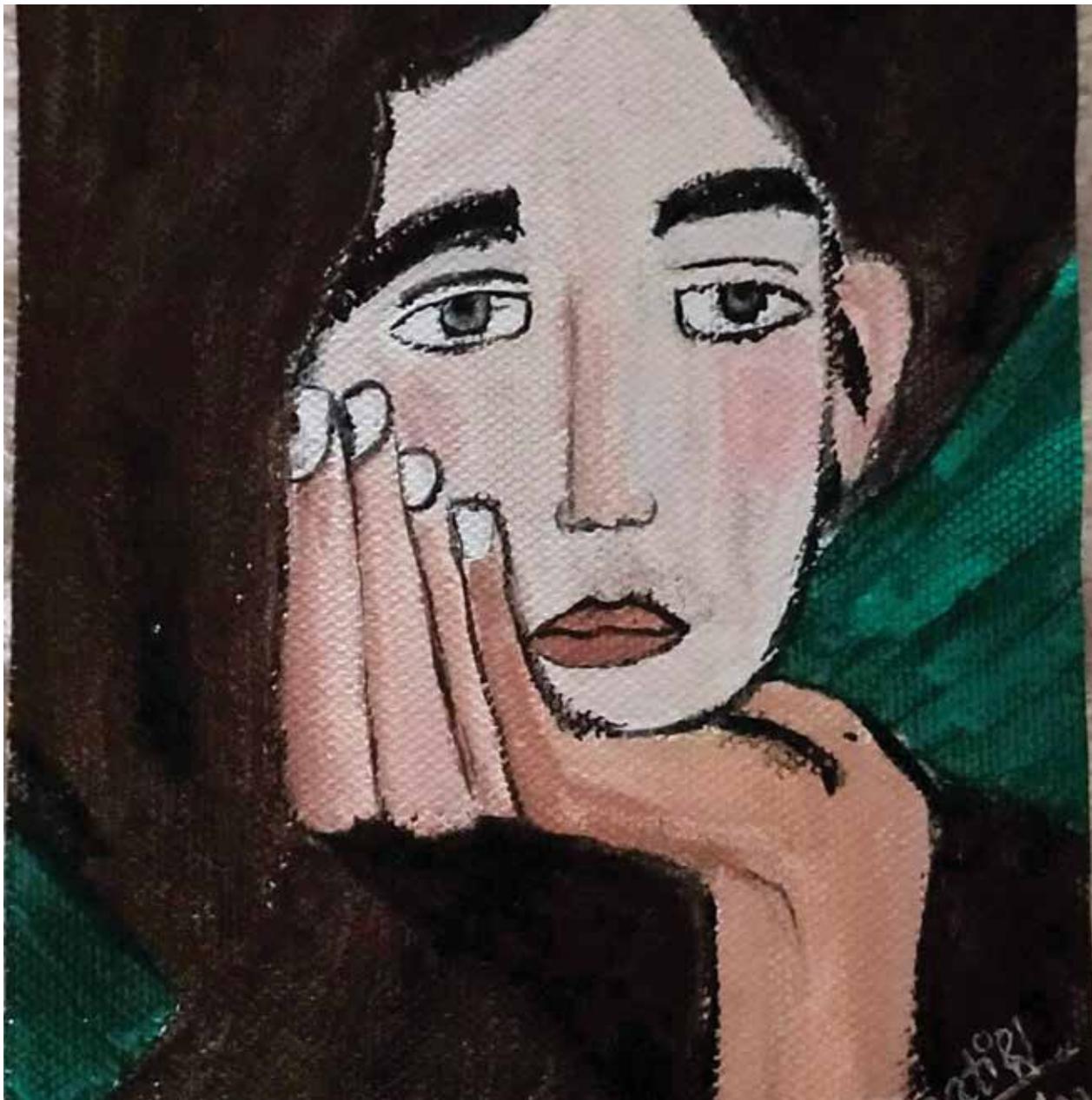
"Look Seetha, no daughter-in-law of this family go for work. You were working when you got married; hence I did not object. Now that the child is at home, you can take care of the household chores and the child. I am suggesting this in the good interest of the family and as an elder. You are an intelligent lady and understand the domestic needs as well. As a lady, our primary duty is towards our family."

Seetha was shocked, confused, and worried. When she discussed his conversation with her husband during bedtime at night in a low voice in their bedroom, he said, "I will not say anything different. Whatever my family says, that would be the final word. You take care of the house." He turned around, and his snore filled the room.

The following week, Seetha was bombarded with various views from her mother and siblings. Seetha's mother anxiously asked, "How can you leave your government job? If you do so, who will support me and this large household? I am yet to get your sisters' married. But wait, please don't get upset with my rant. You should be careful in your in-laws house. I cannot afford anything happening to your married life. Just go by what they say."

That evening Nagu and Indira, Seetha's best friends, visited her. They took her out into the garden and enquired when Seetha was planning to get back to work. When they heard Seetha was contemplating resigning her job, Nagu was furious. She screamed, "What's wrong with you? How will you manage your monthly household expenses? Will you wait every month for someone to give you money? Will you stand begging for more when it comes to Padma's studies? Why don't you think about the future? How will you satisfy your inner soul wanting to achieve bigger things in life, and this constantly challenged thinking brain? Are you crazy? You have to be strong in this matter as a woman, or you will be overruled. You are an educated lady and cannot give up easily. Reason with them. Shall I speak to your husband? You know I can be strong and forceful." Seetha had a tough time convincing Nagu and Indira that she will work on it and come back with positive outcomes.

The sleepless nights filled with fear and anxiety of the future began to take over Seetha's time at home. Her mind was filled with many questions. Am I doing right by staying home? Will I be seen as a selfish person to leave my child back home and go for work? What if my family gets upset with my decision? How will I buy



groceries for Amma every month if I don't work? I would feel like a beggar when I ask for money for my personal expenditure from others. What if I am questioned for every penny I spend? How will my child grow up with quality education? What use is my education if this will be the end result? I feel guilty of wasting a seat in college. My entire department appreciates me for my intelligence. The senior officer was already teasing me that I will resign soon after childbirth. What a shame! How shall I handle this situation?

Reena jumped and intervened, "Aunty, I am amazed how even today we have these talks if women should pursue a career after having children. I have heard from my aunts in Mumbai and Chennai too. They feel guilty if they go for work and even if they don't. I see that things have changed in a different direction now. They want to get married only if the girl is working and is also a great cook and host!"

Padma very slowly spread her thoughts and began to elaborate, "Sweetie, this is a common story in the 1960-70s in most homes. I am sharing this with you because we are used to extreme situations in case studies. Issues that are in the middle, everyday stories do not get focus. It is not seen as something that is affecting the society. Actually, those ignored perspectives, beliefs, norms seep into the system, and over some time, become the do's and don'ts practices, and culture of the society. Reena, it has taken so many women to exercise their choices, get

out of their homes, and work in organizations to influence the society that we live in today. The current generation who are not apologetic, and say it's their right to make the choice of working or being a provider for their home, still struggle to go down that road."

Reena jumped to add, "and even if they do make a choice, they feel guilty, questioning themselves if they are a good wife, mom, daughter, daughter-in-law..." hahaha, both laughed. Padma knew how harshly real that was!

"Aunty, now tell the rest of the story. What happened to Seetha, did she go back to work?" Reena urged.

Smiling, enjoying the enthusiasm and curiosity of Reena, Padma continued, "Well, the following week, the eldest brother of her husband visited them. He was the General Manager and Head - Operations of a large Government Corporation in another city. He was acclaimed for his sense of justice, ethical decisions, and was a people's person. Seetha, after serving him dinner and after Paati had retired to bed, hesitatingly requested for help to resolve this issue. He encouraged her to speak and listened to her patiently. She put forth the need to be self-reliant, independent, and earn to bring up her daughter without having to wait for others' to help. She was sensitive not to complain and put forth her case from justice, relevance, and contextual need. He did not say if he agreed to her or not but promised to resolve before he left home the next day.

The following day he engaged Seetha, her husband,



and Paati in a conversation supporting Seetha subtly. Seetha found her voice and promised to the family that she will ensure that not a single task in the house is ignored; if she is allowed to work. She also agreed to pay an old lady who worked for them an augmented salary to stay till 5pm every day and take care of the baby.

Next 25 years, Seetha got up every day at 5am and went to bed at 11pm. She ensured all tasks of the home were managed, including kitchen, purchases, cleaning, taking care of guests, festivals, and functions were all celebrated in the way the family wanted. She completed her tenure in the government and retired with high appreciation and accolades. The sacrifice she did was to avoid transfers, promotions, and career growth to balance both family and office.

I have seen her planning, managing tasks till she breathed her last." With a pain in her heart, Padma continued, "people appreciated Seetha for multitasking and being efficient, but they watched for lapses at home, including my academic achievements and behavior. I don't know if she just managed life with the best performance everywhere. I have never seen her asking to spend time for herself, or on any other interests, she had. She wanted a life of dignity and self-respect. I know how she guarded her family and money, including the pension she got."

Reena added, "Aunty, I wonder why choice-making should be a struggle for women. Right from childhood, many beliefs are gender-based, and I see that compromises are expected from women concerning their profession. My own friend, who was wanting to do her civil services exam, left her dream when she got married as she had to manage her home. There are many ways parents, relatives, and neighbors dissuade dreams putting forth their expectations as being right."

"Reena, my concern is not what they choose. If it is a compromise, I have seen them searching for their identity in their middle age or lending themselves to be disappointed, cynical, and dissatisfied when they turn the other side of the century. There is a void that grows, and they begin searching outside to fill something deeper

inside. This is unhealthy for them as well as for society. It is time we as women decided that we need a guilt-free, meaningful, purpose-driven life and believe we have all the capability to create one. This belief has to begin right from childhood."

"Oops, Aunty, it's already dinner time, and I have to go! You have triggered the need in me to first gain clarity on what I want in life. Thank you very much," Reena bounced out of the door to get home.



*Dr. Kalpana Sampath
Illustration by Prathiksha, 13 years.*

Conditioning



A man once read in an ancient book about a black stone on the shores of the Black Sea, which could on contact, turn any metal into gold. The stone would be warm to the touch. So he went to the Black Sea, and found there a heap of black stones. He was convinced one of these would be the miracle stone.

He picked up a stone, felt it on his cheek, found it cold, and flung it into the sea. The second stone too was cold and followed the first one into the sea. He did this from morning to evening, every day for weeks, months and then years. Three years passed. One day he put a stone to his cheek, threw it into the sea and then realised that was the stone he was looking for!

 Explicit Learning

- We soon get into habits.
- Our conditioning sometimes prevents us from seeing reality.
- In the process of conditioning, we lose the charm of life.

 Introspective Learning

- What is the nature of 'Conditioning'?
- What prevents me from seeing each experience as independent?
- How do I break the patterns I have got into?

BRIDGING THE GAP



Founded in 2001 by Neelam Gupta, AROH Foundation has presence in 18 states and has impacted nearly five lakh lives until date. Its mission is simple: a world where people live in dignity, security and equal opportunities for all. How does it go about achieving this? By providing assistance to the underprivileged, weak and poor, and by exhorting communities in rural and semi-rural areas to develop life skills, economic skills and socio-cultural skills and thereby turning self-reliant. So, in a nutshell, AROH seeks out an equitable society where all humans coexist with dignity.

The NGO lists out core values ranging from building lasting relationships, upholding ethical standards and nurturing a culture of learning. It values opportunity and responsibility towards making a difference. "We believe that education is the most powerful driver of development and is one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, peace and economic stability," says Neelam. "The gender discrimination in the less privileged sections of the society in the education sector is not hidden behind any curtain. Mostly, girls of such

families neither get a platform in gaining knowledge and developing life skills nor do they have access to resources."

AROH has thus worked on improving the three most important pillars of education — access, retention and quality in Government schools in the States of Delhi, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Meghalaya and Uttar Pradesh — covering more than one lakh children in schools. To address the gender gap and educate children of ragpickers and rickshaw-pullers, it initiated NFE (Non-Formal Education) in 2008, with the support of a PSU. "The Foundation started with non-formal education of 100 children residing in slums near the Foundation's head office in NOIDA," recalls Neelam, "Mobilising these children was quite challenging as the parents were nomadic and did not have proof of citizenship. They migrated from rural areas in search of opportunities and saw their children as a source of income and denied them education."

Eventually, AROH convinced them and admitted 100 children from the streets to school. "Soon we opened another 10 NFE centres with strength of 500 children and identified Educators, who belong from the

same community," says Neelam. Soon enough, the model expanded to 250 NFE centres with 50,000 children in five years, across five districts in Delhi-NCR.

AROH's intervention RISE has drastically brought down numbers of school dropouts. "With capacity-building workshops and training, teachers were to impart syllabus in an easy and interactive manner, so that academically weaker children could be on par with their counterparts in regular schools," says Neelam. Over 3,000 children were benefited by this.

Soon enough, the Foundation discovered that the increased level of dropouts mainly comprising girls in upper-primary classes was due dilapidated classrooms and poor infrastructure, with no sanitation and water facilities. "We worked closely with the government to improve the infrastructural needs of government schools, secured CSR grants and were able to renovate basic amenities," says Neelam, "This increased attendance and reduced the dropout rate."

In two years, 200 schools benefited from increased infrastructural activity, along the lines of repair and renovation, smart classrooms, installation of swings

and slides, sports material, setting up of libraries, water and sanitation facilities.

"Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and lack of livelihood opportunities remain some of the biggest challenges in the way of education for all. Parents who are less privileged and are not able to meet their ends, always see their children as an earning hand and engage them in economic activities," says Neelam. "The girl child is at a greater disadvantage as they remain out-of-school to do household chores or to take care of younger siblings while parents go out to work. The girls often accompany their mothers when they go to work as domestic help or at construction sites."

To tackle some of these problems, AROH decided to look at the aspect of access to schools. "While primary schools are generally available in every village, there is only one middle school every five kilometres, and one secondary school every 10 kilometres," says Neelam, "This impairs access since children are not able to travel these distances." Poor infrastructure and lack of toilets has only worsened the problem.

Education inequality is another problem area. "According to a survey report by ASER, more than 50 percent of Class Five students attending rural schools are not capable of reading a second-standard textbook, and cannot solve basic math questions," she points out. It's simple: performances of rural children are lower than that of those in city schools, thanks to unequal distribution of resources, infrastructure, transportation, funding, teachers and libraries. Not only has AROH tried to bridge this gap but has also supported the mothers of school-going children with skilling in order to ensure economic stability.

"Most of our projects have been hailed as role models by associated and concerned stakeholders owing to their design, reliability, scalability and sustainability," says Neelam. Projects like Padho aur Badho and RISE (Remedial Innovation in School Education) have carved a niche for themselves in terms of success. "Some of our programmes have been running for the past 12 years, having improved the learning outcomes of more than 50,000 children so far," she adds.

The Holistic Rural Development Program (HRDP) is another project that has worked well for AROH. "Driven by the development needs at the village level, we have been strengthening the grassroots through integrated and holistic development in village communities," says Neelam. "This project transformed the lives of over two lakh families in Chhattisgarh, Meghalaya and Uttar Pradesh." In all, 52 villages received a facelift with interventions in education, skill development, women empowerment, environment, health and sanitation, renewable energy, agricultural and non-agriculture-based skilling, rural enterprises and strengthening of village level institutions.

"In line with our vision, our goal is to empower vulnerable and rural communities through education and skill development and to cover a population of 20 lakh underprivileged persons by the year 2025," says Neelam. In keeping with this plan, social transformation of the poor and marginalized is AROH's mission. "With an unprecedented calamity, like COVID-19 hitting us, our priority now is to help poor and marginalised communities cope up with this daunting challenge," says Neelam, "The crisis is threatening education, livelihoods and general health and well-being of people. AROH Foundation is standing as one of the frontline agencies to provide help and relief to communities, especially those who are covered under our projects."

CSIM'S COVID WARRIORS



Mr. Sagadevan
Founder Brightway India Charitable Trust,
Maduranthagam, Chengalpattu District.

- Distributed 1,000 food packets for lunch and dinner, for seven days to 7000 people in seven villages.
- Distributed grocery items to 400 agricultural families in 18 villages, in four blocks of Chengalpattu district.



Mr. Morarji Desai
Founder of Turning Point Educational Trust, Chennai

- Distributed grocery kits, worth Rs. 750 to 2,520 families in Teynampet, Kannagi Nagar and Perumbakkam areas. The beneficiaries are daily wagers, visually impaired who sell things in Electric Trains and physically disabled persons.
- Distributed 1000 face masks to the community members.



Ms. Jeeva. R, Founder of Transgender Rights Association, Kolathur, Chennai

- Distributed grocery kits, worth Rs. 1,300, to 750 Transgender families and 50 sanitary worker families, in North Chennai areas of Villivakkam, Perambur, Ayanavaram, Kolathur, Otteri, Tondiarpet, Royapuram and Tsunami Nagar.



Mr P. Muthu
Founder, Sky Foundation,
Madurantakam Taluk, Tamilnadu.

- Provided 1,200 food packets (Lunch and Dinner), for 10 days to the migrant workers, Tribals and Dalits living in the surrounding 5 villages - Pazhabathur, Pukathurai, Kollampakkam, Mampattu, and Pazhayalur.
- Distributed face masks and grocery kit worth Rs. 1,000, to 82 families, in and around Samathuvapuram Colony, Puthupattu and Karunguzhi Panchayat.
- Distributed relief kit to 25 families of sanitary workers in Madurantakam.



Ms Sornalatha, Founder of Adivasi Social Service Educational Trust, Vandalur Taluk, Chengalpattu

- Collected data of Irula tribes families and helped them receive the relief fund of Rs. 1,000 from the Tribal welfare board of Tamilnadu government.
- Distributed 12,970 kgs of rice to 1337 families in the villages of Nemmeli, Ninaikattur, Pandur, Mettupalaiyam, Kalvoy, Kattankuppam and Eakkathur.
- Distributed grocery kit to 322 families in 12 villages in and around Vandalur Taluk, Chengalpattu District.
- The total cost of the relief material distributed was Rs. 9,74,300, and the beneficiaries were Irula tribes, differently-abled and other disadvantaged people of the locality.



Mr. Manimaran
Founder, Thilakavathi Foundation, Thiruvallur District.

- Provided healthy Kanji made of millets (porridge) everyday for two months to 200 people in Ammayarkuppam village, Thiruvallur district, near Thiruthani.
- Distributed food packets
- Distributed grocery kit, Worth Rs. 750 to 100 families in that locality



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. www.csim.in

Contact Persons:

Ms. Marie Banu
Director, Chennai
@ 9884700029

Mr. Ramesh Balasundaram
Director, Bangalore
@ 9845211311

Mr. K L Srivastava
Director, Hyderabad
@ 91-9912656112

Dr. Madhuri. R
Head, Coimbatore,
@ 91-9840222559

Dr. Agyeya Tripathi
Head - North & NE India
@ 91-8058662444

Mr. Sandeep Mehto,
Head - Hosangabad,
@ 91-96696 77054

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

For further information, please contact: Ms. Latha Suresh
Director, SAN, India
@ 92822 05123.
www.san-india.org

BEING CURRENT AND CULTURALLY RELEVANT



In the past decade there has been a huge NGO sector boom in India. According to some estimates, there are over 69,000 NGOs in operation in the state of Tamil Nadu alone. The vast majority of these are run locally, under tight budgetary and human resource constraints. These are usually founded by people who, while passionate about their chosen causes, do not necessarily come with prior experience in running an organization.

Keeping an ear to the floor

Often, the terms Change Management, People Development, Impact Assessment, Fundraising, Digital Media Presence, etc. can sound too corporate-like and more importantly, as though it takes time away from the simple “problem-identification” and “problem-solving” binary that organizations have undertaken to do. Typically, a smaller, more locally entrenched organization simply does not prioritize these internal management items over its need to “serve”. As a result, there is an enormous disparity in funding and other resource allocations, with the “cream of the crop” NGOs getting the most, leaving the smaller ones scrambling for basic sustenance.

Realizing that organizational development comes at a steep cost to many of these well-meaning organizations, HR leader Prasanna and Communications expert Srividhya founded Aram Porul. A former head of HR in a leading corporate who also headed its CSR wing, Prasanna combines his corporate acumen along with his firm belief in Gandhian principles into his work at Aram Porul. Srividhya on the other hand, comes with rich experience in branding, PR, advertising and communication, having also been involved in volunteering with various organisations. The couple worked alongside one another at a renowned NGO networking federation in Tamil Nadu prior to starting off on their own.

Organizational Development as a priority

The name “Aram Porul” comes from an ancient Tamil moniker for “virtue and wealth”, two of the foundational principles for living a wholesome life. “Organizations spend very less time on organizational development,” says Prasanna. “They need the support of professionals who can offer a combination of corporate expertise, development sector understanding, affordable pricing and geographical understanding. Most of the NGO-consulting firms are based out of Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore. There is a gap in their understanding of Tamil Nadu’s geography, language, cultural and political conditions. The unique challenges and aspirations of this society need to be understood from its own lens,” he says. It is this lacuna that Aram Porul is trying to fill.

Through their services, namely “Meiporul”- Consulting Services, “Esaivu”- Human Resource Development, “Pugazh”- Marketing and Branding Communication, “Ookam”- Training Programs, “Arivu”- Research and “Seyal”- Program Implementation, Aram Porul helps organizations find the missing components to successfully fulfilling their mission. Currently their clientele comprises of a mix of NGOs, Social Enterprises, CSR wings of Corporate firms and the Government agencies.

Says Prasanna, “We have a flexible business model. We work with organisations sometimes on a project basis, ranging from helping them with one time funding proposal or one event, or with one fiscal-period’s accounting work. We also have long-term, retainer relationships with some other clients. With the latter, we provide end-to-end services, helping them develop entire programs and strategies.”

Some of the more memorable projects they have undertaken include the

launching of an online fundraising platform for the participants of the fundraising mega-event “Battle of the Buffet”, held annually in Chennai by Chennai Mission and its event partners. “As you can imagine, NGOs are used to cash and cheque donations and were reluctant to get onboard with this idea of going fully online to receive donations. It took a lot of convincing and help with technology to persuade them. With three months of training for the Battle of the Buffet, the NGOs were finally able to see the fruits of their labour. They were now truly global in terms of fundraising capacity. There is now more transparency and credibility to their work. It is nice to



have been able to play a small part in that,” says a visibly satisfied Prasanna.

When asked what is the most gratifying aspect of his work, he says, “Any change big or small, that we are able to bring for our clients, can be rewarding.” Aram Porul engages in a variety of Personal Effectiveness training programs and Women Empowerment initiatives. One of their signature programs is a four-day annual Women’s Leadership Retreat for women leaders in the NGO sector. A group of 12-15 women leaders of NGOs are invited to this retreat, independent of their families, to get a brief respite from all their routine responsibilities and to

simply rejuvenate themselves. Prasanna reckons that the retreat is a way for these leaders to disengage from routine roles of “caregiver”, both for family and society. During these four days, the focus is on themselves alone. “We conduct exercises that help them develop a deep understanding of self. Added alongside are wholesome fun and entertainment-time spent ‘chilling-out’, travelling, trekking, shopping, sight-seeing and so on,” says Prasanna. “Transformation, both at the individual level as well as at a large-scale, is its own reward,” he adds.

Changing strategies for changing times

As COVID-19 continues to eat into the economy, CSR funding is drying up everywhere. Aram Porul is focused on developing CSR strategies that go well beyond monetary help. “Social distancing norms will affect the way programs, training and learning sessions are conducted. Monitoring and reporting methodologies will also change significantly. We are currently holding talks with our various stakeholders to design and offer solutions that will address the above needs” says Prasanna.

Aside from this, ‘Aram Dialogue’ sessions are being held regularly, with the participation of NGOs, activists, volunteers and donors to share and reflect on the various challenges and opportunities that they face. In their latest Aram Dialogue held last month, in collaboration with Bhumi, 30 participants working in education, health, special needs, geriatric care, livelihoods, relief and rehabilitation were in attendance. It is part of their “COVID - 19 Relief Vs. Reality” series.

“We will continue to be a credible partner to NGOs, corporates, other organizations and individuals who want to create social impact” says Prasanna as he signs off.

Archanaa Ramesh

WORKING TOWARDS A BETTER TOMORROW

In today's world, to make substantial difference in the society or community, it requires social evolution where the people make a significant switch in the existing norms or process to bring the necessary change. However, to ensure the modifications on the development, personal involvement and efforts are needed, individually and as a community also.

Thiruppathi Perumal, was born in Kavundampatti Village in Dindigul which was under developed until the last decade. He attended school in a neighbouring village which had basic infrastructure. He cycled 10 kms everyday to attend school which left him wondering why his village didn't have buses and high school facilities for children while the others had. After completing school, he came to Chennai to pursue his bachelors degree, where he choose a foundation subject in Rural development. That is when he got the idea to bring about change and development in his village and make it a model village.

With the help of the teaching faculty in college, he conducted a survey in Kavundampatti to collect data on the possible changes that can be brought about in several aspects. He identified several issues that required immediate attention and discussed the issues with the people of the village, and submitted a petition stating their requirement and all the schemes that had not been implemented there, to the government office and registered Ministries along with their signatures of all the people.

Later, Thiruppathi, along with his school friends were concerned about the development of the village, and formed a Youth parliament that works to improve the condition and transform to a self sustainable village and generate work. He then started an organisation called Abhinavgram in 2015, which functions out of Kollli Hills with the aim of identifying and providing self sufficient and sustainable solutions to the most backward villages of Tamil Nadu. It is associated with experienced social work professionals who identify villages through a rigorous and exhaustive process consisting of focus group discussions and plans. The members of the organisation also included the elders of the village, to voice out their opinions and give advice.

Their main aim was to improve the school system, health facilities, infrastructure, livelihood and agriculture. Soon after, with the constant effort of the organisation and the government schemes being implemented, buses were introduced, toilets were built in the houses that didn't have the facility, electricity was provided in all houses and regular follow up services were set up, drinking water taps were set in all streets and road facilities were improved.

In terms of medical facilities, they



introduced the safe delivery kit authorised by WHO for infection free delivery, which in the last 3 years has helped 1282 women deliver babies free of infection.

The organisation also started a kinder garden school and included activities for children to keep them engaged and bring awareness of education. With most middle- aged people of the village migrating for jobs to neighbouring states due to low employment around the village, children are left with grandparents who do not follow up much with the children's education, and the drop out rates started increasing. Hence, to change the norm, tuition centres were also set up to keep them motivated.

Agriculture is one of the main aspect of Abhinavgram Society's vision and the main occupation of the village, but that

required work only 4- 5 months a year, hence the people had nothing much to do rest of the year. Thiruppathi, along with Professionals with knowledge of organic farming, introduced the concept of organic farming. The method of sustainable farming was taught to farmers following the Nammalvar method, which is to do farming without the use of chemicals and pesticides. 18 farmer groups were formed, with each group consisting of about 15-25 members, which led to about 400 locals being employed in organic farming. The idea behind the Nammalvar method was, "double the yield and triple the income".

They also focussed on women empowerment, by identifying most underdeveloped villages, and taught women in making finished goods and

food products from locally available raw materials. Many women were trained in pickle making from organically grown ginger, pepper, onion, garlic etc, and supply them to the markets. This gave them an earning of about Rs. 200 per day.

Thiruppathi says, "Many villagers are school drop outs and do not have the knowledge of saving and banking. Only after the concept of organic farming was introduced, many opened bank accounts since payments were made through cheques. We educated them on banking systems, as it helps them save more money".

He added, "Coffee is in abundance here, so we along the help of coffee board of India purchased machines that fasten the process, and require less physical effort has resulted in farmers making 20-30% extra profit than what they were making earlier". Overall in the last few years, the village has achieved an income earning of Rs. 18,00,000 above the selling price and it has been generated because of direct selling of the coffee.

Abhinavgram over the years has brought about significant progress to the village in several aspects which has made living conditions amicable. Their focus for the future is agriculture and to generate employment locally to make the locals independent and self sufficient. "... we worked really hard to bring these changes and we hope to make more progress and bringing about a positive change", says Thiruppathi.

Aatika Kouser

Remembering a Karmayogi

Sri Saranga Pani – 1930-2020

In 1930 on a cool night in September, a baby was born in Vellore at the cusp of midnight. This beautiful baby boy had silky soft hair and greenish-brown eyes. And inside his little body, pulsed a heart and mind that would beat with ambition, grit and brilliance that would light his journey through life. This heart would ignite sparks of inspiration in people he encountered, and this spark would change to a burning flame at the age of 60 when it found its true calling – To be M-A-D – To Make a Difference in the world.

Many of you present here know of Father's journey after his 60th year – How he channeled all his energy after retiring from a stellar career in IDBI into helping society through Siva Sakthi Sathya Sai Charitable Trust, CSIM Bangalore (until 2015) and other Seva organizations that he has been a patron, supporter, mentor and cheerleader. The speakers before me have already touched on this philanthropic aspect that is his true legacy.

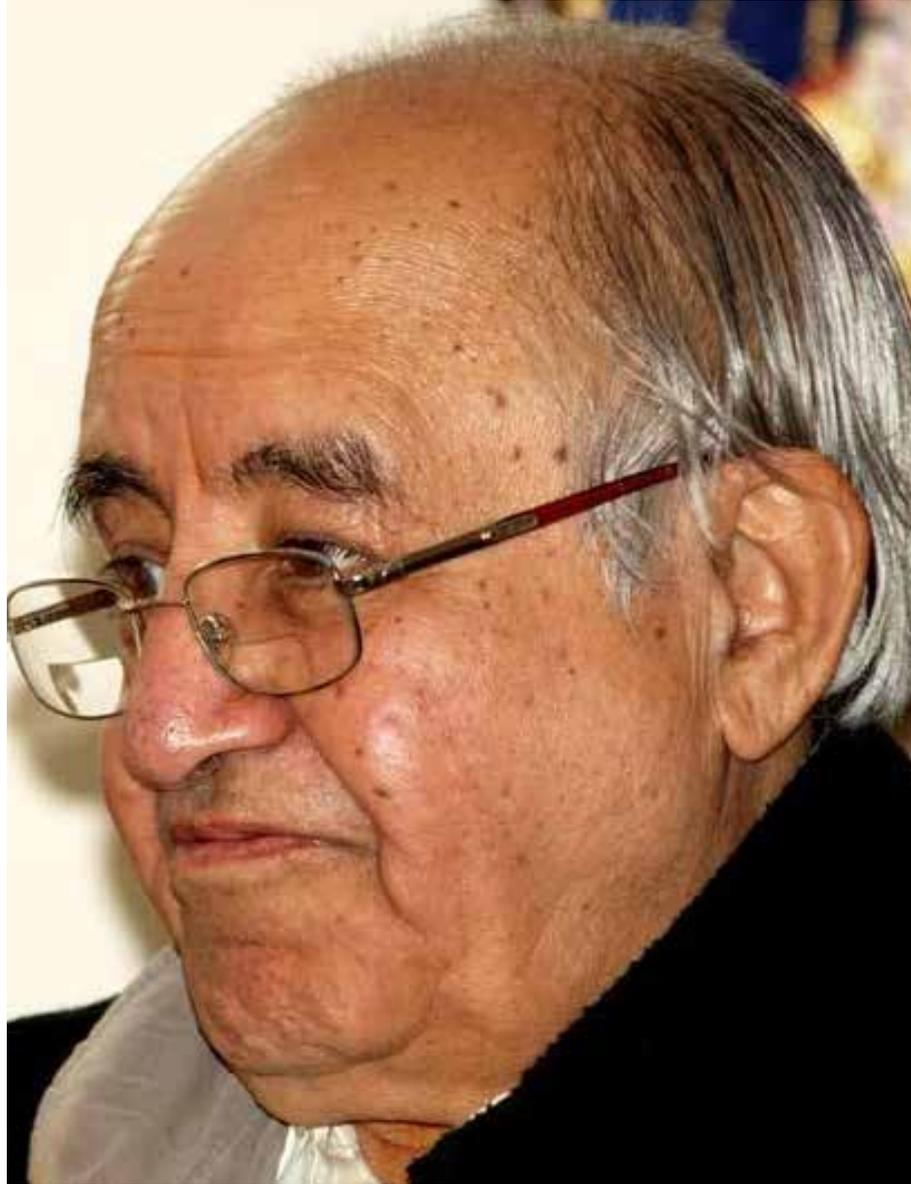
So what I will attempt to do is give you a glimpse of 6 of his personas that we the family knew :

- the innocent child Saranga
- the brilliant student
- the adventurous youth
- the loving husband
- the loving parent Daddy
- the tender grand-parent Ajja/Tata.

I will relate some anecdotes from these periods of his life that he has shared with Family over the years.

The innocent child Saranga grew up in Vellore in a joint household of almost 60 people. He was dearly loved by his grandfather, whom he addressed as 'Appa'. One day the little boy Saranga asked Appa for four annas to go to cinema to see a movie called King Ambresh, an ardent devotee of Vishnu. Appa asked the little boy to fetch a curved tile from the roof of the house. In Tamil you call it Odu – But it also has another meaning in Tamil – Run! Appa told him to take it to the ticket collector and ask him what it is. When Father took it to the cinema house and asked – *Id yenna, Aiyya?* The man said *Odu!* So, my father 'ran' inside, jumped to the ladies enclosure and watched the whole movie without a ticket! His grandfather later came to the theatre out of concern and treated him to an ice cream to make up for the prank and they both had a good laugh about it.

Years later in 1946, at the age of 16, the student Saranga entered St Philomena's college which was newly inaugurated by the Maharajah of Mysore. From here on his academic brilliance would shine through – he earned the first rank and 2 gold medals. In 2018, 70 years after he graduated, he made a nostalgic return to St. Philomena's in Mysore and he was given a red carpet welcome by the Rector and Principal who facilitated him with great respect and honor as the 'oldest'



student from the very First batch. Even after 70 years, he remembered all his professor's names! What an incredible memory he had.

Now emerges the adventurous youth Saranga – Tired of decisions being made on his behalf by old *mamas*, *mamis* and *athais*, the youth Saranga took charge of his destiny and ran off to England in 1952 without telling his parents to join Queen Mary's College in London. There, he attended Queen Elizabeth's coronation, worked at 2 Engineering companies and did a hitch-hiking tour of Europe long before it was a trend! It was a period of liberation and adventure which fulfilled him until his mother summoned him back to India.

On returning to India, Father got married to a lovely young lady (Jayamani, our mother) and now donned the persona of the loving husband. When he took his wife to Rishikesh to meet Swami Sivananda, Jayamani sang *Bhaja Govindam* so melodiously that Swamiji called the young couple and told my mother – This fellow has been coming to me for 2 years asking for *Sanyas*. I knew

he is not fit for *Sanyas* – I am glad he got married to a nice girl like you. In fact - Swami Sivananda was the first in my father's list of Great Gurus who taught him the mantra – Detach, Attach. It meant Detach your Body – Attach your soul to God. This mantra was remembered by Father throughout his life.

Young married life was great for our parents. My father had a Raleigh bicycle from England and he would take his petite wife, seated on the front bar of the cycle all around Old Delhi – to Chandni Chowk to drink *Lassi* - just like the old romantic movies. At this time, Father worked as a Lecturer for Delhi Engineering College One day a student wrote on the blackboard 'The Teacher is a Donkey'. My father entered the class and at first was hurt seeing the message. Then he composed himself and added the word 'Driver' at the end of the sentence that completely flipped the meaning. The sentence now read 'The Teacher is a Donkey Driver' - All the students except the one who wrote it had a good laugh and classes went smoothly after that.

The next persona is the loving parent

Saranga – We three children Gita, Gopal and Gayathri were referred by Father as GeeThrees. He was a hands-on parent with the first child in England, changing nappies and looking after the baby like modern parents do. By the time the 2nd and third child came along, he was deeply embedded in progressing his career in IDBI, but always had time to help with academics. Although economics was tight at home with aged parents and us as dependents, he strongly encouraged excellence in education and generously funded every aspiration we had. I recall him encouraging me to excel in my Master's program. He would joke with me with twinkling eyes 'If you get First rank I will buy you Kinetic Honda – Otherwise you will get Mysore Bonda! I am happy to say – He bought me a silver Kinetic Honda!

Last, I move on to the nurturing Grandparent persona – who the grandkids fondly called *Ajja/Tata*: Father celebrated every success of each of his 5 grandchildren. He was thrilled to hear of their entrepreneurial and academic achievements, and he would tirelessly write emails to each one individually over years heaped with blessings and nuggets of wisdom. He once wrote to my son who was 'hoping to get an internship' to use the concept of the Intention box. He said – Change the word hoping to praying - Say 'I am for the internship' because prayers are always answered but hopes may not.

I am going to end with a story that Dad emailed to us in 2017.

A boy asked his Dad: "How big is God?" Looking up at the sky his father saw an aero plane and asked his son, "How big is that aeroplane?"

The boy responded, "It's small, Dad! You can hardly even see it!"

Then the father took his son to an airport hangar.

Standing in front of one of the jumbo jet, the father asked, "And now, how big is the aeroplane?"

The boy responded, "Oh Daddy, this plane is enormous."

At this point, the father said to him, "That's how it is with God."

How big he is depends on the distance between you and Him.

The closer you are to him, the bigger he is in your life"

Father is like the little boy who is not standing close to the aeroplane of God – but is within it!

His constant prayer to Sai Mother was – I want to remember HIS name on my tongue, HIS form in my Heart and HIS Lotus Feet in my heart-of-hearts and grant an eternal and peaceful rest at HIS Lotus Feet.

Father's prayers have truly been answered in full. Om Sri Sai Ram!

Gayathri Pani-Krishna

“Post COVID-19, we need development that is equitable and sustainable.”

Dr. Balaji Srinivasagopalan IFS talks with Marie Banu about the impact of COVID-19 on biodiversity.

Dr. Balaji Srinivasagopalan is the Former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Government of Tamil Nadu. As the Director of Environment, he was instrumental in launching of the National Green Corps (NGC) in Tamil Nadu Schools and implementation of CRZ regulations in coastal areas of the state. He led Care Earth's research team that worked to augment green cover in Greater Chennai Corporation.

Dr. Balaji is currently the FAO, Rome's Regional Forestry Expert and, Chairman, ABS Committee of the National Biodiversity Authority, Government of India. He also serves as Care Earth Trust's Scientific Advisor. He guides the Trust's efforts to reconcile conservation and livelihood issues in the Moyar Landscape, specifically working to support enterprises in Sathyamangalam.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Balaji Srinivasagopalan IFS talks with Marie Banu about the impact of COVID-19 on biodiversity.

About your interest in IFS and interesting postings?

I belong to the 1981 batch of Indian Forest Service (IFS). I had interest in greenery and plants during my childhood and then pursued my masters in Botany. Before joining the service, I was not very much aware of the variety of work the Indian Forest Service offers, but and after my exposure to diverse forests in East India, North India, South India, and J&K during training, I found it to be an amazing career. Looking back, I have put in more than 35 years of service with satisfaction and a sense of achievement. I always cherish memories of working in the beautiful district of The Nilgiris, as the District Forest Officer (DFO) initially and later as the Managing Director of TANTEA, the largest public sector tea company in Coonoor providing decent livelihood for about 5000 Sri Lankan repatriates. One of my challenging assignments was as the DFO Sathyamangalam when we had to encounter the elusive sandalwood smuggler, Veerappan.

Can you tell us about your tenure in Sathyamangalam?

I served as the DFO Sathyamangalam during 1987-90. Forests of Kollegal and Chamrajnagar forest divisions on Karnataka and Sathyamangalam, Erode and Dharmapuri divisions on Tamil Nadu side are inter connected. Veerappan was familiar with interior forest routes over 25 Square Km in this stretch and had access to the tribal hamlets. One of my able Range officers, V.Chidambaram was shot dead by Veerappan on July 14, 1987.

From then on, we were chasing Veerappan. I had an excellent forest

striking force lead by a committed Forest Range officer C Badrasamy. In one such encounters our team seized a record quantity of 17 tonnes of sandalwood at Makkampalayam. It was a challenging period for our team, but our staff was motivated and we dealt with the situation quite well. Veerappan was elusive but due to our vigilance he didn't venture again into Sathyamangalam division during my tenure.

Your experience with Tamil Nadu Agriculture University (TNAU) and your research work?

I was Dean (Forestry) in Tamil Nadu Agriculture University, Coimbatore from 1995 to 2000. This was also one of the most rewarding periods as I completed my PhD under the most distinguished father of green revolution, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan. During my tenure, the Forest College and Research Institute, Mettupalayam did exceedingly well in education and research and attained numero uno position among forest colleges in the country.

I am proud to say that over 60 of my students got in IFS during this period and serving different states with distinction. I had an excellent team of Scientists involved in 32 national and international research projects. My Thesis was on the impact of people's participation in enhancing the Biodiversity of forests in terms of flora, birds and butterflies. My findings were later published as a book in 2003 titled 'Joint Forest Management for Biodiversity enhancement'.

Later in 2010, when I became the Chief Conservator of Forests and Project Director of Tamil Nadu Afforestation Project, I ensured that such biodiversity monitoring was undertaken in project sites.

Has biodiversity gained positive impact due to COVID-19?

Yes. There is some improvement due to COVID-19 lockdown. Perhaps this will give us a bench mark on the level of water and air quality that could be attained, when there is no human interference. The air quality has now improved substantially across the globe – in Wuhan and also in Delhi. This is because there was no traffic, no industrial activity and no smoke from the agricultural fields. Delhi air is cleaner with 80% reduction of its normal pollution level before lockdown as per the data available.

In Chennai, the air quality shows improvement with less SPM (suspended particulate matter) and oxides of Nitrogen levels. The COVID-19 lockdown period has given a respite to people living in T Nagar, Royapuram and Tondiarpet areas from usual air and noise pollution. The Adyar and Cooum rivers as well as the beaches have also turned cleaner. We



should bear in our mind to keep our neighbourhood clean and desist from polluting our waterbodies.

After all, the human beings are the main culprits in polluting the environment. When their movement is not there, the nature is able to heal itself and looks much healthier and happier.

What are the challenges you think would remain post COVID-19?

There are challenges in all sectors - social, economic and environment. It may take some time to get back to normalcy – could be six months to one year or more. In our urge to speed up economic growth, we should not adopt methods that will pollute the environment. Industries especially thermal power plants and Cement industries to reduce their carbon emission and adopt much more cleaner processes. Tamil Nadu is a leader in both wind as well as solar energy. We produce more than 8,500 megawatt of power and we can feel proud that 50 percent of our energy requirement at present is met through wind and solar power. This augurs well for environment and should be further augmented.

Economy will develop after this recession. Post COVID-19, development may focus on job led growth in areas such as organic agriculture, value addition of agriculture and forestry products, promoting MSME, scaling up service industries in tier II cities, infrastructure development and Real estate development. GDP is important but it is not the only thing. Sustainable development should be our approach, and it should lead to better livelihoods for people. We need to grow, but not at the cost of sustainable development. As you know, economic growth and development are not one and the same. Development

takes into account the social consideration and equity aspect. We need development that is equitable and sustainable. In this way, we will grow without compromising the ability of the future generations to grow.

What are your suggestions for people post COVID-19?

Every one of us should have environmental consciousness and reduce our carbon footprint. At individual level, we should reduce consumption and follow our ancient wisdom of reuse and recycle so that Earth's resources are optimally utilized. We should also be conscious of energy consumption in our homes. We can reduce energy consumption by choosing energy efficient equipment and solar water heaters. This will bring down our individual electricity bill and prove to be good for the country and environment.

Similarly, I would consider mainstreaming environmental considerations in industries, transportation, and real estate to reduce their carbon foot print as this is essential for the post COVID-19 sustainable economic development.

In our anxiety to develop fast we should not sacrifice our environment. Let us green our mind before greening our land. As COVID-19 lockdown has seriously impacted poorer sections of the society, any development initiative aimed at coming out of this recession should be equitable and environmentally sustainable.

What Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in 1944 is relevant even today: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."