

Conversations Today

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Life is one word that comes with multiple meanings and experiences. It is the journey of living. We live, we lead our lives and we die. Life is not just about existence but also about how we define that existence. Hence, it is important for each one of us to look at life not just from one single perspective.

Life is not the same for everyone. Some people face a lot of difficulty with life while some don't. It is often said to be precious. This is more evident through the various ways in which people try to save lives.

So, how can we make our lives meaningful?

Everyone's success and failure depend on how they utilise their time. The ones who are wise, surely attain success.

Time is ever dynamic and waits for no one, it runs at its speed, and we are expected to keep up with it. Time is money is a famous phrase in English used by Benjamin Franklin in his book 'Advice to a young tradesman. This phrase means that time should be spent wisely so that one can earn money, and if this time is wasted, then all the opportunities to make money are lost.

We have heard of several success and failure stories that will prove this metaphor. All these incidents will also make you realise that there is nothing more superior than time. And it is time which can bring you money; you can never buy lost time with money. There is a saying that we are living on borrowed time because we are not in control of it, and this life can end at any moment without giving us a chance to bargain.

Today, the world has advanced in many ways, and people have learned to use their time to make a mark for themselves. Evidently, for such reasons, competition has risen among everyone in every field of work. Almost everyone is doing things to serve the purpose of their life.

In a world where everyone is running behind money and success, it is wise to stop chasing those and instead use our time strategically with a near-future goal and lead a life of joy and contentment.

Marie Banu

FOUR Ts : TIME, TALENT, TREASURE & TOUCH,

A Social Entrepreneur or volunteer or any other stakeholder in social work terrain need to manifest the four Ts into action in varying degrees depending on context or need or occasion. Let us look at them for better understanding and the roles. Time is the most precious input. Time lost is lost forever. Time spent should be quality time. Investment of time is one key requirement for successful social impact achievement. Time investment brings about qualitative change in the social impact. Time can be invested by a volunteer; not necessarily full time. It is well known that volunteer time if translated to money by using man-hour US \$, will run into several tens of Billions of US \$ per year. That is the power of time.

When time invested is managed and led well, it can leverage several fold advantage to social impact. Investment of time, albeit small to start with but in predictable frequencies and into committed ventures, will be the entry strategies for several who wish to take professional career opportunities in social sector and serve joyously.

The second input is Talent. Talent is skill, knowledge, competence, experience, etc. Talent is an important component of social impact. Talent adds value to time. Thus time and talent positively reinforce each other to give an efficient and effective impact of the service. If one does not bring Talent to Time invested, she brings very little but routine. The Talent can be behavioural, besides technical or professional. Behavioural Talent is showing empathy, love and compassion, give and take and share, leadership, teaching by example and so on.

In the Talent sphere the most significant elements are continuous improvement, out of box thinking, innovation, creativity, simplicity, smartness. Thus talent will give the social entrepreneur, a definite differentiator from other organizations.

The third and equally important contribution is in giving Treasure. Instead of just saying finances, money or donations, the word Treasure is used to emphasize giving your treasure, which you like to keep even to yourself like a Treasure. Hence investment of Time, Talent along with Treasure

makes it complete. The 'Treasure' can be just a rupee or millions of rupees, it is just what you can spare and share from your earnings and or wealth. There is no mission without money but it is not the only factor for mission achievement. The Treasure can also be generated from friends, community, comrades, society or venture philanthropy and the like. Time, Talent and Treasure – What a triumvirate it is! It is an amazing spirit – God's gift to the cause you serve.

Time, Talent, Treasure as golden triumvirate bring so much opportunity to learn, open one's own self consciousness, there is a great triumph to bring 'the Heart' into action by involving 'touch', the last but not the least, the crowning glory.

'Touch' concerns the 'heart' and not the intellect, mind or rationale. In true social transformation, 'the Heart' has a very important role, as balance opposed to 'the mind'. 'The Heart' is 'the mother' in the whole play. When one gets an opportunity, grabs it and blends investment of time, talent and treasure in the pursuit of service, the best of best will happen to all concerned as 'the touch' becomes the overarching goal of service. 'The Touch' brings the emotional integration and 'oneness' of approach to the 'common good' for all. 'The Touch' is like a thread that holds all flowers intact in a garland. The thread that 'connects' is the 'touch; and the flowers are Time, Talent and Treasure.

The completeness of service occurs extremely well when Time, Talent, Treasure and Touch are balanced and managed with due consideration for sensitivity, self esteem and self respect.

P N Devarajan



EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

TOGETHER, INTERESTED AND COMMITTED

The social service sector has evolved by leaps and bounds reaching such remote corners in our country, making them visible, significant and at times, functional too. “Today, it is very heartening to see efforts led by committed individuals from different communities. In spite of being restricted to their communities, with limited capabilities, all such work have strived to improve the lives of the needy. They all have lessons to offer and also wish to engage in continuous learning to further develop their communities. In such a scenario, it is critical to bring them all together in one platform. This opportunity opens up many possibilities and allows us to make the best use of all resources – physical, social and human,” says Mr. J. Prabhakar, Founder of Networking and Development Centre for Service Organisations (NDSO) in Chennai.

Popularly known as ‘JP’, Prabhakar comes from a humble background that gave him the space to identify his interest in Art. After his schooling in Uthukottai, Tamil Nadu, Prabhakar came to Chennai in 1973 to study Arts but he couldn’t pursue his dream. His search for opportunities led him to Ashok Leyland in Ennore where he joined as a labourer and gradually grew in his 29-year-long career with this company. His interest in social service and community welfare work was apparent and he soon became the leader of ‘Nallor Vattam’ – a small group of employees who pooled in resources and offered services to the villages around the company premises. “We worked in juvenile homes, orphanages, organised medical and blood donation camps. Different activities allowed me to visit different places and communities. This experience enriched my knowledge and further enthused me to engage in social service constructively and on a bigger scale,” he adds.

In the Theeyambakkam village near Manali Refineries, the Nallor Vattam team under Prabhakar decided to ban illegal liquor which was almost the identity of that community. The multifarious consequences from this act affected the future of children living here and Prabhakar was determined to reform the village. Taking inspiration from Anna Hazare’s ‘Ralegan Siddhi’ in Maharashtra, his team worked on all the possibilities based on the people’s needs assessed during their visits. Anna Hazare’s guidance was a big boon and soon liquor banished from here. Prabhakar and team initiated Vivekananda Vidyalyaya, a local school that still caters to the education of



children at Theeyambakkam and neighboring villages.

After Ashok Leyland, he worked with Ananda Vikatan as an Artist. “From 2001 to 2005, my work here helped me travel across India. Over 3,000 drawings of temples and leaders brought me closer to the ideals I held closer to my heart. The idea of social service became a strong drive and I was eager to do something on my own,” says Prabhakar who was very much aware of the different kinds of developmental work happening around him. He felt the need for a networking platform where service oriented organisations and individuals could come together and complement each other’s efforts. “Like I already mentioned, social work is happening everywhere in different forms and modes. Bringing them together not only offers experiential learning for a larger group but also demonstrates the need for efficient use of resources in hand. Together we can move a bigger mountain,” he smiles.

Ennangalin Sangamam was initiated in 2005 with 100 organisations coming together to recognize and learn about each other’s work. Having been personally involved and visiting these organisations, Prabhakar naturally thought of a trust that could take this effort forward with better management and strategies. “Meeting once a year is only the beginning. What we did together, post the meeting, is important and everybody’s energy motivated me to prepare an organisational framework that could lead the way forward. I was soon at CSIM where I acquired all the

functional competency required for my mission,” he shares.

The NDSO Trust was formed in 2007 and since then, on the first Sunday of every year, 100 NGOs come together. It has been sixteen years and Prabhakar’s trust is now a network with the strength of 1,600 organisations who have vowed to come together and collaborate for larger efforts. “It was all a natural chain process and the growth was visibly organic, like I had learned in CSIM,” says Prabhakar. Health, education, organic farming, environment, governance, rural development – no sector is left untouched by the network and he has recommended CSIM to many enthusiastic social workers like him. “We learn together, we grow together and then, together we live the change,” he reassures.

Prabhakar admits that great challenges are an opportunity to realise the limit of our strengths. During the 2015 Chennai Floods, the network focused on Scheduled Tribes who had lost almost everything that they had built for themselves. In Cuddalore and Thiruvallur districts, 150 houses were built and 500 toilets were constructed – all with the support of network funds, government aid and support from network associations.

Mahatma Gandhi Tuition Centres were built in 20 villages in Cuddalore district to support the education of tribal children. These centres also spread to Dharmapuri, Pollachi and Thiruvallur districts. 563 children are studying in these centres presently and they were provided with mid-day meals every day,

even during the COVID pandemic. For livelihood, NDSO provided them with three sophisticated boats with the help of Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and other support to revive their economic ecosystem. Provision of solar lamps to more than 1,000 families and many more activities, all with the support from organisations in the network brought about a visible change in their lives. The rebuilt Thazhainallur village in Cuddalore district is now a model village.

NDSO offers awards and cash prizes to organisations and individuals every year to recognize and encourage social service efforts in different sectors. Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi Awards to youngsters in the august presence of dignitaries like Governor of Tamil Nadu has motivated many more youth to come forward and reform their communities. The Covid Pandemic threw in new challenges and the local networks successfully supported all NDSO efforts in the region. “Work keeps happening and the involvement of youth is our biggest strength. Our focus right now is to revive interest in local self-governance. We want to develop model panchayats in Pudukottai, Sivagangai, Madurai and Ramanathapuram districts.

Work is underway and we are in communication with 20 panchayat leaders who have a vision for their villages. We are dreaming and working together for a better future,” says a committed Prabhakar.

Shanmuga Priya.T

CHANGING HUES: AWAKEN THE QUEEN WITHIN

Breaking the cage to going beyond

Ting! A message from Reena appeared as Padma sat sipping hot filter coffee in the morning.

“Aunty, I have an assignment to submit tonight, and the internet is not functioning. The service providers are saying it will take an entire day to redo the cable. Can I work from your office today?”

Padma smiled and replied, “No problem. Come along. I will leave home by 9:30am.” “Thank you, Aunty, love you,” came Reena’s reply.

It was a busy day, and Padma had meetings from the time she stepped into office. Lunch time came too soon. “Hello, Ma’am. How are you?” a familiar voice greeted Padma as she sat down to eat lunch with Reena. “Hello, Kajol. What a pleasant surprise to see you here today!” Padma got up and gave a warm hug to a good-looking young lady and said, “You look good, and I hope all well with you, your husband and son. How is the little brat?”

Kajol blushed and, with a wide grin, said, “I am fine, Ma’am; doing very well in my profession and managing my home too. Hello, Reena. Nice to see you here.” Kajol stretched out her hand towards Reena. Reena was staring at Kajol in disbelief, and recovering in a bit, held the stretched-out hand and said, “Hello, Kajol. Good to see you!”

Kajol took her time and explained to Padma, “I had some editing support work and also finished a bridal make-up assignment nearby. So, I thought of stepping in for a while.” Padma gave her an assuring smile and said, “You are always welcome, my dear.”

Kajol trotted happily to meet the rest of the staff in the adjacent room. Squeals of laughter was heard with the bubbling energy of Kajol and others.

Reena, still in a daze, softly whispered to Padma, “Aunty, what a transformation! Kajol looks amazing. I couldn’t recognize her when she walked in.” Padma patted on Reena’s arm, saying, “Reena, it has been a long while since you met Kajol. She has spared no options to transform herself, grow and take on life.” Reena looked at Padma inquisitively and asked, “Aunty, this is a puzzle to me. Tell me more.”

The story time thus began.

Padma gave a wry smile and said: “Being different is a challenge; being a differently abled girl is hundred times more challenging. The first day Kajol walked into my office, I remember a shy, scared, hesitant girl wide-eyed with doubts about people around her. That fear and doubt had worsened the stammering she had.”

“Kajol came from a middle-class family where childhood meant unsparing school performance, discipline, obedience and orderliness. When she was as young as a four-year-old, questions from her textbook would be asked by her father. If there was a wrong



answer, she was beaten and shouted at, making her pee in her pants. Her disobedience and clumsiness was met with punishment that would make her sit in a corner for hours together facing the wall. She forgot and got confused, unable to process the information when the thought of the punishment clouded her head.”

“During those years, she developed a fear to speak, and there were days she would not have said a single word uttered in an entire day. Before long, she lost control over a few words in her speech and developed stammering. This was a vicious cycle. When she was asked a question, she struggled to find the words and would stammer; and she was beaten for not speaking up and stammering.”

“When she reached middle school, her stammering was pronounced; she became a silent, lonely girl with no friends in class. Relatives pitied her, teachers looked down upon her and her disability, friends jeered her, parents ignored her and focused on their second child, her sister. Kajol was taken to a

speech therapist because the school suggested, but financial constraints did not allow her to undergo the therapy. As she grew, she was dying inside since no one in her world seem to think about the problem she was dealing with and she needed help.”

“Kajol had striking features, beautiful hair, and large eyes that made her very attractive when she became a teenager. Boys who were initially smitten by her beauty teased and mocked her when they learned about her stammering. They were trying to take advantage of her and sought her help but ignored her when they all met in social gatherings. The high school ragging and teasing steadily grew, and she decided to quit and began studying from home. She took up distance education and completed her 12th grade and a diploma. As she stayed at home, she was the only one who did all the household chores. Her parents worked outside, and her younger sister was the darling of the house. Drawing, painting, listening to music were her only companions.”

“Kajol would often hear her relatives tell her mother: “Oh, poor girl. She is beautiful as long as she doesn’t open her mouth.”

“It should be some curse. Did you check Kajol’s horoscope? Maybe you should do some prayers.”

“It’s lucky that your second girl is fine. You better start thinking about figuring something out for the elder one. Who will marry her with this stammering problem?”

“There were no words of encouragement or appreciation at all. Kajol was caged. One day, she resolved to go out of her cage and find some work for herself. She looked at many avenues, spoke to a few cousins and a couple of close friends.”

Padma took a break from the story, gulping some water to assuage the pain in her heart, thinking of Kajol’s eyes when she had first met her.

Kajol walked into Padma’s room cheerfully and sat down. “Come, Kajol, right timing. Reena wants to know about your job interview experience and your life here in our office,” said Padma.

Though Kajol had a grin on her face, her eyes told another story. She opened a few pages from the past. “Reena, I had nightmarish experiences of meeting interview panels. Initially, they would ask me a few questions, then it was only about how I cannot do administrative jobs with my stammer. I was turned down and made to feel like something was seriously wrong with me. I was losing hope in people and myself. A cloud of fear about my future was closing in on me. At that time, my cousin’s friend told me about this office and a vacancy. I came here with the fear of rejection. But, for the first time, I felt welcomed with love, acceptance and open arms. I was asked to study further and complete a few certificate courses to increase my skill capacity.”

“Ma’am gave me the job of answering the phone calls that come to the office for the first year. On Fridays and Pooja days, we chanted the 40-minute prayer to goddess Lalitha (Lalitha Sahasranamam). It was like a family I didn’t have. No one made a reference to my stammering. The first two months were very tough to answer the phone. But, as my confidence grew, I recognized I was stammering lesser. My colleagues were helpful, and I felt like a pampered child amongst the seniors who worked here. I learnt to seek help from others. I was encouraged to speak, dress well, present myself well, and before I knew it, I enjoyed being here. I was learning new things by studying new certificate courses and applying them at work. I was respected for what I did well and pulled up only for the mistakes I made due to oversight. The fear began to vanish slowly, and I felt accepted as a part of the organization. I learnt ways of starting sentences with the words I am most



comfortable with. I went back to colouring, drawing, and singing. I joined music classes. I am surprised when I sing now; I do not stammer at all.”

Reena smiled and added, “Aunty had told me you found a man of your dreams and have a son now. What do you do now as a profession?”

Kajol’s eyes brightened up, and she cheerfully shared, “Reena, it became like an evolving spiral. I knew I could build my life to a better level when I read and listened to many motivational stories shared with me at the office. When my friend’s friend proposed to me, I was initially scared. He had a difficult childhood and was soft and compassionate. Realising the fact that he has accepted me as I am and did not refer to my stammering even once we dated, I agreed and we got married. He is very supportive and I do not struggle with words when I speak to him.”

“I quit my job when I became pregnant. I had always wanted to be a make-up artist. I knew I was good at it too. While helping my mother run her beauty parlour, I have now become a sought after make-up artist and also do bridal make-up. I am also engaged as a freelancer with some creative agencies and take up digital jobs. I am enjoying my work. It does not call for much speaking, right?” She giggled.

Kajol added, “Reena, I knew I had to accept and work around my challenge than denying and dying within. I was stuck in a cage that people had built around me. I had to shut my ears to the opinions thrown upon me and build my own inner resolve to grow and make each day meaningful to myself. We will have to recognize and break the cage ourselves. There will be some blocks and speed-breakers in life, but it does not mean we cannot move beyond them and take off once we cross them.”

Padma had a satisfying smile on her face, and Reena’s eyes were filled with admiration and hope.

*Dr Kalpana Sampath
Illustration by Ritu Rathore*



Reflect:

- Do I see my ability in my disability?
- Am I willing to listen and talk to myself more positively?
- What weightage do I give to what others think of me and my actions?

Conformity



Bayazid, the Moslem saint, would sometimes deliberately act against the outward forms and rituals of Islam. It once happened that, on his way back from Mecca, he stopped at the Iranian town of Rey. The town’s folk, who revered him, rushed to welcome him and created a great stir in the town. Bayazid, who was quite tired of this adulation, waited till he reached the market place. There he bought a loaf of bread and began to munch it in full view of his followers. It was a day of fasting in the month of *Ramzan*, but Bayazid knew that his journey justified the breaking of the law. Not so his followers. They were so shocked at his behavior that they promptly left him and went back to their homes.

Bayazid impishly remarked to a disciple. “Did you see how, the moment I did something contrary to their expectations, their veneration vanished?”

Explicit Learning

- We are struck with the rules.
- We venerate a person as long as he conforms to our expectations.
- We place more importance on rules than on wisdom..

Introspective Learning

- Why do I fail to understand what is behind the rule?
- What is the nature of ‘Conformity’?
- Why do I turn my back when someone acts contrary to what I believe in?

MONTESSORI MAGIC

The Montessori method is extremely beneficial since children are taught individually, they can learn at their own pace and there are a lot of activities aimed at the child's development



When Diya Ghar opened its first centre in Green Garden Layout at Ramamurthy Nagar, Bangalore, it had only about 5 children under its wings. This was July 2016. By September that year, the number quickly swelled up to 30. Just three years later, Diya Ghar opened its second centre, and even organized to pick up and drop its students. Ever since, the organization's admission rate has only reached upwards.

At its basic level, Diya Ghar describes itself as an NGO for the children of migrant labourers. The organization believes that all children deserve to partake in the joy of learning, and that none be left out of the process. It is precisely from this belief that its network of centres and Montessori education has originated.

"We have worked with many batches of children since 2016. However, over 500 children have graduated from the Montessori preschool course and continued further education in private or government schools," says Saraswathi Padmanabhan, Founder and Director, Diya Ghar, "Currently, we have over 400 students in

eight communities in our preschool programme."

Why Montessori, though? For a start it's simply on account of the learning methodology. In the words of Saraswathi, Montessori education helps students "learn concepts", thereby improving foundation. "Montessori method uses a lot of learning material that students work with to learn concepts," she says, "As children learn by doing, their foundation is stronger."

At Diya Ghar, children work in a mixed age group of between two-and-a-half to six years of age, a process which lets younger students learn from older ones.

"There is also scope for older children to teach youngsters," Saraswathi adds. As per the Montessori methodology at Diya Ghar's centres, there is a clear emphasis on the development of fine motor skills even as children are taught individually and get to learn at their own pace.

"Children from lesser-fortunate backgrounds come with developmental delays," says Saraswathi, "The Montessori method is extremely beneficial since children are taught individually, they can learn at their own pace and there are a lot of activities aimed at the

child's development." Needless to say, learning by doing is an approach that has resulted in children actually enjoying the process of learning, as a result of which students enjoy and look forward to attending school.

The syllabus at Diya Ghar focuses on two pillars: cognitive development and learning development. Striking a balance between both is the key. Saraswathi explains. "Cognitive development refers to reasoning, thinking and understanding," she says, "In preschool, children continue to keep learning the art of questioning, spatial relationships, problem-solving, imitation, memory, number sense, classification and grading to name a few." She continues: "Language development, on the other hand, includes understanding and communicating. We introduce them to English and help them understand and speak. We also teach them to write English and Kannada."

However, Diya Ghar's curriculum is one that goes beyond these two pillars, choosing to focus on all-round development. "We cover all aspects of a child's development – physical, emotional, social, cognitive,

including language development," says Saraswathi.

One of the major challenges that Diya Ghar had to face in its five-year-long journey came during the COVID-19 lockdown last year. Not only did the NGO take the onus upon itself to ensure continuity of learning, but also looked into the health and wellbeing of its students and the community at large. "During the lockdown, we collaborated with other NGOs and formed COVID Relief Bangalore which resulted in 11,00,000 people receiving dry rations to help them through what was most certainly a very difficult time," says Saraswathi.

To ensure children continue to learn we switched to a community-based model. Our teachers went where the children were. In addition to our online curriculum, we started building classrooms within the blue tents settlements so that children could attend daily classes.

However, a specific approach to education always comes with its share of challenges. "Finding a suitable place to build the classroom with land-owners cooperation was and is one of the biggest challenges we continue to face," says Saraswathi, who also lists

finding blue-tent communities to work with as another key challenge that she faced in the journey of Diya Ghar. Then, there's the challenge of finding the right kind of human resources to impart Montessori education. "Finding new community champions and community teachers from within the communities to work part-time with us is also proving to be a challenge," says Saraswathi.

In keeping with the attempts to ensure overall health and wellbeing, Diya Ghar has gone about distributing milk, eggs and fruits after class on an everyday basis. "They (children) also get monthly packs of high-protein mix and protein bars once a week," says Saraswathi, "These supplies are for preschoolers and all the other children in the community as well. As on date, nearly a thousand children receive nutrition kits on a daily basis."

Diya Ghar has gone the extra mile to ensure that high standards of hygiene have been maintained within the communities that the NGO has worked with, especially in the post-pandemic time period. "We have raised the standard of hygiene for the communities that we work

with by providing hygiene kits, masks, conducting workshops and making sure there is physical distancing within the community classrooms," says Saraswathi, "All children within these communities are taught to wash their hands before each meal on a daily basis. This is literally practiced each day before children receive their daily nutrition kits."

Diya Ghar has gone about conducting regular medical camps for children and adults, while its blanket-and-sweater-distribution drive during the winters has been quite successful too. The NGO isn't done yet with its services and hopes to keep giving back to society. In keeping with these plans, an expansion blueprint has been worked on and will be executed in due course.

"By the end of March, we will be running 12 community centres for 500 preschool students, and by the end of 2021, we will be working towards doubling that number to 1,000 preschool children and their older siblings," says Saraswathi, "Our next milestone is to serve 5,000 preschool students and spread our presence across Bangalore."

Tom yum remedy: From elephant conflict to coexistence

How the Thai national dish serves as an innovative, sustainable solution in solving the long-standing human-elephant conflict.

An elephant raid can easily destroy a farmer's months of hard work and their source of income in just a few hours.

Just four hours away from the Thai capital city of Bangkok, the farmers of Ruam Thai village live with the constant fear of elephant raids looming over their heads. They double up as watchmen at night, employing various methods to keep elephants away from their plantations. From creating loud noises through firecrackers and gunshots, to setting up electric fences and poison traps. Yet these Asian elephants still find a way to get past these barriers, and into the plantations. "It's like a battle; whoever will be more tired between humans and elephants," says Samorn Sangthong (Som).

The 36-year-old has spent her whole life in Ruam Thai village, nestled in the hills right next to Kui Buri National Park where wild Asian elephants reside. With elephants and farmers living in such close proximity with each other, human-elephant conflicts (HEC) have been a daily struggle throughout the years.

Fellow Ruam Thai villager Thanasit Biboonwattanakorn (Oh), recounts the impact of elephant raids on his plantation, "In the past, there was a time when my agricultural income was around 40,000 THB (around USD1,300). Now, my income has shrunk by half. I only have 20,000 THB (around USD650)."

Agricultural farming is the main source of income for farmers living in Ruam Thai. Faced with droughts and unforeseeable changing market demands, elephant raids further worsened their financial situation. Months of hard labour could disappear overnight. Farmers are not the only victims of HEC. Elephants pay a hefty

price too, sometimes with their lives. The number of elephant deaths and injury cases across Thailand rose from 27 cases in 2014 to 88 cases in 2018.

"They are living creatures on this planet, so they have the right to live on this earth without anyone harming them," says Som.

"Everything is evolving. Humans are evolving, elephants are evolving. But the location is still the same size. We need to adjust our way of thinking. We need to adapt and learn to live with elephants."

BRING THE ELEPHANT HOME

Searching for tangible and humane solutions, both Som and Oh joined Bring The Elephant Home (BTEH) as an activity coordinator and field staff respectively.

Bring The Elephant Home is an international non-profit organisation in Thailand advocating for peaceful, innovative, and community-based solutions that allows for coexistence between humans and elephants.

"When the locals benefit, the elephants benefit, and the broader nature benefits as well," shares project manager David Owen, highlighting the organisation's philosophy of finding a win-win solution to this conflict.

BTEH has utilised innovative solutions in other districts around Thailand, by creating beehive fences around plantations. These work as a successful natural deterrent as elephants are afraid of bees. This approach doesn't just keep crops safe, it also provides farmers with an additional source of income as they could harvest the honey.

This solution however, wouldn't work for the farmers of Ruam Thai as most of their crops are pineapples which are grown with the use of herbicides. These herbicides are fatal to bees.

So BTEH worked with the local community to find a long-term solution that would work for them, while protecting both farmers and elephants.

TOM YUM PROJECT

In late 2020, the Tom Yum Project came to life, an initiative that seeks to help farmers transition from planting crops that are desired by elephants, to crops that are natural elephant deterrents, such as lemongrass, chili, turmeric, bergamot, galangal and citronella.

Coincidentally, these crops are also essential ingredients in the Thai national dish of Tom Yum soup, which would help the farmers to serve the existing demand for these crops.

An experiment was conducted where pineapples were planted alongside these new crops, to see if they would stand up to the elephant test. The results were a roaring success. In the span of two months, over 95% of the pineapples were gone, with less than 6% of any of the tom yum crops damaged.

"Growing these underground plants is easier and more convenient," says Oh. "Even if elephants step and damage them, we are still able to sell their tubes and roots."

Beyond being 'elephant-proof', and in commercial demand, these crops could supplement farmers' income, by being processed into organic products for sale.

BTEH organised product-making workshops teaching villagers different properties of the crops, and how to repurpose them into useful daily essential items such as massage oils, soaps, candles and mosquito repellents. "The product is really more than a soap or a candle," says David. "It's a symbol of the future where humans and elephants can coexist in harmony." With tangible solutions in

place that benefit both humans and elephants, Som reflects on what coexistence with elephants means to her: "Thai people believe we owe a lot to elephants. If there are no elephants, then we won't have the country of Thailand today."

Oh echoes her sentiments: "We as a Thai need to protect what's been an essential part of our culture. What our ancestors had passed to us, we have to protect."

BEHIND THE SCENES: When international travel is not an option and you need to tell a wildlife story in a country where a sudden spike of COVID-19 cases has everyone scrambling in panic, how does one produce a wildlife story? Our producer, Lilian, shares about the challenges she and the team faced, and more importantly, what drove them to bring this story home.

About Bring The Elephant Home (BTEH)

Bring The Elephant Home (BTEH) is an international non-profit organisation in Thailand actively involved in elephant conservation work. They advocate peaceful, innovative, and community-based solutions that allow for coexistence between local farmers and endangered Asian elephants. BTEH promotes understanding and awareness of the role of elephants in the ecosystem, and diversifying the farmers' sources of income through the implementation of beehive fences and alternative crop planting.

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

www.ourbetterworld.org



Creating Pathways To Success, One Book At A Time

Libraries are a timeless, yet often an overlooked institution. We have all used a library at one point or another. It is one of the last few public spaces you are allowed to be without the expectation of incurring an expense. More importantly however, several studies from across the globe have confirmed that libraries are a crucial tool for development. Access to a library highly improves the average child's chances to pursue higher education. This is precisely what the Basic Research, Education and Development (BREAD) Society works on, in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. BREAD Society establishes children's libraries in government schools in these two states.

It all started when Dr. N Bhaskara Rao, a mass communication and social research expert, made a poignant observation. In 1989, on a visit to the USA, while reminiscing with his long-lost friend Dr. Ratnam Chitturi, Dr. Rao recalled how many of his childhood pals from his native village had been unable to move beyond their ill-paying traditional occupations simply because their families were unable to afford higher education. Even though as children these friends had shown a lot of academic promise, their dreams fizzled out due to limited affordability. To address this funding gap that continued to exist in these rural areas, Dr. Chitturi started the North South Foundation (NSF) based in USA and simultaneously Dr. Rao started the BREAD Society in 1989.

The NSF would raise funds from NRIs in the US and the BREAD Society would identify meritorious students from low-income families to award scholarships to. BREAD initially selected candidates based on an annual parental income below Rs. 20,000 and their respective ranking in EAMCET and CET and IIT exams. After conducting a pilot study in 2002, BREAD arrived at common eligibility criteria to award scholarships to meritorious SSC-graduate students from government and government-aided schools pursuing all branches of education in government institutions, doing away with the "parental income" criteria. In 2004, BREAD started receiving donations from resident Indians as well. About 9,000 scholarships were awarded up until 2009. In 2009, the composite government of Andhra Pradesh announced scholarships for higher education to all students with parental income below Rs. 1 lakh per annum. Hence, BREAD discontinued their Scholarships program to avoid duplication.

BREAD moved on to establish libraries at government schools. Says Mr. Ram Mohan Rao Kakani, Secretary of BREAD Society, "Children in government schools are not exposed to reading colourful graphic-designed



story books of 20+ pages. We set up an expert committee to select age-appropriate books from a broad list of publishers initially in English and Telugu. The team came up with a list of 650 books. Typically, we provide nearly all of these books at the time of setting up the library and then add more books at regular intervals."

Students can borrow books and take them home. Prizes are given for brief book reviews. This helps them to develop writing, comprehension and communication skills. They sometimes take the assistance of their parents and elder siblings in doing these book reviews. TISS, Hyderabad did a field study of BREAD libraries in 2007 and observed that this also improves the quality of family interactions. Further, Mr. Kakani says, "We published a Handbook, "Karadeepika" in Telugu, to operate the BREAD library through Voluntary Student Librarians (VSLs) lending books to their classmates. This not only teaches the students resource management and leadership skills, but helps reduce the library-in-charge teacher's workload."

A total of 1,509 libraries have been set up by BREAD so far. These libraries can be accessed by 6,50,000 children at

any point of time, and over the last 12 years, more than 12,50,000 students have benefited. Teachers have reported that students show greater enthusiasm to read and learn, because of their newfound access to books.

As a way to reward teachers who go above and beyond their call of duty to assist their students with competitive exams and government scholarships, BREAD offers felicitations. Each year, teachers and heads of schools securing five or more NMMS scholarships (a nationwide scholarship) are awarded a token of appreciation for their dedicated services.

What is also interesting is that BREAD Society is a completely volunteer run organization. The management team is comprised of experts in diverse fields, who lend their expertise to the organization for free. Overhead expenses are less than 1% of program expenses. A free office space has been provided at Hyderabad and a huge workspace at Kakinada to receive, organize and distribute over one lakh books to the identified schools. Management members meet their own expenses on travel and stay.

BREAD advances research through

their various impact studies, conducted both in-house as well as in collaboration with major schools such as TISS, SPJIMR and SIMC. Transparency in their processes allows them to build lasting relationships with their donors. This however, does not mean there are no challenges. Says Mr. Kakani, "Interest rates on corpus funds are declining. With the surging prices of books, it is getting more and more difficult for us to replenish books at each library. We are trying to publish our own books as a way to mitigate this concern."

The pandemic has resulted in donations plummeting. In spite of that, for two years in a row, BREAD has established a record number of new libraries. In the last year and a half, they have set up 199 libraries in Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV). KGBVs are residential high schools set up by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for disadvantaged girl children in Mandals with low women's literacy rates. They hope to continue adding libraries to more of these KGBV schools.

"Bad libraries build collections, good libraries offer services, great libraries build communities," goes the saying. By vastly improving the chances of underprivileged children to pursue far-reaching ambitions, BREAD Society is truly levelling the playing field.

Speaking of a vision for the future, Mr. Kakani says, "We hope that someday soon, BREAD scholars who hail from marginalized sections of society, will take charge of BREAD and take it forward to newer heights."

Archanaa Ramesh

A total of 1,509 libraries have been set up by BREAD so far. These libraries can be accessed by 6,50,000 children at any point of time, and over the last 12 years, more than 12,50,000 students have benefited.

WOMEN DURING COVID-19

The international women's day was observed on 8th March, 2021 with an underlying theme - "Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world". This theme was selected to celebrate and reiterate the very important role played by women in handling household, community, enterprises and economies during pandemic and bringing these back to normal life. Women were found at forefronts working as caregivers, housekeepers, community mobilizers, leaders, doctors and influencers to contain the ill effect of corona virus. Women also played an important role in bringing about the behavioural change on issues related to cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation, not only at household level but also at large in communities. During all these times a learning ecosystem has been created where individuals, communities, civil society organizations and government share their ideas and learning about social distancing, use of mask and sanitizer and curing asymptomatic cases at home.

This crisis has certainly brought forward the multi-faceted role played by women in our society, from nutrition till leadership for policy making and implementation. During past one year we have seen various women leaders around the world, who have successfully contained the pandemic in their respective countries/communities. These leaders have demonstrated their skills and knowledge in leading COVID-19 response and its recovery effort; proving that women bring varied competency, perspective and experience when it comes to decision making during crisis situations. According to reports, countries like Denmark, Ethiopia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, New Zealand and Slovakia have been more successful in stemming the tide of the COVID-19 pandemic and responding to its health and broader socio-economic impacts, all these being headed by women. These countries have been widely recognized for the promptness and level of determination in handling national response to COVID-19. Having said so, there are only 22 countries worldwide where women are head

of state and government.

The story is not positive on all fronts; during lockdown countries have seen increase in number of cases registered/ reported for domestic violence, unpaid or underpaid care duties, poor work-life balance, unemployment and poverty. This discrimination might look new, but was present in different form within our society. These parametric indicators came on surface during lockdown, mainly due to their change in normal workday routine either at home or at office. It is evident that health emergencies do not impact men and women equally, simple acceptance to this can help us designing policies and processes to make world ready for future crisis.

The data below speak more about the inequality faced by women, no matter what position they are in:

- Only 24.9% of national parliamentarians are women, the trend indicate 130 more years to bring gender equality
- Being at the forefront in dealing with pandemic, women are paid 11% less than their male counterparts
- In specific researches expressions of aggression, competitiveness, dominance and decisiveness are perceived positively for men but negatively for women
- Young women contribute lot as volunteer, health worker and community enumerator, yet women under 30 are less than 1 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide, making it difficult for young women to put their views forward among policy makers
- According to World Bank, of 189 economies assessed in 2018, 104 economies still have laws preventing women from working in specific jobs, 59 economies have no laws on sexual harassment in the workplace, and in 18 economies, husbands can legally prevent their wives from working
- Reports suggest that nearly 40 per cent of women in wage employment do not have access to any form



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- Reports suggest that nearly 40 per cent of women in wage employment do not have access to any form

of social protection

- Most of the 3.9 billion people who are offline are in rural areas, poorer, less educated and tend to be women and girls
- According to McKinsey report, only 5% of Fortune 500 CEOs are Women
- McKinsey report suggests that the economic cost, a reflection of the human and social costs is estimated to be approximately USD 12 trillion annually

The facts and figures above suggest that women, especially those living in rural and semi-urban space need extra support in achieving inclusivity. Covid-19 has brought matter to surface and has given administration an opportunity to rewrite the role and associated benefits of women and young girls in post Covid world. It is important for us to understand the critical role played by women and appreciate the variety brought by them in solving critical issues. Some of the

steps to bring women at fore-front are:

- Promote new governance models with women at the realm of all affairs
- Protect and design policies to safeguard women and girls from gender based violence
- Improvise working conditions and workplace safety for women and girls
- Improve equitable accessibility of financial, health and other basic services to women and girls
- Create more efficient technology inclusion programs to include more and more women and girls
- Advocate gender-segregated data in all development projects to help understand the issues in more data efficient way
- Promote women leadership from household to local economy and country

Agyeya Tripathi



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

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

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

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

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HOMELESS TO LIMITLESS



Jadi Madhava Rao was born in Khammam district, in Telangana. Raised in a remote village that is still lacking in basic infrastructure, he had to walk great distances to school every day. He realized early on the importance of higher education. While his older siblings went on to become teachers, he decided to forego his engineering ambitions and pursued Sciences, doing a postgraduate degree in Mathematics. He strongly felt that it was due to his father's sheer determination that he was able to get as far as he did, with his education.

As a student in Osmania University, Hyderabad, Mr. Rao was often struck by the plight of children begging on the streets, working at mechanic sheds and washing plates in tea shops. He started spending time at several homes and orphanages, trying to understand the legal procedures involved in caring for orphaned and destitute children. While working as a tutor at the Bahujana Hitai Destitute Children's Home, the management would often entrust him with the charge of the children. The home would only provide shelter for children under 12 years of age. Mr. Rao wanted to start an institution that would take care of each child until they finished their studies. That is how Aadarana-Home for the Orphaned and Needy Children came into being. Founded in 2003, with five children in a rented house in Warasiguda, the organization grew in a few short years, to house 60 kids in two separate homes for boys and girls respectively.

In the initial days Mr. Rao juggled the

needs of running the home along with his profession as a tutor. He would conduct an annual summer drive to identify kids to support. He earmarked five districts each season and would look for orphans, or single parent kids who were not likely to have any access to education. Sometimes he would pick up kids at railway stations and from the streets. Soon he realized that he was going to have to give up one or the other, as it was too large an undertaking to do both. He chose to nurture the Home fulltime and spearheaded a movement - "Save the Children". He took to the streets, raising money from philanthropists, families and his own relatives. Being on rented premises was often challenging, as homeowners disliked their houses being used as an orphanage. So, through his fundraising initiatives he was able to buy a vacant plot at Saroor Nagar, to build an accommodation for 100 children.

In 2017-2018, the Amitabha Aadarana Vidyalaya was established. It is a day cum residential school for orphaned and destitute children. Currently, 100 children from the Aadarana home as well as 80 children from other homes in the local community get free education, books, uniforms, and mid-day meals at this school. The State-Board affiliated school is adequately staffed with trained teachers and non-teaching staff. Equipped with well-furnished classrooms, a library with over 3000 books, a computer lab and digital learning centre, fire-safety equipment and so on, the school also has a van and a bus to transport its day-scholars. Timely

health check-ups are conducted for all children, and the school premises is kept clean and sanitary. Anil Kumar Salluri, a representative of Aadarana says, "The school management has taken utmost care in protecting the rights of children. A Child Rights Committee has been constituted which meets every fortnight to discuss any issues or misconduct and is swift to take up remedial or preventative action." Cultural and sports activities are conducted with great gusto each year.

From the beginnings, Mr. Madhava Rao has made sure that every child gets to leave the Home only after they have been adequately supported, cared for, and more importantly, equipped with enough life-skills to thrive on their own. In keeping with his vision, most of the now grown up Aadarana kids have moved on to achieve great success with their higher education and settled into diverse careers. Recounting the many success stories, Mr. Salluri says, "Srinivas Durgam came into our home as a ten-year old. He eventually made it to IIT Dhanbad and is currently working at a multinational corporation (MNC). Sowjanya Suguru, who similarly entered our home in her 5th standard is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree in Australia. Jaipal and Pavan Desani, two brothers who had lost their parents at a young age. Jaipal went on to start a borewell manufacturing business in Madhya Pradesh and his brother is now serving in the Army. Anil who hails from a rural area, is currently pursuing his MBA in Australia." This is everything

that Aadarana stands for- giving deprived children a safe and loving environment that supports their every ambition.

True to their nurturing spirit, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Aadarana has been diversifying their services. They have provided essential provisions to the distressed and displaced families. Moved by the plight of the masses of migrant labourers who lost their jobs and were forced to return home due to the lockdowns, the Aadarana team, adhering to all safety and hygiene protocols, gave away cooked meals and grocery kits to daily wage labourers, construction site workers and people at old age homes and night shelters.

It has not been an easy ride for Aadarana, over the years. "We still are in need of adequate funds to carry out our programs. We need to be able to pay our teaching staff their salaries, and we could also use more volunteers to help children with their extra-curricular activities," insists Mr. Salluri.

When discussing plans for the future, he says, "We wish to evolve into a higher education platform. Aadarana cannot stop with the Amitabha School alone. We are looking to expand it into a Junior College first and someday soon, a full-fledged degree-college. We plan to set up Technical Training Centres to train skilled tradespeople, such as electricians, welders, lathe operators, etc. Yet another dream project of ours is to set up small business establishments that will be run by destitute women."

Archanaa Ramesh

“CSR is an opportunity for companies to come up with innovative solutions for social problems.”

Dr. Suresh Reddy shares with Marie Banu his thoughts on the future of CSR in India

Dr. Y. Suresh Reddy is the Director of SRF Foundation and oversees the SRF's corporate social responsibility and philanthropy programs. SRF Foundation's network has grown significantly under his leadership. He is a prolific writer, and has authored various books, such as the “Co-operatives & Rural Development” and “Child Labour in India”.

Dr. Reddy is a Ph. D. in Public Administration from SV University. He brings more than 24 years of experience in philanthropy, social change, and non-profit leadership. Prior to joining the SRF Foundation, he worked with the Byrraju Foundation, Hyderabad; Dr. Reddy's Foundation, Hyderabad; CARE India (International NGO), New Delhi and the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), New Delhi.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Suresh Reddy shares with Marie Banu his thoughts on the future of CSR in India.

Can you tell us about SRF and SRF Foundation?

SRF Limited is a multi-business chemicals conglomerate engaged in the manufacturing of industrial and specialty intermediates. The company's business portfolio covers Fluorochemicals, Specialty Chemicals, Packaging Films, Technical Textiles, Coated and Laminated Fabrics.

At SRF, we believe that it is essential for companies to have a purpose, more engaging than profits and that purpose should be intrinsic to the fabric of the organization. Building on this belief, SRF Foundation (SRFF), formerly known as the Society for Education and Welfare, was set up in year 1982 as the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) arm of SRF Limited.

Drawing inspiration from its founders, Late Sir Shri Ram and Late Dr. Bharat Ram, who believed in contributing to society through education, SRF Foundation is dedicated to the transformation of education in the country.

SRF Foundation implements CSR programmes for SRF Ltd. as well as for 11 Corporate houses like IndiGo, IBM, Capgemini, HP, etc. This is a unique feature of the SRF Foundation. Our focus areas are Education and Skill Development.

What are the advantages of implementing the CSR programmes directly?

I joined SRF Foundation in 2009 when our annual CSR budget was only Rs. 1 crore. Significantly, continuing the journey to FY 2020-2021, our budget was 13.25 crore rupees, and we expect our next year budget to be around 15 crore rupees. Similarly, an equivalent amount is our Corporate partners' budget too.

I have developed the institutional processes and capabilities of my team to take up these CSR projects. We implement the projects directly in 21 locations in 9 states of India. We have set up our project offices and SRFF project officers stationed here.

SRF Foundation acts like a conduit in bringing the people together – local communities, government, and corporates. By timely delivery of CSR programmes, we have garnered goodwill for SRF Foundation.

The advantage of implementing your own CSR is that you can have more vision driven control on the quality of the programmes. You know what you want and, with the experience you gain over time, you know what works and what does not work on ground.

Secondly, you have an opportunity to try out some innovations. By directly implementing your CSR programmes, you get well connected with the local

communities and government. This helps you to understand their actual needs over felt needs and engage them in their own development process.

What are the challenges faced during programme implementation?

It is obvious that challenges are faced by all organisations, not just SRF Foundation, while implementing the CSR programmes on ground. It takes about three to six months' time to build the trust of the local communities. This is crucial as our project team needs to work with the local people while designing the programme.

SRF Foundation operates in nine States of India and the norms/systems followed by each State Government while engaging with NGOs, are different. In some cases, we need to sign a MoU with the Government.

SRF Foundation is well-equipped to deal with our Corporate partners who are unique in their own ways. They have their own way of funding, their own expectations from the CSR programmes, and different reporting systems.

SRFF's aim is to bring people together and serve as a single platform for corporates, government, and communities. We adopt an inclusive approach with differential strategies. For example, for a school programme, few corporates want to provide physical infrastructure facilities like toilets, drinking water, library, labs, etc.; some focus on digital literacy programmes; few want to offer teacher training programmes; and some want to work on girl child education. Each one of them have their individual focus areas.

SRF Foundation follows a holistic approach. We work towards transforming the school into a 'model school' where children gain holistic development. The challenge we face in this process is allocating more time and resources to bring about this change. I would argue that the physical change process of a school is more resource intensive but less time consuming. However, the academic transformation of a school is more process driven as well as time intensive. It takes around three to five years to build the capacity of the teachers and enhance the children's learning outcomes.

In providing a holistic education programme, with the limited resources available, we prioritise the activities. When we have corporate houses expressing interest to collaborate with SRF Foundation, we link them with our relevant CSR projects. For instance, IBM offers training programmes for school teachers, Coca Cola contributes towards physical infrastructure for schools; Times of India wants to work with Spoken English programme; Schneider prefers to work for school drop-outs and electrical training programmes; etc.

SRF Foundation's approach facilitates corporates to participate in our CSR activities and at the same time enables us to address issues faced by the children, schools, and local communities at the ground level.

In what ways do you strengthen the interface with the government, corporates and the communities?

Strengthening happens at two levels: at SRF Foundation head office level and at the program level.

At head office level, we sign a tripartite agreement with the respective State Government, Department of Education and the Corporate and clearly outline the programme outcomes and roles and responsibilities of each of the partners involved. Our team visits the programmes periodically to ensure that the programmes are implemented as planned and identify the gaps for



applying better solutions.

At the micro level, we coordinate monthly meetings and interact with our key stakeholders – children, school teachers, headmasters, panchayat, government officials at block and district levels, etc. We encourage community ownership so that they are capacitated to handle the programme after our exit.

How do you ensure transparency and accountability for your CSR programmes?

Corporates, who wish to partner with SRF Foundation, conduct due diligence to assess our capabilities for implementing their CSR programmes. They visit our programme areas and also review our annual reports, governing structure, systems and processes, and legal documents (12A, 80G, FCRA).

Once the Corporate expresses interest to collaborate with SRF Foundation, we submit a proposal with a budget, detailing the programme area and activities. Likewise, on obtaining consent from the corporate a formal MoU is signed.

Notably, periodic monthly / quarterly reports as desired by the corporate partner is shared by our programme team. We also publicise our programmes' best practices in social media. The fund utilisation certificate is shared with the corporate partner on a quarterly basis. We ensure that the funds are spent as per the proposed plan.

Your thoughts on the future of CSR in India?

CSR is an opportunity for companies to come up with innovative solutions for social problems.

Since independence, our Government has been spending crores of money in the development sector. The welfare schemes offered by the State and Central Government are laudable. The CSR spend is only around 20,000 crore rupees. The reason the government has made CSR mandatory is because they want the corporate houses to apply their technology, management practices, and develop innovative solutions for issues concerning education, health, sanitation, drinking water, etc.

The CSR space is evolving and getting matured. The recent CSR Amendment has stated Impact Assessment as mandatory for projects with a budget of over one crore rupees. This is good! The CSR programmes will be carried out not for the sake of spending the allocated funds but rather to make an impact in the society which can be measured, reported, and documented as best practices.