

# Conversations

A Chronicle of Social Currents

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## From the Editor

Dear Friends,  
I would like to share five thoughts with you.

1. Social Entrepreneurship is about leadership. To lead is to serve!
2. Be of service together. Share wisdom together. Become a community in spirit, at all levels of body, heart, and soul—*Deepak Chopra*

3. Leader listens and open to all influences, but does not get swayed by anyone.
4. Everybody gets bonded at the soul level. At the soul level one gets connected to the universe, to the silent domain from which all matter and energy flow.
5. Successful entrepreneur is one who has a passion and a purpose. In

them we find value drawn from the realm of soul-soulful leadership. Leader expands awareness and consciousness, and empowers people all around thereby empowering himself.

I am sure you will be able to relate to all these thoughts while reading the inspiring stories featured this month.

**P. N. Devarajan**



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## Need for Organic Farming



A one day seminar on "Need for Organic farming" was held at CSIM, Chennai on April 24th, 2011. Dr Nammalvar, known as the 'Father or Guru of organic farming' in Tamil Nadu, addressed the prospective social entrepreneurs of CSIM.

"Agriculture is about 15,000 years old in India. Fifty years of Green Revolution has taken us to a position where we have realised that it is no longer sustainable. The problem lay in the fact that the Green Revolution tried to turn agriculture into agri-business. Organic Farming should become a culture and not an occupation. Every House should

have a small vegetable garden and both the children and the adults should be involved in maintaining it. This would help in making farming a culture both in urban and rural areas. It would also help in making agriculture attractive to the youngsters", was the crux of Dr.Nammalvar's message that day. He spoke about the Japanese farmer, Masanobu Fukuoka and his 'natural farming' practices.

During the Q&A sessions he answered a wide range of questions ranging from sustainable farming techniques, home gardens, pesticides, fertilizers, Aloe Vera cultivation, etc.



## Counseling Workshop

Counseling is a helping art and a science. It cannot be learned without personal involvement and practice. There are some basic building blocks like listening, questioning, and suspending judgement which must be learned and understood first.

CSIM conducted a two-day workshop on 'Basics of Counseling' for prospective social entrepreneurs at CSIM and NGO personnel on 25th and 26th April, 2011. Dr Kalyani

Sundararajan, a counselor cum trainer par excellence was the resource person. The various topics she dealt included: Basic Counseling Techniques, Transactional Analysis, Qualities of a Counselor, Effective Communication for Counselors to handle their clients, Process of Counseling and Group Therapy.

Interactive sessions with role play and presentations were the highlight of the counseling workshop.

ADD SPARKLE TO THE SEASON WITH A TOUCH OF THE ORIENT AT **China Town**  
 A SIP OF SCINTILLATING SPAIN AT **Zara**  
 A TINGE OF EXOTIC THAILAND AT **Benjarong**  
 A MESMERISING SENSE OF NORTH INDIA AT **COPPER CHIMNEY**  
 A SPLASH OF COASTAL FRESHNESS AT **Kokum**  
 A MÉLANGE OF SPICES AT **ENTÉ KERALAM**  
 AND VEGETARIAN GOODNESS AT **Cream Centre**

# Peace in Vogue

**“We have around 250 volunteers studying in different years in college, and one day we asked ourselves what we should do to make ‘Peace’ a lifestyle?”**

With the Board Exams now behind them, walking the roads with a new spring in their step are teenagers who are ushering in their college days. Uniforms discarded, updated on the latest in fashion and having a makeover from head to toe, college life means a license to bunk classes, to participate in all kinds of cultural activities, subscribe to different clubs and committees, form friendly gangs and celebrate every day. Though we may superficially sum it all up as above, we must not forget that there are a few profound lessons that silently seep into our system and make a permanent stamp in our personalities. Class Seminar Teams, Department Clubs, Cultural and Sport Committees, National Cadet Corps, National Service Scheme and Students’ Unions, are some of the sub-systems of college that ensure such varied exposure. Community service, when taken seriously can be one of the more rewarding components in the college extra-curricular activity scene. As for CSIM Alumnus Arun Fernandez, the Outreach Programme in the Commerce Department made such an impact in the mind of this Loyola College student that he traded off a career in international business in favour of indigenous social action. “When graduating with a B.Com degree in Loyola, I had two offers from universities abroad to pursue a master’s degree in International Business. My father being a businessman himself was toying with the idea of my helping him expand his business. However, I couldn’t think of leaving Peace Rangers.”

Peace Rangers is the brainchild of Arun and his two mentors, Fr. Joe Arun, Secretary, Loyola College, Chennai and Fr. Amala Das, Director of Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions (IDCR). After months of working together in rural and urban slums, organizing medical camps, celebrating festivals with children in Balwadis, Arun and his friends were organizing Season of Love in 2008 at the Tamil Maiyyam. These 15 youngsters collected as many as 2500 gifts from over 45 schools in Chennai in a mere two months, to be distributed among lesser fortunate children. It was during this process that the name of Peace Rangers struck them. In solidarity with the victims of the Mumbai 26/11 attack, they formed a human chain starting at their college and running right up to Stella Maris College for Women. It included 1500 participants from Loyola, Women’s Christian College, Ethiraj College for Women, M.O.P.Vaishnav College for Women and Stella Maris too.

Why “Peace Rangers?”  
 “Peace-building is a lifestyle that we have adopted” says Arun. “We have around 250 volunteers studying in different years in college, and one day we asked ourselves what we should do to make Peace a lifestyle? For instance if we’re on the road and a cyclist or motorist narrowly brushes past us, hitting our side-view mirror in haste, what do we do? The commonest occurrence is that each one shouts on top of the other and try to up his score on the list of abuses he hurls at the other. Instead, if we trained ourselves to ask him or her, ‘Are you hurt?’ Then, their instinctive reaction would be a polite ‘no damage to your car either, sir!’. We tried it and found it to be an extremely useful tool of peace.” Thus trying to

modify our responses to environmental stimuli will help us become organically better individuals. Peace Rangers has been trying to inculcate the habit of Peace in the minds of several hundreds of school-goers and college-goers through their Peace Culturals. In collaboration with CARITAS India, they have started the Breaking Differences Project whereby volunteers from their college undergo a rigorous orientation program in the areas of HIV, Stigmatization and Child Rights. They are then sent to local schools to sensitize

required the help of scribes to give my exams. When I was to enter 11th Standard, there came a turning point when I learnt about the Alpha To Omega Learning Centre and went on my own to talk to the Principal. She was impressed that a boy so young should have the courage to seek admission on his own and offered me a seat on one condition- no scribe. My heart jumped.” Arun Fernandez went on to score a first class in the exams that he wrote on his own for the very first time in all of his fourteen years of schooling.

Along the way, his gift of the gab ensured that he held positions of leadership in all of his schools. He was jubilant no doubt, but he was determined to do something even more daring. All along his father had been somewhat shy of talking about where his son studied. His prejudice had to be broken down. So in 2006 Arun registered for a course in Commerce in one of Chennai’s oldest and most coveted colleges, so that his father need no longer cringe about where he studied.

As he held on to Peace Rangers, the immediate



Arun initiating school children into the peace process

students towards the same and thus create a new generation of informed members of society.

Rooted in its humble beginnings Peace Rangers is now snowballing into a big movement. “We realize that by not resorting to violence, we are actually contributing towards a better world. The learning and value addition that we as students gain from being a part of this movement is par comparison” says a confident Arun.

Even for a youngster who has been shouldering leadership at a large level throughout his college life, his level of self-assuredness and effervescence seems infectious. Where did he learn it from? “I’m dyslexic” he begins. Enough said already, because to have overcome the stigmas and constraints of the “hidden handicap” is an experience that will gear one up for any challenges thereon. “I went to Don Bosco School in Egmore till my 6th standard, where I was being promoted every year solely on the merit of my athletic skills and also upon a lot of persuasion and lobbying on the part of my mother with the school authorities. After that, I went to special schools such as the Madras Dyslexic Association and St. Britto’s Academy where recognition was duly given along with oodles of encouragement which I knew was commonplace because of the school’s setting. As I was very confused with writing, I



Arun in action

option he could think of that would supplement his work was to enroll for a master’s degree in Social Work in the same college. During this time, while working on a research paper, he started getting inquisitive about Social Entrepreneurship. That was when he got introduced to CSIM. “Mrs. Latha Suresh (Director, CSIM) is one of the most resourceful persons I know” reminisces he. “While she and Mr. Prasanna, Project Coordinator for CIOSA helped me with innumerable contacts and resources, my research itself was going in a downward spiral and I had to discontinue it. However, Mrs. Latha Suresh suggested that I take up the Certificate Course in Social Entrepreneurship and I thought, why not! Social Entrepreneurship is a different school of thought altogether and I totally support the emergence of newer and newer ‘profit making NGOs’” says Arun.

As he is graduating this year, Arun has made up his mind to do M.S. in Peace Studies in the famed University of Notre Dame in the United States. His statement of purpose no doubt is burgeoning with the fruit of his labor and passion. Rewarding and unchartered territories await this lad and he is sure to leave a prominent footprint as he marches right ahead.

—Archanaa R.



When I raise my fingers at someone, I don't speak, but my hunger does!  
— Guliya Bai

## THE NEVER-SAY-DIE WOMAN

With a vision that reaches beyond the ordinary, strength of more than a hundred men, courage of a soldier and a willpower that never dies, Guliya Bai, the woman who strengthened the fragile lives of the deprived in Hoshangabad, rules millions of hearts, not just in her village Kesala, but across the entire state of Madhya Pradesh.

The 65-year-old lady, with her dark brown eyes and wrinkled skin, is the President of *Satpura Mahili Sangathan*, a committee which tries to empower women in 36 villages across the district of Hoshangabad. She is also a member of *Kisan Adivasi Sangathan*, an organization that helps the poor farmers. Guliya Bai is an activist who 'doesn't need an organization to support her' remarks Baba Mayaram, a rural affairs journalist in Hoshangabad.

Guliya Bai started her journey in quest of justice when she was barely 20. The newly married bride was the dark horse in her family, and her in-laws disapproved of a woman raising her voice. She remembers how a tribal woman's house in Sukhtawa was completely destroyed by '*jangal ke thanedar*'. The forest officers complained that the woman had "stolen" wood from the forest, a forbidden act. In spite of being warned that her husband would leave her if she stepped out of her house, she went ahead and rescued her 'tribal sister'. While she narrates this episode of her bravery, her hands move enthusiastically and her orange bangles jingle against one



She pulls down her 'ghunghat' and smiles a little, when Faguram, a Zila-Parishad member, starts talking about her acts of great daring, especially the time she held the hands of Digvijay Singh, Ex-Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh



another. There seems to be no fear in her eyes. Guliya Bai took some twenty more women with her, and entered the thanedar's house, and questioned him vehemently about his action. She became the voice of the 'voiceless tribals'.

Wearing an orange sari, chunky silver anklets, glass bangles, mangalsutra and a red bindi, not to leave out the tattoos engraved on her skin, Guliya Bai looks powerfully extraordinary among the ordinary. For more than 40 years now, besides bringing justice to homes, this lady from Kesala village in Hoshangabad has raised her three daughters and taken care of her husband who has been lying paralyzed for thirty years now. The unbidden tear when she talks of her husband does not go unnoticed.

She pulls down her '*ghunghat*' and smiles a little, when Faguram, a Zila-Parishad member, starts talking about her acts of great daring, especially the time she held the hands of Digvijay Singh, Ex-Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh. '*Guliya Bai ke pehle aisa koi nahi kar paya* (none before Guliya Bai could ever do this),' he says proudly. Farmers kept dying as well as being displaced every now and then, either for the Tawa dam project, or the proof range. The innocent farmers were denied pattas for the land on which they were living. Accompanied by villagers, Guliya Bai sat for three days before the Chief Minister's house to meet him. He met and consoled them, but before he left, Guliya Bai caught his hands to ask him about the compensation for the displaced villagers. When the CM explained that

surveys are being conducted, Guliya fearlessly asked, '*Khet mein ya paper mein?*' (on the land or on paper?) She went on to say that the government has been cheating the poor farmers. There have been many incidents, when the lady who was herself displaced by the Tawa dam has questioned the authorities. '*Dharne lagake kam karana ata hai humey,*' (Protests make them work) she says confidently.

Having been a member of the now defunct Tawa Matsya Sangh, Guliya Bai joyously talks about the organisation that brought livelihood to hundreds of poor people. '*Sarkar ne chal karke tor diya,*' (it was a sabotage by the government to destroy the organization) she says resentfully.

Nothing stops Guliya Bai even at 65; she struggled for a year to get her and her husband's pension. '*Ye form bhara, woh form bhara, ek darawaza se ek darwaza*' (I kept on filling forms, and running from door to door) she says. She finally managed to get a meagre amount of Rs.150 per month.

Guliya Bai protested to the government against the insufficient pension sanctioned for old women, and almost no pension for widows.

While we wait for things to happen on their own, she will probably sit in another '*dharma*' in the near future to bring justice. In spite of being discouraged time and again by the government, or sometimes even by the men in her own village, the never-say-die attitude keeps the Kesala lady going.

—Adrija Bose  
Asian College of Journalism



Madhu Singhal



Neelam Sodhi



Anuradha Shankar and Shankar



Rubina Mazhar



Kamalakaran



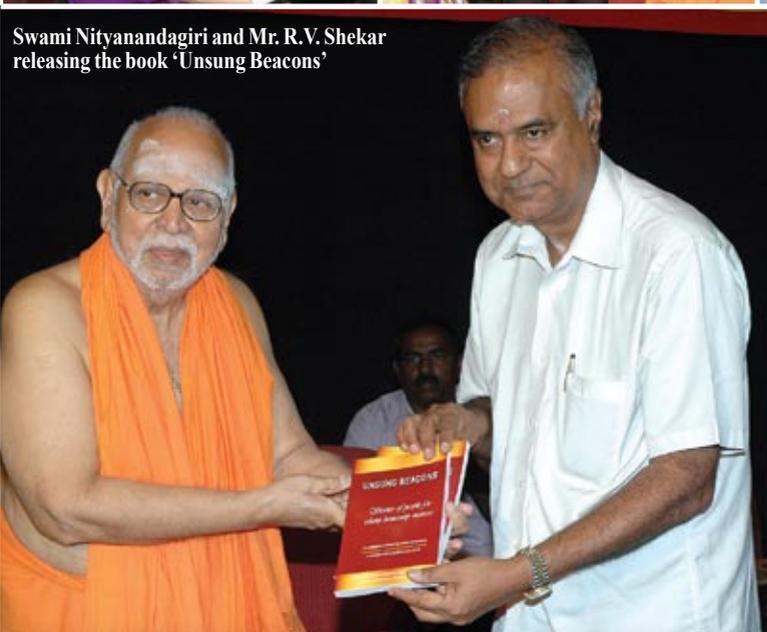
Vanjula Vasanth



Anu receiving on behalf of Jayanthi



R.P. Krishnamachari



Swami Nityanandagiri and Mr. R.V. Shekar releasing the book 'Unsung Beacons'



Audience at the event

# Sadguru Gnanananda Awards 2011

The twelfth Sadguru Gnanananda national awards was held on March 12, 2011 at Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai. The Chief Guest for the event was Mr R V Shekar, Managing Director, Lanson Holdings Ltd and the Guest of Honour was Swami Nityanandagiri of Tapovanam.

The awardees who were honoured this year were:

**Women Social Entrepreneurs**

- Ms. Madhu Singhal Founder, Mitra Jyothi, Bangalore
- Dr. Neelam Sodhi, Founder, Ashirwad, Ludhiana

**Family in Social Work**

- Mrs Anuradha Shankar & Mr Shankar, Founders, Tribal Society, Cuddalore

**Fellowships**

- Mr Kamalakaran, Founder, Vizhuthugal, Satyamangalam District.
- Ms. Rubina Mazhar, SAFA, Hyderabad

**Sadguru Gnanananda Social Citizenry Award**, was introduced this year for committed volunteers in the social sector. Eight volunteers involved in the Dal, Oil and Sugar (DOS) scheme were felicitated. They were: **Smt. Jayanthi Karthikeyan, Smt. Vanjula Vasanth, Shri Margabandhu, Shri K S Jayaraman, Smt Chandra Janakiraman, Shri P Subramaniam, Smt. Janaki Raghavan, and Shri R P Krishnamachari.**

'Unsung Beacons'—a compilation of inspiring stories published in *Conversations* in 2010 was released by Swami Nityanandagiri. *This publication is available at a price of Rs. 100 per copy. If you wish to make a purchase, please write to cmdc@csim.in.*



Margabandhu



K S Jayaraman



P Subramaniam



Chandra Janakiraman



Janaki Raghavan

# IToo Can!

**“One should not go to a corporate and demand them for a job just because he is disabled. Instead, we should train the disabled suitably and find a job that matches his skill set.” —Meenakshi Balasubramanian**



Meenakshi Balasubramanian with Akhil

MBA Foundation is a charitable trust at Powai in Mumbai that works for the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities. “The thought of launching this organisation started with me having a son who is dyslexic,” says Meenakshi Balasubramanian, Founder, Mutually Beneficial Activity (MBA) Foundation. Meenakshi moved to Delhi with her family when her son Akhil was four years old. “We noticed that he had specific problems. He was not able to do simple things which other children of his age could do. I used to ask him why he can’t write the alphabet ‘c’ which is very simple. I kept comparing him with my other son who is five years elder to him. Some of Akhil’s milestones were delayed. He was not able to jump and lacked finer coordination. I never knew that he had a disability until he went to school. It was when his teacher complained about his inability to read and write like other children, did we realise that he was dyslexic,” says Meenakshi. “My husband who visited London on an official trip heard about the British Dyslexia

Association. His colleague helped him get some learning material, and I sought the help of a special educator to teach me to educate my son. Dyslexia was not much known 20 years ago and so I went from place to place trying to find out ways to help my son. Due to difficulty in reading, Akhil was given books of lower classes, although he was capable of understanding more. He felt frustrated and cursed himself saying, ‘why can’t I read like others, why can’t I do things like others?’ “Akhil had formal education until class 6 with a special examination paper which had only objective questions. He used to ask me, ‘Why should I tick the answers, when my friends are all writing?’ I could not answer!” “When I visited Mumbai, I saw the new vocational training centre of the Spastics Society at Chembur, and totally fell in love with it. I said to myself—If not academics, let him at least be trained in vocational activities. I moved to Mumbai along with Akhil, who was 15 years old then, while my husband continued to live in Delhi with his parents and my elder son was in Coimbatore studying engineering,” adds Meenakshi.

**We noticed that he had specific problems. He was not able to do simple things which other children of his age could do. I used to ask him why he can’t write the alphabet ‘c’ which is very simple** ”

Dr. Mithu Alur, founder of Spastics Society observed Akhil for some time. She told Meenakshi that Akhil was not yet ready for vocational training, and that he needed more of education and school discipline. Akhil was enrolled in their school in Bandra where each class had only 6 to 8 children. It was here Akhil had a new lease of life. “When he saw the other children who were more disabled, he started to say ‘I can!’ He helped his spastic friends to eat, helped his teacher to hang the map, and was very active in his class. When I visited his class, I was disturbed as I wasn’t sure if Akhil who was an able bodied person would fit in here. I was concerned if the environment would affect him more. But instead, it had a very positive change in him,” says Meenakshi with a smile. Meenakshi pursued a course at NIIT while in Chennai and worked at Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) as a computer trainer in Delhi for a short while. When she moved to Mumbai, CII offered her a similar posting here. But, she opted to work at the computer lab in Spastics society.

“Dr. Alur said to me that CII will get a hundred Meenakshis”, but these children need me more. As a mother, I can understand these children. Therefore, I chose to work in Spastics Society,” she adds. Meenakshi trained Youngsters with different kinds of disabilities including hearing and speech impairment, taught them computer education, and coordinated placement through CII. In the year 2000, National Centre for Promotion of Employment of Disabled People awarded her with the Helen Keller award for her dedicated service in getting jobs for disabled persons in corporate houses. Recollecting the award, she says: “I would send the trained youngsters on internship to corporate houses like Essar, Mahindra and Mahindra, and many other companies with whom I have contacts. At first, they would be apprehensive to go, but after a week’s time they return happy as they would have experienced better working conditions in these companies.”



Meenakshi observed that most of the youngsters who were trained in tailoring, printing, and other areas of work were back in their homes doing nothing productive. She wanted to do something for them. She discussed her concerns with Dr Alur, and this set the beginning for a sheltered work shop for them. A number of items were produced in the workshop by the children with help from their teachers, and a stipend amount was offered to them. At the end of three years, on completion of training, there were seven girls who needed a regular working place. In the meanwhile, Akhil was progressing well in his studies and had completed his 8th standard. As the Maharashtra board had Marathi as a compulsory language to clear the SSC examination, Akhil found it difficult to learn a third language (he was already learning English and Hindi). Meenakshi introduced National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) which provides learner-centric quality school education in Spastics Society, and Akhil was the first student to enroll.

Meenakshi’s family have been very supportive of her efforts to educate Akhil. Her husband Balasubramanian once said to her, “when Spastics Society provided an answer for our son to progress, why don’t you think of doing something for these youngsters?” Meenakshi coordinated a survey in Mumbai and learnt that there were three or four institutions in and around Chembur that offered vocational training the disabled adults, but after a period of time they did not have a regular occupation. This was the similar situation for her seven students who had completed the vocational training. It was then she decided to launch a long-term programme for them. With the support of the parents of her seven students, she launched the MBA Foundation, which was inaugurated by Dr. Mithu Alur, Chairperson of Spastics Society. One of the parents offered her flat to set up the workshop and all the parents contributed towards the renovation costs. “We worked on the budget and decided to charge a nominal amount as fees to meet the running expenses. We wanted it to be like an office for the youngsters. They would come and make things that they have been trained in, or are capable of, and we would assist them to market their products. We also decided to pay the children a stipend for their service,” says Meenakshi. MBA Foundation was registered in December 2001, and is also registered under Society’s Act, Persons with Disabilities Act, and National Trust Act. “We made a decision not to specify our organisation to work with a specific segment of the disabled; hence we named it Mutually Beneficial Activities (MBA) Foundation with the mission—a life with self esteem and dignity for the disabled. When we have such a diverse

group, we find that each one is able to contribute, and together the team is able to produce more effectively,” adds Meenakshi. MBA has around 150 beneficiaries, networks with social organisations like Rotary club at Thane, and operates its programmes through four of its centres located at Powai, Chembur, Thane, and Gorai in Mumbai. “The parents of the disabled persons did not know what their children would do after their lifetime. NGOs did not have an answer either. This made us think of a Life Care for such disabled persons who cannot be mainstreamed through employment, or who cannot live independently and lead a life with dignity and self esteem. Early childhood intervention and life care is offered through the centres at Powai and Gorai; and vocational training and day care is provided through all our four centres. The centres at Powai and Gorai provide residential care along with other rehabilitation activities,” says Meenakshi. Adult education, training in communication and documentation, lamination, photocopying, telephone operation, and data entry are offered to the disabled youngsters in addition to making of products. CEDAT—Centre for Executive Development Training Programme, offers a 6 months course for the educated but unemployed persons with disabilities to prepare them for mainstream jobs. They are trained in English, computer operations, personality development, and executive calibre. Since 2007, CEDAT has offered training in association with NASSCOM Foundation for five batches that comprises of 15 to 20 trainees in each batch. Most of them have been placed in organizations like TCS, HDFC, ADFC, and Aurionpro. “Unlike in the past, corporate houses are sensitive and support charities. One should not go to a corporate and demand them for a job just because he is disabled. Instead, we should train the disabled suitably and find a job that matches his skill set,” says Meenakshi. Recently, MBA Foundation has launched a section 25 company called ‘Dignity Foundation for GODS (Groups of Disabled)’ through which they market their own products as well as products made by similar NGOs and disabled persons who work from their homes. GODS make a variety of products like candles, snacks, gift items, chocolates, squashes, pickles, and household products like hand wash, phenyl, and incense sticks. Akhil has been trained to coordinate and market these products along with a few others. “Being a parent I learnt a lot after dealing with my son. I had to be the occupational therapist, physiotherapist, counselor, and a special educator to be able to help my son. I never went to a special institution to learn, but underwent short term courses as a parent. I wish the parents’ group was stronger. We need to make them learn to behave with their own children,” concludes Meenakshi.



Ravi Subramanian



Akhil, 35 years old, a dyslexic, leads the public relations for MBA Foundation. He approaches clients, makes presentations, and follows up on product delivery. When asked about how he approaches the corporates, this is what Akhil said in a very confident tone: “I am not alone. I have my colleague Ravi Subramanian who helps me in marketing. I first take an appointment in a company and go and meet the HR officer or the HR head. I introduce myself and my organization and talk about the products we make. We then organize an exhibition in their venue and sell our products. We also invite them to our centre to see our activities.” Ravi, an engineer by qualification, lost his short term memory due to an accident. After the necessary medical treatment, doctors opined rehabilitation and occupation for him. He joined MBA Foundation 5 years ago, got trained in coping with his memory problem, and became an ideal partner for Akhil. He now has a sharp memory, but has writing problems. Their complementary skills have helped them in advancing in the field of public relations. Akhil further adds, “We have introduced a new scheme called ‘Friends of G.O.D.S club’, where a person pays Rs. 1500 a year to become a member. Each member chooses the products he wishes to receive and once in three months the products valued at Rs. 375 is supplied at their doorsteps. We have a detailed price list and have a lot of marketing schemes. We have bulk buyers (institutions, etc) who place regular orders, and we also sell our products in residential areas.” “We are not asking for donation, but instead creating jobs for our youngsters. Instead of buying somewhere else, we ask them to buy it from us! I want to work here even when I grow old, as I am very passionate towards the cause. I have to build up this organisation,” says a responsible Akhil.

—Marie Banu

# A Different

“His biggest motivator was himself—his lack of formal education, people laughing at him, and his community not having an image in Bangalore.”

# ENTREPRENEUR

Chenraj Jain is an entrepreneur with a difference. He is the founder chairman of the Jain Group of Institutions and is a person with a strong conviction that much more is possible than what people ordinarily think.

Chenraj is an MBB and not MBA! Those who have read ‘Rich Dad-Poor Dad’ by Robert Kiyosaki will understand the meaning of this. Although uneducated, he is capable of hiring 1000’s of MBAs and also nurture MBA students. In reality, he is far better educated than many. His MBB (Marwadi by Birth) DNA is what we need to emulate as a role model. He rightly says, “I don’t want my students to run for jobs, rather I want them to be entrepreneurs and create jobs”. Chenraj hails from a family where education was not considered important. For him, sports preceded academics and he studied only up to the eighth standard.

Chenraj Jain believes that success lies in conviction, positive energies, and attitude and that alone could guarantee accelerated success. In Basavangudi at Bangalore he started his career as a salesman in Bombay Dyeing with a paltry monthly salary of Rs 50. Delighting the first customer was his greatest self actualization. He excelled his experienced seniors who were drawing Rs 600 per month. Later, he worked in his uncle’s textile shop where Devaraj Ranka spotted him. This resulted in his meeting with Mr. Dhirubhai Ambani of Reliance Industries. He was provided a distributorship for Reliance Textiles Network at a very young age with a credit of 3 lakh rupees. He could liquidate two years of unsold inventories, but the initial success did not continue and resulted him losing one lakh rupees.

His selling approach pleased Mr Dhirubhai Ambani and instead of reprimand, he was provided more businesses with Reliance Textiles net work. Chenraj had a roaring business for ten years and was responsible for 1300 counters in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. His networking created more dealers for Reliance across South India and he handled unsold goods—damaged goods, raw and uncut material—not by weight but by the market price.

Chenraj’s strategies was simple. He covered more number of small customers than focusing on one big customer. If you read the book ‘Parable of the Pipe Line’ by Burke Hedges and go through the life of Chenraj Jain, you will realize that this is not a parable, but a true story of a living legend. Out of 100 contacts, he believed that 10 will give him business. Hence, small customers were his winning formula. At the age of 25, Chenraj had contacts with more than 5 lakh people. He created a network of 1000 entrepreneurs, who were also ordinary people, without any capital. This pipe line resulted in faster and better profits not only for him, but to his net worked friends who otherwise would have been monthly salary earners.

Swami Vivekananda’s books gave Chenraj the inspiration to trigger people to stand on their own feet. He realized that the future is in the knowledge eras. Also the issue of lack of education amongst his community members pained him. His father taught him freedom of space and Mahatma Gandhi’s life taught him to work against all odds. The very idea of building a holistic system of education came to his mind when he traveled in villages and saw hundreds of students begging. He realized that there is no dearth of talent in India,



but they were neither tapped nor the energies converged. At the age of 14, he rubber shoulders with Dhirubhai Ambani and that spirit is what has made him another Ambani (in a different context)—not in improving millions of money, but impacting millions of people.

These factors were the foundation seeds of the Jain Group of Institutions in Bangalore. At the heart of the curriculum at Jain’s schools are values imbibed from such people as Swami Vivekananda,

Dhirubhai Ambani, and N R Narayana Murthy—all of whom shaped Chenraj Jain’s personality. His own personal life experiences, risk taking capabilities, net working necessities, and win-win approaches added newer insights for the educational curriculum. Jain group of Institutions provide application focused quality education and holistic education, and creates individual who have an attitude to success.

Another interesting side of ChenRaj Jain is the incubating entrepreneur. Many cannot be by birth a businessman nor have the fortune of having his father’s business take a risk. He therefore started another educational venture, and called it humorously ‘creating MBP’ (Marwari by Practice). Beating the Varnasharma Dharma was his venture. If ordinary people have an idea and will to execute, then he is there to incubate them. So far, over 30 entrepreneurs have been incubated

by Chenraj. He does not believe that entrepreneurs are necessarily graduates. Another incubation that he does is on emerging sports personalities. To mention a few, Pankaj Advani, Robin Uthappa, Rohan Bopanna, Shika Tandon, Rehan Pooncha, Hariprasad, Karuna Jain, etc.

His biggest motivator was himself—his lack of formal education, people laughing at him, and his community not having an image in Bangalore. He wanted to be positive in whatever he did. He

wanted to prove his competence and to replicate those who were like him through the incubation model. He also plans to expand this spirit in the field of ‘Social Enterprise’.

Chenraj Jain believes that students are the main stakeholders. His Institutions are committed to bring out their best potential by providing them exposure not

only in academics but also in non academics like self development, soft skills, extra-curricular activities, and sports. He did not want his students to miss what he had missed as a student—fun and freedom of space. All JGI Institutions have the state of art technology, library, IT support systems, and an environment for studying.

Students at JGI go through practical labs of life, work in agricultural fields, encouraged to cook food at home, and are made to interact with economically deprived peers. JGI is a gurukula for experiential learning. This gurukula also focuses

on yoga, pranayama, and coaching sessions on Sanskrit language.

Chenraj adopted his success business recipe of networking, motivation, and hard work in education as well. His teachers are social entrepreneurs. Students are exposed to varied professional forums like HRD Network, National Institute of Personnel Management, and Bangalore Management.

Interestingly Chenraj owes the success of his Institutions to six teachers who could not speak fluently. He triggered confidence in them, gave opportunity and brought their innate talent and potential. Yes, not only in business did he created entrepreneurs, but in academics too he created better teachers.

He believes that a genuine educational institution must focus on building the right attitude amongst its students, and not just rosy report cards.

JGI faced a lot of challenges before it was accepted as a genuine educational institution. It was seen as a communal institution for the Jain community. Equal opportunity was provided to all students irrespective of their caste, creed, or wealth and this resulted in establishing a creditable identity. The institute also provides free education to economically deprived students.

Every member of the JGI is empowered - be it teacher or member of the shared services team. He felt that his institution gets better visibility from the invisible people. Hence, empowerment was a way of life. Chenraj believes that he has transcended from the doer, manager and director, to being an obedient servant. He believes that it is the teachers who know their students needs. According to him, nobody is an employee. The teachers are all participants and contributors and he allows them to them to play multifaceted roles.

Chenraj ensures that teachers keep their students pro actively engaged so that negative energies will have seldom scope to arise. He aims to fulfill all his ambitions and therefore has a variety of courses in JGI. The institute has started a separate course on aerospace research. A true servant leader, Chenraj enjoys in seeing others succeeding and many of his students becoming entrepreneurs.

JGI aims to contribute 2% of country’s GDP by creating leaders of business excellence. Chenraj believes in directing his students towards entrepreneurship and his students have come up with establishing 26 companies in various sectors like hospitality and technologies.

Having started with three schools, Chenraj Jain plans to replicate this to 100 schools in Karnataka in the next 5 years and reach out to one and a half lakh rural children. Today JGI has 28 institutions and 50% of the wealth is contributed to charity.

The Jain group of Institutions have become a deemed university called ‘Jain University’. If there is a will there is a way!

—S. Deenadayalan and Sonal Dhawale

# Humanity - Lost and Found

Ever wondered what goes on in the life of a person whom we loosely call a beggar? The sight of small children and frail looking ragged adults calling out to us on our busy roads is not an uncommon one, and it only invokes negative feelings. Popular media often depicts beggars as a tragic or comedy element, exaggerating the characteristics of the underground mafia, and the overt congeniality of the beggars themselves. The reality however is much stranger and unnerving than that. How does one turn into a beggar? Did you hear of the millionaire who was dumped into a Beggar's Home?

In the eyes of law, beggary is a crime. The Beggar's Home at Chembur in Mumbai (a custodial institution established by the Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act of 1959) is considered a nightmare by all accounts. Although its objective is to regulate and control beggary and to rehabilitate individuals with their family and organic society, the system is ridden with lengthy procedures. Once inside, it is only luck that can take you out of those iron gates.

Where is the lobby to take up the cause of these displaced and wronged individuals? The answer comes in the form of Koshish, a Field Action Project of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) formed in August 2006—the brain child of Mohammed Tarique, a student at TISS.

"While pursuing my Masters Degree in Social Work at TISS (2004-2006), I was placed for field work with an organisation working with street youth. Once all of a sudden, many boys went missing. Upon enquiring I came to know that the police had arrested them on charges of beggary. I went to meet them in the custodial home and I was shocked with what I saw."

"This was my first encounter with the Beggar's Home. Conditions were beyond one's imagination. It was overcrowded and it seemed as if people were simply left to die. How can we turn so uncaring and insensitive? I decided to challenge the situation. I knew it wasn't going to be easy to break down the institutions that have been there for decades, but I needed to be free from the guilt and shame of being part of the society that left its own people to die and become food for the rodents. I believe Koshish was born that very day!" says Tarique.

Tarique was not alone in establishing Koshish. When he first discussed the idea within TISS, Dr. Parasuraman, Director of TISS expressed that he was keen on doing something as an institution on the growing issue of homelessness. Vijay Nagaraj and Krithika, also of TISS, came together and engineered the birth of Koshish. Dr Vijay Raghavan, Asha B. Soletti, Professor Vidya Rao, and Professor Amita Bhide (all from TISS) and Kamini Kapadia from Action Aid India came together to form the Advisory Board of Koshish. Today, besides the people mentioned above, the close knit working team includes Mangala Honawar and Pradeep, both former students of TISS.

Koshish works within the Beggar's Home. Absolute belief in the worth of every individual is what makes them different. Their aim is to protect the rights of the people arrested under the Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act 1959.



"Our focus has been on empowering the homeless by building their capacities through various means. We have stayed within the system to challenge the system and that's the beauty of our intervention. Efforts have been put to make government take up the responsibility and collaborate in the entire process, thus making the government accountable towards its people. Our strategy of networking with the police system and organisations in various states has helped in alliance-building to advocate for policy changes," says Tarique.

Koshish works towards reintegrating homeless persons with their families and also back with the society and has succeeded well in their mission.

"So far, we have been able to intervene with at least 1,000 people and reintegrated almost 300 homeless people with their families. We have been able to trace the homes of our clients across the country who had lost contact with their families, been missing for weeks or months or years, and were found wandering on streets due to mental illness or family discord. We interact and understand our client. Our team members make home visits, inform families of the law and sensitise them towards the client's condition and ensure family support by regularly following up with them," says Tarique.

"We also enlist the support of the police and our network partners from different states across India. The support of the various government agencies in our intervention processes is growing favorably as the years go by. Their active participation and contribution has been of great significance in the implementation of our intervention programs.

A large number of clients who couldn't be taken back to their families are now living independently, are well settled in their jobs, and rebuilding their social life. On the whole, I attribute our successes to dedication, teamwork, and perseverance. But for my

dedicated team, this project would be very difficult to run," adds Tarique.

Koshish has faced a lot of problems as their field setting itself is a challenge. "Government treated us as if we never existed. If we are poor, what do we do? All we want is to live. Is that a crime? We would all have been forced to the streets and cycle of debts if you weren't there," says Megha, Raju's wife. She was deeply relieved when Koshish informed her about Raju's whereabouts and ensured his release and return to the family.

The very experience of clients being in custody is traumatic for both the client and as well as the worker. "Staff dynamics in these types of institutions is another challenge that one faces

*A large number of clients who couldn't be taken back to their families are now living independently, are well settled in their jobs, and rebuilding their social life*

regularly. To mobilise support for the client group, with so many wrong notions attached with them, hasn't been easy either. Building relations is the key to our work. Since we work so closely with the system, often our client group sees us as a part of beggar's home staff. We are seen as the very people who arrested them and all their anger and frustration for being arrested is wrongly taken out on us," quips Tarique.

"Life with Dignity—it's not only my need or a choice I have made. It's my right and I will continue to struggle for it," says Uma, aged 60, who was arrested under BPBA 1959, and got released after Koshish intervention.

Unfazed by all these challenges Tarique speaks about Koshish's future plans. He says: "We are

focused on getting this punitive legislation repealed, and are confident of achieving it in the near future. However, even when this law will be repealed, the problem of destitution will still remain, and the rehabilitation process will continue to be a challenge. So, we are now channelising our energies to build appropriate structures and systems through which vulnerable people will be protected and supported."

"We also aim to become a platform where youth could come and experiment with their ideas, thoughts, and vision without any hindrances, restrictions, or fears. We feel today's youth is promising and willing to take up challenges. They need direction and motivation. We have been putting in our efforts to make the youth realise why it is important for them to get involved in the issues of justice delivery and protection of rights of vulnerable groups, and why they must speak up for the weak. We want them to overcome the fears of consequences and fear of failure while doing so," says Tarique.

It has been a great learning curve for this youngster and his friends involved in Koshish. "People with tremendous grit and determination can rebuild their lives, even with little support. We are witness to their capacities in doing that. The patience and faith that they have in relations is tremendous. All it takes to make the system move is pure simple love. Through this work we have seen how greed and hate spoil beautiful families, and how jealousy has ruined people's life. But, we have also learnt that the biggest truth of life is still 'love'. It wins over anything else. Make a beginning! That's the most crucial step to move mountains," concludes Tarique.

May the efforts of this group pave the way for a young and vibrant India where beggary should be something that the next generation can learn about in museums alone!

—Archanaa R.

# Mind Control, Surrender and Consciousness of Self

An inspiring conversation with Ramana Maharishi and his disciples, Mr. S. Ranganathan, I.C.S., Collector of Vellore, Mr. S. V. Ramamurthi, I.C.S., and Mr. T. Raghaviah, late Diwan of Pudukottah, on mind control, surrender, and consciousness of self.

**Mr. Ranganathan** asked, "Kindly instruct me as to how the mind may be controlled."

**Maharishi.** There are two methods. The one is to see what the mind is; then it subsides. The second is to fix your attention on something; then the mind remains quiet.

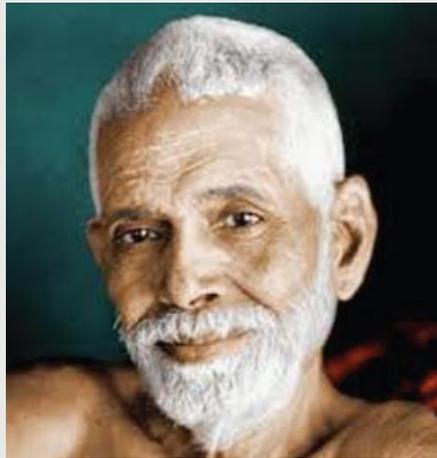
The questioner repeated the question for further elucidation. The same answer was returned with a little more added. The questioner did not look satisfied.

**Mr. Raghaviah:** Men of the world that we are, we have some kind of grief or another and do not know how to get over it. We pray to God and still are not satisfied. What can we do?

**M.:** Trust God.

**D.:** We surrender; but still there is no help.

**M.:** Yes. If you have surrendered, you must be able to abide by the will of God and



not make a grievance of what may not please you. Things may turn out differently from what they look apparently. Distress often leads men to faith in God.

**D.:** But we are worldly. There is the wife, there are the children, friends and relatives. We cannot ignore their existence and resign ourselves to Divine Will, without retaining some little of the personality in us.

**M.:** That means you have not surrendered as professed by you. You must only trust God.

**Mr. Ramamurthi:** Swamiji, I have read Brunton's book 'A Search in Secret India' and was much impressed by the last chapter where he says that it is possible to be conscious without thinking. I know that one can think, remaining forgetful of the physical body. Can one think without the mind? Is it possible to gain that consciousness which is beyond thoughts?

**M.:** Yes. There is only one consciousness, which subsists in the waking, dream, and sleep states. In sleep there is no 'I'. The 'I-thought' arises on waking and then the world appears. Where was this 'I' in sleep? Was it there or was it not? It must have been there also, but not in the way that you feel now. The present is only the 'I-thought', whereas the sleeping 'I' is the real 'I'. It subsists all through. It is consciousness. If it is known you will see that it is beyond thoughts.

**D.:** Can we think without the mind?

**M.:** Thoughts may be like any other activities, not disturbing to the Supreme consciousness.

**D.:** Can one read others' minds?

The Master as usual told him to find his Self before worrying about others.

"Where are others apart from one's own Self?" asked the Master.

**Mr. Raghaviah:** How shall we correlate the higher experience with the lower experience (meaning spiritual experience with mundane affairs)?

**M.:** There is only one experience. What are the worldly experiences but those built up on the false 'I'? Ask the most successful man of the world if he knows his Self. He will say "No". What can anyone know without knowing the Self? All worldly knowledge is built upon such a flimsy foundation.

**Mr. Ramamurthi:** How to know the 'Real I' as distinct from the 'false I'.

**M.:** Is there anyone who is not aware of himself? Each one knows, but yet does not know, the Self. A strange paradox.

The Master added later, "If the enquiry is made whether mind exists, it will be found that mind does not exist. That is control of mind. Otherwise, if the mind is taken to exist and one seeks to control it, then it amounts to mind controlling the mind, just like a thief turning out to be a policeman to catch the thief, i.e., himself. Mind persists in that way alone, but eludes itself."

—Excerpted from Sri Ramana Maharshi teachings

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## Insights-on a path to self discovery *A Series on Growing -Reflections for Deep Change*

'I' is the fuel we need to burn to fly high (p15, Inner Realities, Insight Publishers, Bangalore, India, 2003).

We many times wonder, what is that one thing that will make the journey of a social entrepreneur stress free? Most of the times it is the ability to truly let go and discover oneself while discovering the society. The paradoxical part of this understanding is that only by complete submission and submerging, self discovery begins to take place and insights begin to emerge. This has also been a strong eastern orientation that unless one does not let go and submit completely to anything, one cannot discover self.

The challenge for a social entrepreneur is to ask if one should go with answers to the field which requires their intervention, or should one submerge, experience the space, and let the answers emerge. The stress comes in when the social entrepreneur thinks they know what needs to be done, and begin to judge the space and develop interventions based on those judgments, while the space may actually require something else. This begins right from the time the person steps in to do a baseline study of the targeted society.

Do I see what is or what I think it is? This is a critical reflection that one needs to do. When one is willing to totally let go of all assumptions and interpretations, but is willing to observe, absorb, and reflect on all that is existing the reality that emerges allows for answers that are not simply right, but also more appropriate.

This parable describes the experience very well.

A salt doll journeyed for thousands of miles and stopped on the edge of the sea. It was fascinated by this moving liquid mass, so unlike anything it had seen before. "What are you?" asked the salt doll to the sea. "Come in and see", said the sea with a smile. So the doll walked in. The further it went the more it dissolved till there was only a pinch of salt left. Before that last bit dissolved, the doll exclaimed in wonder, "Now I know what I am!" (Sampath. J.M. story 90 Discovery – 3rd edition, Insight Publishers, Bangalore, India, 1998)

The saying that part is a dimension of the whole has been there for long. But it usually does not get integrated into the life perspective so easily. When we explore the world and its nature it is in reality an exploration of ourselves. For discovery to happen the essentials are:

- Absolute openness to observe, explore, experience, and reflect to oneself
- Willingness to identify the biases that arise in our mind and to set it aside
- A strong connectivity to all that one is observing as happening in the society to what is happening within
- Willingness to accept the context as it is and not judging the context from what it is not or what it ought to be
- Allowing the subtleties to emerge



and the process to show the pathway towards solutions

- Required discipline and intensity to document every experience at the form as well as essence level
- Willingness to learn to learn and not be in a hurry to conclude

To conclude and emerge as an expert has been seen as a mark of growth. But, the precepts of the eastern philosophy indicate that 'knowing many a time stops one from knowing more'. It is the ability to recognize how little one knows, and the vastness of the universe and depth to which one can go to explore life—contains the real growth.

When we explore the society and the issues from this angle, we will not get stuck in the relationship of giver-receiver. There will be a realization that each one of us is also responsible for all that is happening in the world today and cannot pass the blame to anyone else. That realization is likely to bring in a sense of

accountability to provide contribution to make any space a better place than what it is. This accountability coupled with action orientation will lead to emergence of certain pathways that one can formulate to respond to a particular situation. The word respond is very critical here, since if it is not out of a realization we tend to react, and reaction need not necessarily give appropriate actions. Journeying in these pathways gives space for solutions to emerge for several issues that plague the society and our existence. When we revisit the path traversed by several leaders and social entrepreneurs we realize at an essence level that it is the same as what is described above.

### Points for Reflection:

- What are the methods I use to identify my biases as they emerge?
- How do I discover more of myself as my mind suffers while studying the issues that plague the society?
- What is my own acceptance and intensity level in self discovery and how do I enhance it?
- At what depth am I able to experience my extent of accountability to all the things around me?
- What are the things I do on an every day basis to take care of this accountability?

—J.M.Sampath & Kalpana Sampath

**T**op Down should give commitment of resources to match the planning of the Bottom Up process. Societal needs are better understood by the people in the bottom of the pyramid. Needs definition underlines the existing gap or not existence at all. Once the perceived gap is understood, it will lead to an exercise of qualifying it. The gap may be existing temporarily or permanently, or occurring cyclically or irrationally. One has to assess the influence of gaps on lifestyle, living standards and/or impacts, short term or long term on citizens, communities, groups, or society.

Many a time the impact is so severe, that the people suffering are left numb; the people do not know the suffering. The issues are complex, varied, confounding, and basic. Hence, planning, profound solutions, and strategies are found or developed by the people, and only facilitation is done by social entrepreneurs who are sensitive and deeply concerned. Therefore, the planning is Bottom Up, and financial, infrastructure and competence inputs come from Top Down process.

Optimum and effective use of resources should be seen in the performance of the organisation, and such competence must be built by local organisations and facilitated by local members.

Bottom up processes bring in and reinforce 'the ownership' component of social enterprises. The changes that are brought about in these Bottom Up enterprises are almost a revolution in evolution.

The people at the bottom of the pyramid are concerned about nature, animals, birds, underground and surface water, waste reduction, and waste recycle

## SCALE OUT NOT SCALE UP

as a part of their existence. Therefore, they will protect, preserve, and nurture these elements in the process of building a social enterprise.

The people at the bottom of the pyramid will not allow lopsided growth of the individual components of life, namely: Economy, Equity and Ecology (The Three Es).

Top down planning has always attempted top sided growth unintentionally or unknowingly, and that is what past tells us. We need to correct the major misalignment to bring Economy, Equity, and Ecology in a harmonious balance. Social enterprises are wholesome, interdependent, smoothly meeting ever-changing change by sound practices and early interventions.

Social enterprises can belong to different sizes and scales. The scales are mega, medium, small, mini/micro orders. While each one of the above scales have good, bad, and indifferent dimensions, the selection of scales will emanate from one that is more effective and simple, in every context that one considers. Another guiding factor is resource availability, mobilisation, movement, application and its management. Local resource dependency is to be largely recoured. With all the above ramifications, social sector/social enterprises should tend to be a micro enterprise (there could be exceptions).

If one has to manage a micro enterprise, the resources—monetary, human, infrastructural—is very small. A microenterprise should be accessible and could be located within limited geography.

One can qualitatively demonstrate 'giving' and 'sharing' as a basic philosophy of living. Of all factors, 'relationship' will be its strongest and admirable. In such a micro enterprise it is possible to demonstrate that quality of outcome, impact, or goal is the supreme, and not quantity.

Documenting the practices and developing replicable best practices will be dominant activity.

A question will arise as how do we reach out to more people in the bottom of the pyramid. This will be achieved by customisation and replication in many paces by local ownership, local training, and local support.

Through a network of communication processes the multitudinous micro enterprises can stay connected and derive advantage by replication of appropriate practices.

A micro enterprise is simple, nimble, quick, clearly communicative, and alert to changing change. It can be creative; innovative (innovation is not invention but doing things differently). It will trigger servant leadership and create social entrepreneurs for the community/society/ neighbourhood. The replicability effect will provide an epidemic like movement in spread and reach for the common good.

Micro enterprise can be micro financed and serving of debt and its repayment will become the responsibility collectively of the micro community. (Dr. Kurien somewhere wittily said you could cheat the government but not your neighbour)

Scale out and not scale up concept is a running mate of the micro enterprise concept. Scale up results most often into a monolithic, giant like structure. This structure slowly and definitely promotes inflexible bureaucracy. The structure becomes rigid and decision making takes undue long time. Naturally, the exercise becomes expensive and unaffordable. The cost of maintaining the structure and bureaucracy becomes so heavy; almost entirely the budget provided for the cause/goal is consumed. The passion to do social good through a social enterprise goes out of the window.

Whereas 'Scale out' as opposed to 'Scale up' is a solution that supports people and is entrepreneurial. To 'Scale out' and at the same time, meet the social expectation, you have to have multiplicity of ventures, leading to micro enterprises. Scale out reaches out to the doorsteps of the people at the bottom of the pyramid, trains them and gets them in a self help mode, and helps each other in mission achievement.

Scale out to every nook and corner, kindle the enterprising spirit each citizen has and inspire him or her to work together to create, innovate and become productive and effective.

The 'scale out' philosophy should be 'Each one, reach one', 'Each one teach one', 'Each one bring a smile on the face of the other'. How blissful is such a solution, long lasting, everlasting, ever sustaining, to a 'new world', 'new way of life' and 'new spirit of existence'!

—P.N.Devarajan

# Cream of the Crop

**Chiyaan Vikram**  
shares with  
**Marie Banu**  
his passion for  
cinema and how  
it can address  
social issues



**V**ikram, popularly known as Chiyaan, is the first amongst the South Indian acting fraternity to be conferred with an honorary doctorate for his excellence in fine arts (acting) by a foreign university. After the critical and commercial success of *Sethu* he has been part of numerous other commercially successful films and has earned major critical acclaim for many of his performances. He has won three Filmfare Awards as well as India's most prestigious National Film Award for Best Actor.

A simple and compassionate person, Chiyaan is known to celebrate his birthday through charity work each year. He is the founder of 'The Vikram Foundation' that aims to work for women and child development; education and literacy; and support and medical aid to the disabled and underprivileged. He has also inaugurated the 'Kasi Eye Bank' and was the first to pledge his eyes for donation.

*In an interview with Marie Banu, Chiyaan Vikram shares his passion for cinema and how it can address social issues.*

**Many of your popular roles depict issues/problems faced by the general public. What makes you choose these roles?**

Frankly, I don't believe in performing to carry across a message. I am very passionate about cinema. I would rather train my efforts towards cinema as entertainment and seek other mediums to advocate social issues. For all you know, I may play an assassin or a rapist in my next film. It would curb my creativity to confuse the two.

Certain roles like *Anniyan* or *Samurai* were purely the director's need and want to delve on a social cause. I was just an instrument. But, I loved doing those roles. I chose these roles more for the performing potential than for anything else.

**How would you rate the role of cinema in addressing social issues? Would you call yourself a catalyst in bringing about social change through these movies?**

Cinema is one of the most powerful tools in reaching the public. Every actor has used it to a certain degree to meet or justify some end. For me, cinema per se, it will always remain a canvas wherein I can explore my art. But even as I say this, I am glad that few of my roles have addressed certain social issues with far reaching effect.

**You are known to be a socially conscious person in the film fraternity and have been supporting people in need. Can you elaborate on your journey in social service?**

I've always believed in what is said so wonderfully in the Bible—not letting the right hand know what the left does. Being socially conscious is what makes us different. And being an actor is a boon! I find it much more easier to reach across people, much easier to influence people to help, and much easier to carry a message or movement forward. And I've been doing just that in my own small way.

**It is learnt that the crew of *Kandasamy* had adopted two villages in Madurai and provided infrastructure facilities for schools. Any interesting experience with the rural folk here?**

That was spearheaded by the director and the producer of the movie. I was glad to be a part of that venture. A lot of good work went into that project. And in a few months we had reached to almost 20 villages. But interestingly, more than providing amenities, we educated them on independence and sustenance.

**If you would choose to be a social activist (like *Anniyan*), which issue would you campaign for?**

I think what *Anniyan* advocated suits me perfectly, because I identify with every issue that he addressed.

More than anything, change has to come from within each one of us!

**Can you tell us about 'The Vikram Foundation' and 'Kasi Eye Bank'?**

'The Vikram Foundation' has done a lot of work in children welfare—helping under privileged children in reaching their basic academic goals; medical aid and post operative care, specializing in heart operations.

The Kasi Eye Bank has always been a dream for me ever since I played Kasi! I felt that was the only way I could do justice for the deep want that he created in my soul. What was heartening was that when I announced that I was starting the movement on my birthday, and that I was pledging my eyes, a thousand of my fans joined me in that endeavour on that very day! Since then, it has been only growing stronger.

The Agarwal Eye Hospital has associated with the Kasi Eye Bank and do quite a few operations free of cost every month.

**As a brand ambassador for 'Vidya Sudha', (a school for children with special needs), do you have any suggestions for "inclusiveness" of these children in society?**

All it takes is realizing that these children could have been one of our own, and that they are born this way through no fault of theirs. Just like Kasi, I felt a need to do something for them too. Krishna, the character I play in the movie *Deivathirumagan* is my answer. Krishna will touch everyone in his own special way and has the beautiful message of "inclusiveness"!

**Being a very busy actor, how do you find time for social work?**

I have not done much. Whenever I am free or there is an opportunity to do something, I do it. My wife and my friend Suri have been a great source of help in this regard. So have doctors from Sri Ramachandra hospital, who take extra pain to do scores of operations for us.

**What was your first reaction when you heard that the Universita Popolare Degli Studi Di Milano, Italy has chosen you for an honorary doctorate for excellence in Fine arts (acting)?**

I am still reeling from that. It is a great honor that is bestowed upon me, and I feel humbled by it!

**Your advice for youth who aspire to be social entrepreneurs?**

Go for it! The youth of today are the pillars of tomorrow!

## Editorial

**Latha Suresh**  
**Marie Banu**