

Inspiring Conversations

*A compilation of Celebrity Interviews featured in
Conversations - a tabloid on social issues*

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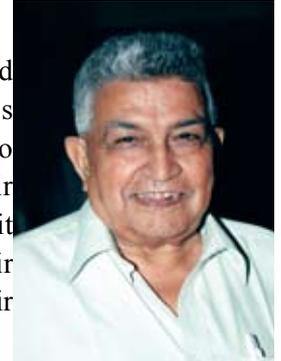
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FOUNDER'S NOTE

Conversations, a monthly tabloid launched in January 2010, showcases Social Entrepreneurs and celebrities who demonstrate social responsibility in their work. The celebrities featured in the Chat section of Conversations share their passion for a social cause and express their concerns and thoughts about our society.



It is remarkable to note that every celebrity featured in Conversations yearns to make an impact in the society through his or her chosen profession and is proud to be associated with a social cause.

Inspiring Conversations is a unique publication which has peeped into the soul of several celebrities and has presented a different perspective of their work and ideas. Bureaucrats, film directors, actors, musicians and philanthropists have all given inspiring insights about how society matters to them.

This publication is a compilation of 27 interviews that can guide the way to many an aspiring celebrity. Marie Banu has painstakingly researched and interviewed these remarkable celebrities and has succinctly conveyed their thoughts. Just the way some talk shows and reality shows inspire people, I hope this collection of conversations will encourage the reader to emulate these celebrities.

P.N.Devarajan

Founder

Centre for Social Initiative and Management

FOREWORD

“Be the change you want to be and want to see,” is the famous dictum of Mahatma Gandhi who believed in practice and not mere precept.

There is need for collective consciousness in society to rise against injustices borne by the poor and underprivileged.



Ms. Marie Banu, the dynamic social scientist, has been interacting with personalities from different walks of life who have taken upon themselves to feel for the people and to contribute towards the overall wellness of society. She has been writing regularly in an informative journal ‘Conversations’ which is a popular platform to exchange ideas to motivate people in different fields.

CSIM has very thoughtfully brought out a compilation of Ms. Banu’s interactions which I am sure would strengthen their goal of creating the much needed awakening in society.

This is a book not merely to be browsed, but read, thoughts assimilated and reflected.

My congratulations and best wishes to Ms. Banu and CSIM for their maiden venture. God speed in all their noble deeds!

R. Nataraj, IPS (R)

Chairman

Tamilnadu Public Service Commission

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Conversations, a tabloid exclusively on social issues, is unique in its own way. Launched in January 2010, *Conversations* discusses through positive stories social issues that concern many of us. Each section in this tabloid is well defined and Chit Chat is one of them.



Chit Chat features interviews with celebrities engaged in social work or who have made an impact in society through their work. Celebrities from various walks of life are interviewed - film personalities, musicians, bureaucrats, and philanthropists.

As researcher and interviewer, I have found the experience enriching in many ways. For one, I am humbled by the humility of these busy, illustrious personalities.

“Thank you for finding me worthy of your pages,” said film director Jayendra when I thanked him for giving me time for the interview. When I had forgotten to record the interview with Mrs. Khushboo, she said: “You want to come over again, come over. If you want to give a call, you can.”

I must make a special mention about Dr. Kamala Selvaraj. She was the only celebrity to call and thank me for sending across the print copy. I was teary-eyed with happiness when she said, “The interview has come out very well.”

Interviewing bureaucrats was equally edifying. Their crisp response to each question meant I did not need to edit them at all. I would like to mention that Dr. V. Irai Anbu, IAS; Dr. J. Radhakrishnan, IAS; Dr. C. Sylendra Babu, IPS; and Mr. J.K. Tripathy, IPS scheduled the interview before or after office hours so that their work was not affected.

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I must thank Mr. P.N. Devarajan, Founder, CSIM, for giving me the opportunity to work for CSIM and engage in *Conversations*.

I would like to express my thanks to Mrs. Latha Suresh, Director, CSIM, for her sensitive and perceptive inputs. Her enthusiastic interest has been a perpetual source of encouragement.

I wish to thank Mr. Amit Kumar, a communications professional, who mentored me. His tips on design and content has made *Conversations* sharper.

Finally, I would like to thank my Mom and Dad for their constant love and support.

Hope you enjoy reading the interviews. I would love to hear from you.

Marie Banu. J

*Head – Communications & Networking
Centre for Social Initiative and Management*

CELEBRITY INTERVIEWS



SINCERELY ZEALOUS

Amala Akkineni was educated in Bharathanatyam at Kalakshetra, Chennai, and is married to Telugu actor Akkineni Nagarjuna.

She is a prominent animal welfare activist and founder of Blue Cross of Hyderabad, a non-government organization which works for the welfare of animals and preservation of animal rights. She is a vegan and an environmentalist. She also teaches Yoga for women, and promotes communal harmony.

Amala Akkineni shares with Marie Banu her passion for animals and her guidance to those who seek to volunteer.

What inspired you to launch Blue Cross of Hyderabad?

As a professional aspiration, I had never planned being an actor. But, it was a very good profession as far as financial stability is concerned. Once I achieved this, I wanted to do something that appealed to my heart. I made a clean career break. I got married and moved into my husband's city.

I went back to classical dancing and I started rehearsing with Jyotsana, my friend from Kalashetra, who also lived in Hyderabad. I would go to Secunderabad for rehearsals and en route found sick and injured animals. I started rescuing them—taking them to the local vets, looking after them at home—and after a month or so my husband came back from work one day and said, “Our house is like a zoo. There are injured animals in every nook and corner including a buffalo with a broken hip in our garage. You really should do this in a more organized way.” It was his idea! Till then, I was just responding to needs. He donated me the first ambulance and that is how Blue Cross started.

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Blue Cross has extended help to over 300,000 sick, injured and abused animals and birds till date. Did you envisage this reach when you launched Blue Cross?

It is interesting you ask. I had a wonderful experience. Initially when I saw all the suffering I thought, ‘Oh God! How am I going to do all this?’ If you have helped one you would see another 20 waiting for treatment.

One night, Rukmini Devi (*athai* as we would call her) appeared in my dream. I had a lot of love and regard for her and had interacted with her when she was alive. In my dream, she was taking a group of students from my dance class and walking briskly around Kalashetra campus. She had her hands sweeping and showing the entire vast expanse of Kalashetra, the classes, the performances, and the theatre. She had a twinkle in her eye and she told me, “Do you think I thought about all of this when I started Kalashetra? Do what you believe and the universe will help you!”

I woke up that morning feeling absolutely sure that what I was going to begin was something that the universe needed to be done and I was just an instrument. I don’t think of this as my work or my doing. There are so many wonderful people and animals whose energies have gotten together. This to me is the expression of best of human qualities—compassion and service, joy and love. I am happy to be part of it!

Some people are paranoid of stray dogs even though they would have been sterilized and free from disease. What is your advice for them?

There are all sorts of people. On the one hand, there are people who fear animals because of some traumatic experience that has led them to feel that way. On the other hand, we have certain psychotic or so called animal terrorists who are socially misfit and they use

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animals to cause a different kind of terror in the community. One has to have a fine balance.

As far as I know, every reputed organization working for animals has a good education program which reaches out to the community and exposes people and their children to understand animals and how to behave with them. The Blue Cross education program has a specifically designed slide show presentation for school children. It addresses exactly that—how children need to behave with animals; why a dog bites and how to avoid getting bitten; how to overcome fear; how they can understand animals better; and what is the body language when a dog is playful, angry, sick, etc. What we understand, we share with the children, and they love it.

Your organization has been promoting the adoption of indigenous mixed-breed Indian dogs as part of your mission to bring down the number of homeless animals. Can you share with our readers your experience?

We want to reduce stray and homeless animals so we sterilize animals and give homeless puppies for adoption. We promote adoption of Indian homeless animals from the hundreds of puppies, kittens, cats, and dogs abandoned on the streets. We believe everyone can help by adopting a homeless one and not just by buying fashionable pedigreed animals.

When an animal becomes part of your family it is like a child. Sadly in India, most of our pedigreed animals are inbred and unscientifically bred. All of them have some kind of genetic flaw. At three or four, a Dalmatian can die of kidney failure; at three or four, a German Shepherd could get hip dysplasia; and at one or two years of age, a Great Dane could suffer from liver failure. A pet lover who begins to love their animals like members of their family goes through the trauma of disease and then death of a pet.

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I had both my young Dalmatians die in my arms due to kidney failure. It was deeply disturbing as they were adorable wonderful creatures. Whereas, the Indian dogs, and I have had many of them along with my pedigreed dogs, are so hardy and naturally designed for our climate that besides their annual vaccination and sterilization operations, they never fall sick. I never had an Indian dog have health issues like the pedigreed ones. They are affectionate, loyal, and excellent guard dogs too.

Which of these roles would you like yourself to be identified with: Dancer; Actor; Animal welfare activist; spouse of a leading Star; all of them?

I think we all have different roles at different times. I work with about 12 reputed organizations on different issues. It could be animal welfare, environmental protection, widow empowerment, orphan education, or HIV awareness. Each issue is very dear to my heart, but there is something about animals that is dear to me. From the age of five I have been rescuing injured birds and animals. That is definitely part of my personality and it will be in any role I play. Whether I am the superstar's wife, or a dancer, or an actor, that animal rescuer will always be part of my psyche.

Your guidance to those who seek to volunteer?

One must have a very strong ethical code of conduct. Unfortunately, in most welfare movements there is so much of negativity and politics where people are insulting each other to get a better name or position in the name of the cause. One must focus on the work and avoid the negativity. Secondly, you would need strong commitment. If you say that you feel strongly for children, then make an appointment in your diary and say when you will go out to do it. Stop talking, stop thinking, but go and do it!

The first time you help you will learn. When you attend a course on the issue, or volunteer or intern with an organization by offering

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your professional skills you will get a deeper understanding of how you can help. But, make that commitment first!

I would say that three hours of volunteering in a week is enough to start. If you are able to keep that appointment, then at the end of the month you would have not only increased your confidence and understanding, but you would have also connected with a lot of people who are already doing that work, increased your network, and at the end of the year have a very impressive report of what you were able to do.

That is how the three lakh animals came about at Blue Cross. You make that commitment, and before you know you would be well on the path of social work.

There is so much to do and so much to learn, so all the best!

"When an animal becomes part of your family it is like a child. Sadly in India, most of our pedigreed animals are inbred and unscientifically bred. All of them have some kind of genetic flaw."



SENSITIVE FRAMES

'Angadi Theru' produced by Ayngaran International depicts the everyday struggles in the lives of salespersons in the city. The movie highlights the vulnerability of the rural folk and abuse at the workplace.

Arun Pandian shares with Marie Banu how he uses media to bring about social change.

You started your career as an actor, and now have turned into being a producer. Do you have any intention of getting back to acting?

I haven't started thinking about it. But I do not know when I will change myself. I joined the Institute of Film Technology for an acting course but spent most of my time in the direction, processing and editing department. Although I started my career as an actor, I was also part of the production team. I even distributed my first film *'Oomai Vizhigal'* along with my good friend Abhavananm. Besides, I have even edited and directed movies. So, right from the beginning I have been involved in every phase of the film industry.

Are you happy being a producer now?

Yes. I love to give a social message in my movies like *'Angadi Theru'*. At every stage a human being starts learning something. We cannot be good when we start, but we can understand what is good and bad at a later stage. What I was thinking about commercial films earlier has changed once I established my own production company. We are now thinking of bringing social reforms through our films.

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When you entered the film industry, was there any resentment from your family?

My father was a colonel in the army and my uncle was the Vice-Chancellor of Ramachandra Medical University. Another uncle was an engineer, the first Executive Director for BHEL in South India and my brother was in the shipping industry. Everyone in the family was in a different line of work and therefore they did not stop me from joining the film industry, although there was slight resentment. But slowly, they understood that I had made the right choice.

What was the first reaction when you heard the story line of ‘Angadi Theru’?

I was amazed and impressed. The movie has projected abuse of both boys and girls at the workplace.

I have three daughters and I say that I am like a warden in my house. I know the value of women. I told the director that after seeing the movie, my wife should feel for the salespersons when she goes to the shop and every man should respect women.

When you wanted to produce the movie, did you think that it was a risk that you were taking?

Of course yes! It is not a normal formula subject and you cannot find this kind of film made in the past. To be very frank, the director had narrated this subject to a lot of well-known producers in the industry. They had their own opinion, but my intention was different.

I was a little hesitant about the movie climax. On discussion with the director Mr. Vasantha Balan, we made it positive. He is a great director with a lot of caliber and lives with the film. I too live with my each and every production except for the big commercial films, which has no value addition to the society and has only the entertainment factor.

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The movie depicts the life of salespersons in a shop in T Nagar. Did the shop owners object?

Bonded labor system and abuse of women is happening all over the world. This issue is common and the movie shows how the vulnerability of the poor people is abused.

For a movie, we need to identify a certain place for people to picturise the issue and so we chose T. Nagar. We did not mean to project any individual and that was not our intention.

Of the issues projected in the movie, which one are you are passionate about: poverty, disability, unemployment or abuse?

The worst is poverty and abuse. After watching the movie, Madam Kanimozhi M.P.said that she is proud to know that I am conscious of the issues in society.

Will you continue producing movies like ‘Angadi Theru’ or have a mix of commercial movies as well?

This film ‘Angadi Theru’ is also a commercial hit. This is what we want - good cinema. It is not whether it is a commercial or an art film. Once people develop a taste for good cinema, they will surely encourage such films in the future.

As a movie maker, do you aim for an award or is there anything else?

You are born to live and do something for the society. There are a lot of things that needs to be changed in and around us. Nobody is born perfect.

For example, I have been cleaning my plate for the last four years. I do not give it to anybody either at home or in office. It really helps a servant who is working in my house to feel that whatever work she is doing, is not demeaning. This may be a small issue but it makes the people around me happy.

How do you think that media could be used as a tool to bring about social change?

Awareness on social issues should be created. Also, media should highlight the ill effects of Coke, Pepsi, etc. My second daughter has not drunk Coke, Pepsi or mineral water for the past ten years. Recently, I read an article about a 101-year-old lady working on the roadside. Issues such as these, when highlighted in the media, will influence social change.

"You are born to live and do something for the society. There are a lot of things that needs to be changed in and around us. Nobody is born perfect."

CLASSIC NIGHTINALE

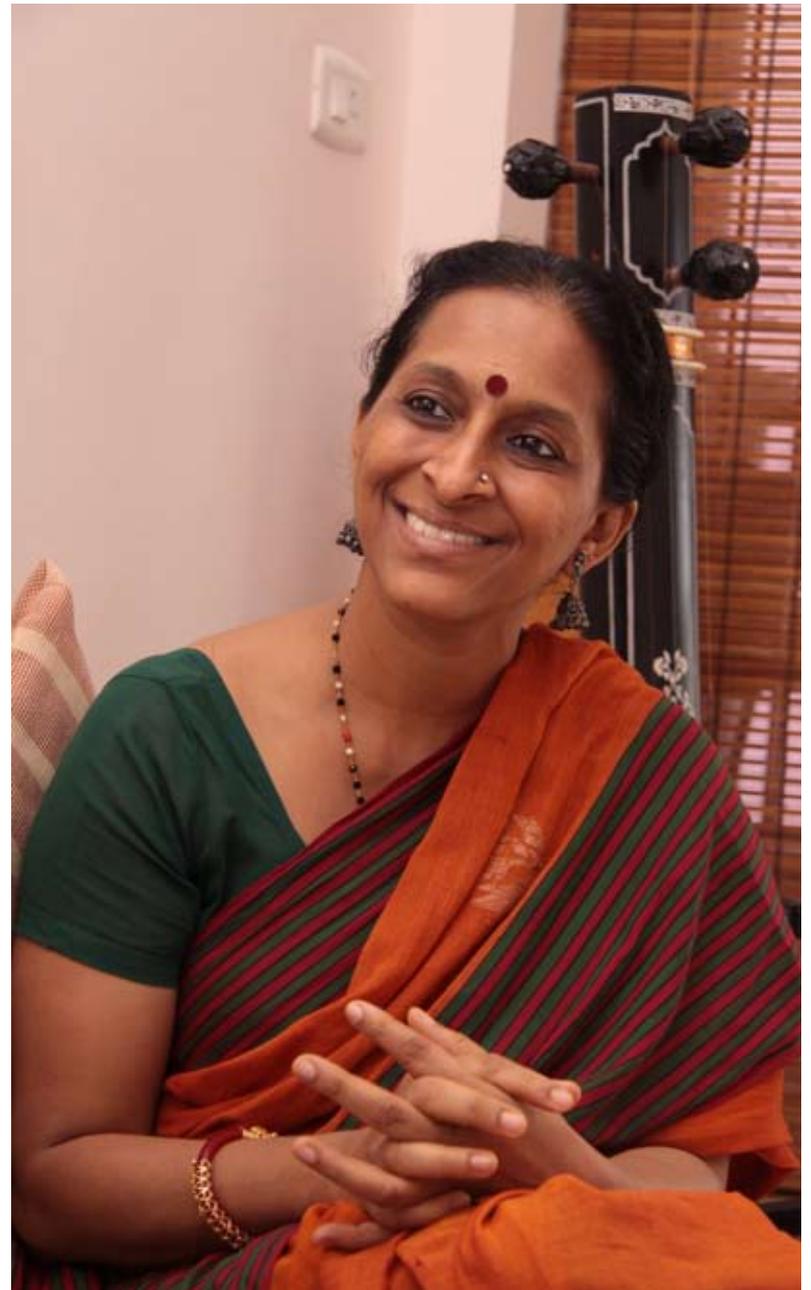
Bombay Jayashri is an Indian Carnatic music vocalist. She has also recorded songs as a playback singer in South Indian films. Jayashri began her concert career in 1982. She has a vast performing experience presenting concerts all over India and in over twenty different countries around the world. She has the rare privilege of being the first Carnatic vocal performer in the Royal Opera House, Durban and the Russian Opera House at Helsinki, Finland. She was also the sole representative of the Carnatic Music tradition at Lausanne, Switzerland; Porto, Portugal and Santiago, Spain, and is the only artiste who has been featured twice at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London.

Jayashri has been the recipient of several awards and accolades from many prestigious institutions, including the Kalaimamani award from the Government of Tamil Nadu and she has been conferred a Doctorate by the Mother Theresa Women's University. She has also co-authored a book 'Voices Within' which describes the work and life of seven eminent musicians.

Bombay Jayashri shares with Marie Banu how music can unite people.

You have been performing for charity concerts since 2001, not for one but for several issues. Which of the social issues are you passionate about?

I don't know if I can particularly say that something is closer, or something is not as good. I like to reach out in a way that musicians can do, even if it is like a drop in the ocean and if it could make a change in their lives. I go once in a way to sing at the Ramana Kendra blind school. I don't know if they are happy or



not, but at the end of the day I feel that I have done my little bit—thus going beyond just my areas of performing is special to me. Visually impaired children are extra intuitive towards sound, and sometimes they sing with me, which is nice. If we can help them by raising funds through an event, it is special. Any cause that is worthy is special and I cannot point out and say that it could be only for the autistic children or for the visually impaired that I have sung for.

Music has a wonderful therapeutic effect and hence used as a tool for treating the mentally challenged. Can you share your experience while performing for this audience?

The very first time I sang for them was when I was at school. I studied in a convent, and we had a subject that we could choose—Guides or Social Service. To be a Guide one required a lot of funds from time to time and I came from a family that could not allow this. Only seven of us in my class took up Social Service. As months rolled by, I realized what an advantage it was.

We would go twice or thrice a month to institutions, or spend two or three days in a hospital. I remember Sr. Marie Theresa who was particularly interested in music. She was fond of me because I could sing. She once said, ‘Let’s change the kind of Social Service we are doing, and go to orphanages and sing.’ I was studying in seventh standard then and still remember those experiences that touched a deep chord within me. The experience when I sang for such children and the love that I got made me feel important. It was a pure unaffected , which I never got while singing for a school competition or singing for an audience. I must thank my teacher for this. Time and again after that when I got a chance in life I relive those experiences in a more meaningful way when God has kept you in a better position.

What according to you are the essential qualities for an artist to be a success?

First of all, you should be blessed to grow up in a musical atmosphere. Today, the stress is on education and academics. Both my parents were music teachers. I woke up at 4 A.M. for my father’s practice, and when I returned from school my mother would be teaching. Many a times, I remember going to sleep when my father was teaching. These are my early lessons in life.

You need parents who believe that their child should come up in music, offer them training, and make them practice. You require regular consistent practice for three to four hours every day.

I was fortunate to have very great teachers. I moved to Chennai only to learn music, and not because I wanted a career. I had one of the greatest masters like Sri. Lalgudi Jayaraman, who consented to take me as his student. One does not need anything more in life, but be blessed with the right teacher.

When you are a singer or dancer, you must have the art of performing which you have to hone over the years. For this, you need a nice guide who will instill the confidence and give you the knowledge. After that, I feel that the most important aspect is appreciation—to get more audiences who love your music and love you for whatever you are. I am really fortunate and believe that God has created me for this purpose.

Do you think music should be shifted from being an extra-curricular activity into being part of the school curriculum?

Yes, it should. We have been complaining about this issue in public forums and wherever in private that it should be heard . I grew up in a convent we had piano classes on every Wednesday, and during weekends had the option to go to the church and sing along with the choir. Singing in school creates a deep impact on you. You

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have access to music which a child is denied today. This is very unfortunate!

It is not that we need every child to become a musician, but instead we need to create that interest. The whole world is looking at India with awe and wonder at its rich culture, but here we do not bother to encourage it. In Europe, every school has arts and music as compulsory subjects until the eighth standard after which it is optional. I think we are all to be blamed for not striving hard enough to see that children of today have arts as part of their curriculum.

Would you advocate for this along with your fellow musicians?

I would. But, we always wait for someone to take the lead, for which we are to be blamed for again. If one takes the lead, I am ready to follow.

As a winner in all music competitions during your school and college days, what is your advice for aspiring musicians?

Media as it is today is a full time occupation. It is a full time commercial business in itself. There is always talent in every field—science, arts, music, or sports. But today, even in your own house, you would have a television camera before you, and the press writing about you. This is the order of the day. One has to be very careful not to get bogged down by this before you start singing or become a musician. Because, before you achieve much, the world would know you, and that would make you complacent.

There is nothing like knowledge. My teacher is 81 years old. Even today, he calls himself a student and lives the life of a student. He still reads about music and composes. He says: 'Every day I learn a new note and compose a new note within the range.' The student in him is more alive than himself. So we have to take a leaf from the lives of such great people.

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I always tell youngsters not to be happy just because they have a small write up somewhere, or have their face appear on television. It is just an exposure for something which is hardly started. So don't stop learning or practicing. We are here only to learn the art and gain knowledge.

How can music be used as a tool to unite people irrespective of their caste, religion, or culture?

I was part of a production called MTV Coke Studio— an internet brand of music that is also to be aired on television. Different genres from different parts of India, singing different languages, in praise of different religions were all under one roof. We had Leslie Lewis, a Christian composer; Rashid Khan, a Muslim; Assamese folk singer, and Sufi singers besides me. We were actually eating from each other's plates and at the end of the shoot we did not want to go back to our homes. I realized how music can actually bring people together. They are actually singing one religion—which is music!

I think we can take a leaf out of this experience. I believe that music is a powerful tool that is filled with love and compassion and unifies people.

"There is nothing like knowledge. My teacher is 81 years old. Even today, he calls himself a student and lives the life of a student."



"TRUE EMPOWERMENT IS WHEN WOMEN CAN ASK QUESTIONS."

Dr. C.K. Gariyali, a post graduate from the Delhi School of Social Work and a doctorate in women's studies from the Mother Teresa University is a senior IAS officer. She has studied poverty alleviation at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University and Women's empowerment at the Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University. She has served as Principal Secretary to the Governor of Tamil Nadu and as Secretary Social Welfare Department. She also held the position of Collector of Chennai and South Arcot districts, and was the Secretary to the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.

Dr. C. K. Gariyali, IAS shares with Marie Banu her views on women empowerment.

You have held several portfolios in the government. Which of them did you cherish most and why?

Indian Administrative Service is a great opportunity to serve the nation. I have cherished each and every portfolio and I don't rate them high or low. I think each of them opened up new opportunities for me to help somebody in different segments of the society.

However I cherished most my work in the Correctional Administration Department. During the year 1979, I worked with children who were involved in petty crimes; kids who had failed an exam or got beaten at home and just hopped on to a train and landed at Madras Central; girls who had lost their parents and were wandering the streets; orphans; and women who were apprehended and remanded under immoral traffic act. While there, I was terribly moved to see these unfortunate human beings, who were young

and vulnerable and mostly victim of circumstances. Every morning I had to think of devising new ways to help them—to get them out of correctional institutions, to find their parents, to get them back to their homes and families, or alternatively, to place them in foster care or adoption. There were many issues that we were struggling with, but we eventually made a lot of improvement to the system and the prevailing laws. When I was transferred, I cried for days. I still keep in touch and send occasional gifts for girls in the Kellys home.

While serving as Senior Secretary, Government of Tamil Nadu, you were also on special duty as the Relief Commissioner for Cuddalore district. Can you share your experience working for the tsunami victims?

It was a very sad experience! I have never seen such devastation in my life. The morning of the tsunami, the Chief Secretary asked me to immediately head to Cuddalore as I was at that time overseeing the administration of Cuddalore District.

I drove directly to the hospital as the dead bodies were brought there and all the survivors were gathered outside. I had never before seen people who have lost everything—their children; their family members; their homes, their belongings, and even their livelihood. Before I could get down from the car, a woman came rushing towards me, held me by my neck, started shaking me, and asked me screamingly to go to the sea and bring back her three children. She did not need any other type of assistance from the government. All that she wanted was to get back her kids. In her mind a person of authority could simply miraculously bring back her children.

I could see that the survivors of tsunami were in a terrible state of depression and I was worried if they would kill themselves. Therefore, the first thing I did was to call Dr. Thara of SCARF and ask her to rush a team of psychiatrists, psychologists, and

mental health personnel to Cuddalore. Then, I made other calls to the Institute of Mental health in Chennai, National Institute in Hyderabad, NIMHANS in Bangalore, NGOs in Madurai, and requested them to send as many therapists and counselors as possible along with anti-depressant drugs to treat the survivors.

People had lost the will to live. Our government did not spare any expense and the NGOs also chipped in. The first thing I did was to re-open the schools because unless children settled into a routine, parents could not be able to put their lives together. Another important thing was that we involved survivors in their rehabilitation and used a participatory approach where political leaders, local leaders, and survivors jointly worked together.

Cuddalore became the laboratory to generate the customized and personalized rehabilitation strategies and ideas for all tsunami affected districts. The work in Cuddalore was highly commended by Medha Patkarji as well as Bill Clinton and our work received international acclaim.

Known as the ‘Mother of SHGs’, can you tell us about the SHG Movement in Tamil Nadu?

Deep inside me I am a feminist and I passionately care for women. I am happy that they are getting stronger and more empowered. The SHG Movement started in Tamil Nadu in late eighties, when Dr. M.G.Ramachandran was the Chief Minister. Since then, Tamil Nadu Government including our present Chief Minister Dr. Miss. J. Jayalalitha has been very much pro-SHG and pro-poor. In the last three decades, poverty reduction has always been the main agenda for our Government.

As a result, Tamil Nadu has achieved maximum poverty reduction in our country. The credit for this would go to women’s self-help groups as they organized and empowered themselves economically,

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socially, and politically. Today, almost every SHG woman is contributing in some way to her family's income.

In the early years, it was challenging to bring women into the SHG fold. Women going out of their homes to attend meetings and training were jeered at by the local people. However, once families realized that woman could bring in extra money into the household, the attitude changed.

Do you think that the women of today are empowered enough? What according to you is woman's empowerment?

I have written four books on this subject. The first one is titled 'Inching Forward' which talks about the empowerment being a slow by sure process. The second one is titled 'Woman's Own' which is about the SHG Movement itself. It shows that SHG woman had to first empower themselves within the household and then only they could empower themselves economically, socially and politically.

True empowerment is when women can ask questions, take decisions, and bring transparency in local governance. Today, we have over 10,000 SHG women elected as representatives in local governance. Tamil Nadu should be really proud of achieving this.

In economic empowerment of SHG women, what is the role that the government, banks, and different financial institutions play?

We have a lot of money allocated by the State Government as well as the Central Government to provide seed money and revolving fund for the Self-help groups. Once SHGs are credit rated and graded, they also become eligible for availing bank finance. Majority of banks lend funds to the self-help groups at an interest rate of 12 to 13 percent. However, the banks are not able to meet the entire requirement of SHG women. They are particularly unable to lend to the urban poor as they fear that they would migrate.

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In reality, the urban poor actually live for decades in the same place and they are also in need of financial assistance. In cities like Chennai, banks do not even have adequate staff to open bank accounts for hundreds of SHG women. Hence, there is a big gap in credit access to the poor.

This credit gap is being filled by micro-finance institutions. However, few MFIs have been lending at a very high rate which had led the RBI to set up Malegaon Committee to address the issue. Now the RBI has issued rules based on the recommendations of Malegaon Committee to regulate the MFI sector. With this kind of regulations in place, the MFI sector can play an important role along with the Government and banks in providing credit to the poor.

"I could see that the survivors of tsunami were in a terrible state of depression and I was worried if they would kill themselves. Therefore, the first thing I did was to call Dr. Thara of SCARF and ask her to rush a team of psychiatrists, psychologists, and mental health personnel to Cuddalore."



THE GIFTED GAB

Gopinath, popularly known as ‘*Neeya Naana Gopinath*’, is the host of the popular television debate show called ‘*Neeya Naana?*’ Earlier, he was known as ‘*Makkal Yaar Pakkam Gopi*’, and was subsequently identified with a program titled ‘*Sigaram Thotta Manithargal*’.

His knowledge on current affairs is laudable. Having succeeded as a television anchor, he is now helping students improve their communication skills. He has published two books titled ‘*Theruvellam Thevathaigal*’—a collection of poems, and ‘*Please Indha Puthakatha Vaangatheenga*’ — a book on personality development.

He is the recipient of Young Achiever award by India Today magazine (2007); Best Anchor of the State by Anantha Vikatan (2007, 2008), and also won the outstanding Young Indian Award by JCI in 2008.

Gopinath speaks to Marie Banu about his passion for media and the need for social change.

You are always identified with your television programs: ‘*Makkal Yaar Pakkam*’, ‘*Sigaram Thotta Manithargal*’, ‘*Neeya Naana*’, and ‘*Nadanthathu Enna*’. Now, you are popularly known ‘*Neeya Naana Gopinath*’. How do you feel when one addresses you so?

Friends used to call me ‘Gopi’; others call me ‘Gopinath’. Popularly, people call me ‘*Neeya Naana Gopinath*’. Basically, I am a journalist. I started my career as a journalist in the television industry 12 years ago. From day one, my advantage was that I was an on-screen as well as an off-screen person. If I was a reporter,

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I was also the news reader; when I was reporting, I was hosting programs as well. I wanted to experiment things better. It has been my passion to work in the media.

Gopi is my personal name and Gopinath is my official name. I like to be called 'Gopi'.

Amongst all the talk shows, which issue did you find difficult to moderate?

Actually, nothing is hard when you like it. Each talk show has its formulas. Each one has its own sincerities and commitments. I can say that commitment and the work that goes into each of the shows are different. While some need a psychological approach, some also requires more commitment, research, meetings, and physical work.

It is joyous to meet different people, understand, react, convince, console, justify, make them feel happy, make them understand the realities, and at the same time gain an understanding of what is happening in the rest of the world. It is like a sweat after five kilometers run. I never felt it as a hard task. It might be tiring physically. At times, we do three shoots in a day for programs that are staged on sets. We shoot continuously for four days and I would have to stand for 18 hours in a day. If I elaborate on this further, it would seem like a herculean task, but I would just say it in one phrase: "I Love my job."

Who has been your role model?

I do not have any role model as such. I have derived inspirations from people like Pranoy Roy, Rajdeep Sardesai, and Ravi Bernard. Even when I go to colleges to chair seminars, I tell the students not to take me as a role model, but as an inspiration, if they think I deserve it.

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If you take me as a role model, it would automatically turn into hero worship, and you would want to be another Gopinath. There are many talented people so take one good thing from each person and derive inspirations from them.

You are helping students to improve their communication skills. Can you tell us about your 'Taalk Shop Academy School of Excellence'?

It was my passion to start a training academy for all sectors. I researched for three years on training needs in this competitive world, apart from academic education. For example, I came from the southern part of the state. When I came to Chennai, it was a cultural shock to me. I was hesitant to interview leaders who were from the North as I had to converse in English. Although I knew the language, I did not have the confidence and the exposure.

Apart from soft skills, one requires negotiation skills, enterprising skills, speaking skills, and commanding skills. Most of the time communication skills are connected with language. But, strongly I believe that language is only a part of communication. Content, body language, and confidence level forms most of the communication. Our training programs aims to enhance the employable quality of the individual.

Our next project is to start a media school. We plan to tie up with educational institutions and offer an optional course. Our core team has worked on the course module in such a way that it is more interesting for the students and is not restricted to class room lectures alone. Even a student of seventh standard would know how to read the news. But, to read correctly really matters. This is what we aim to teach.

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Which of the social issues disturb you the most? How can we use media to bring about change?

There are many issues that require change. Each and every one should feel that they can also contribute towards the society. Change always happens because of one person who initiated the process. People followed Tiguara. People believed in Gandhi and followed him. There was no CNN then, nor did they follow because he was Gandhi. It was because they all wanted a change.

People have their own set of responsibilities. Our next generation just needs to be tuned. Our society demands children to study well. We force them to study well, score high marks, and enter into a medical or engineering college. We force them to excel in their education so that they can get into a good job and still force them to earn more money. After all of this, you expect them to show love and affection, when you have just created an ATM. You never taught them social values, but complain that they do have any social consciousness and not having concern about their country. We have lost our moral capability to criticize them.

Your advice to those engaged in social work?

I never advice people. I have a very big respect for social workers and NGOs. It is difficult for one to sacrifice a Saturday evening or a Sunday for somebody. In a scenario where the whole world is like a corporate company, these NGOs and social workers are making a difference.

Although most of them receive criticism they continue with their work, because they strongly believe in the cause. They are handicapped many a times to express their point of view. It is difficult to talk to a lay man about the environment impact after 45 years which would affect their future generations as he would not live that long.

Celebrity Interviews

Despite challenges, struggles, and de-motivation, NGOs continue to do their work. Their effort towards bring about social change should be appreciated.

There are two kinds of social workers—one addressing problems that are happening in the immediate present, and the other who are forecasters working on issues that would happen after ten or twenty years.

There is a verse in the bible that says that ‘*Theerkadharasi ullooril madhika maataan*’, (meaning that forecasters would not be respected in their native). NGOs are like that. They work despite all the criticism they receive and this is why I respect them.

"I do not have any role model as such. I have derived inspirations from people like Pranoy Roy, Rajdeep Sardesai, and Ravi Bernard. Even when I go to colleges to chair seminars, I tell the students not to take me as a role model, but as an inspiration, if they think I deserve it."

MOVER AND SHAKER

Gautham Vasudev Menon, an award winning film director and producer has been in the film industry over ten years. A trendsetter in Indian cinema, Gautham has been an inspiration to many. He has recently won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Tamil, and has also been nominated for a Filmfare Award for Best Director.

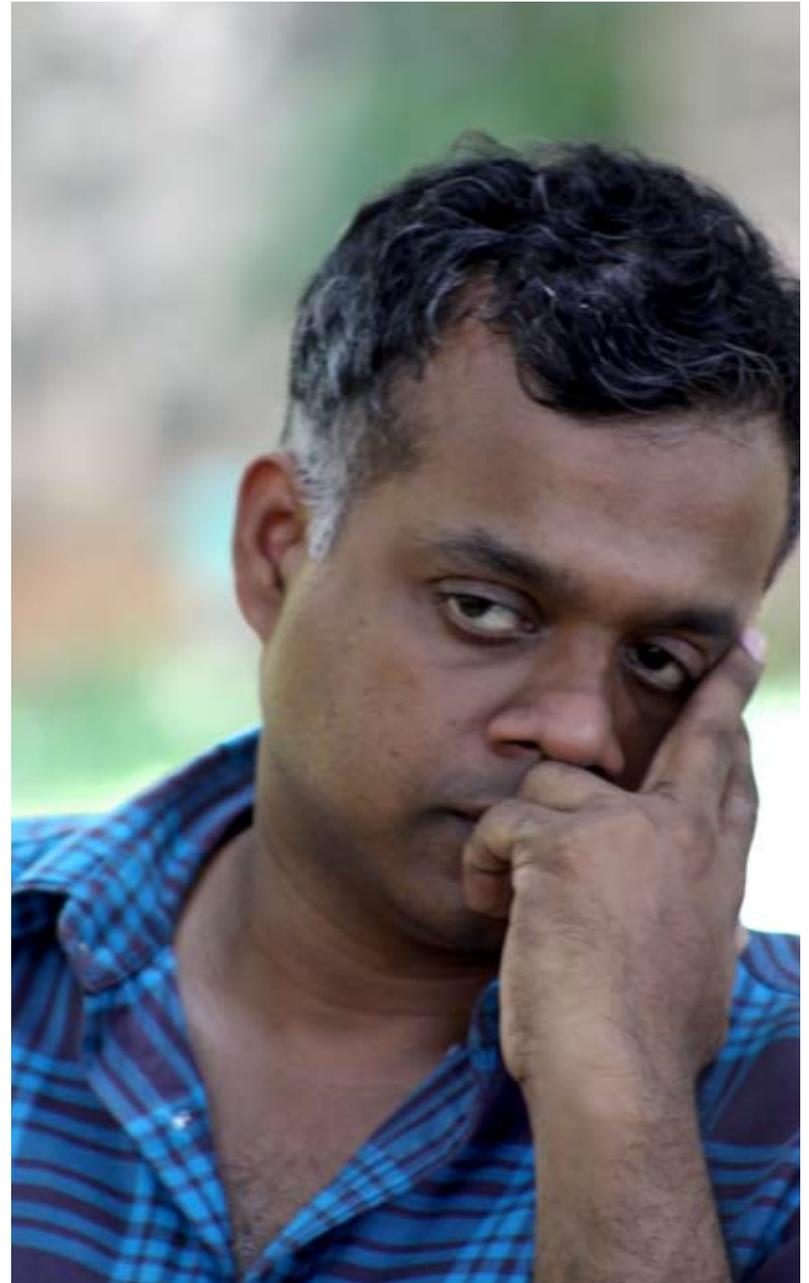
Gautham Vasudev Menon tells Marie Banu how media could be used to bring about social change.

You had recently directed the anthem song for Tamil *Semmozhi Maanadu*. Can you share your experience working in this project?

In movies, I put together a concept and the songs are woven into a screen play. I don't have to think too much about the visuals for the song as they form part of the script. Working for the Tamil *Semmozhi Maanadu* anthem song was a new experience, because the song was already composed and recorded. I was asked by A.R. Rahman to make a video out of this, and being a government project I wondered if it would have a political edge. A.R. Rahman convinced me that the project was about Tamil, the language, and Tamilians, and asked me to script out a concept.

I suggested shooting the video with all the singers, similar to 'we are the world' song. MP Kanimozhi was very supportive and was like a producer of the film as the funds came through her from the government. Both A.R.Rahman and I did not charge for this project but spent on making the song.

I decided to include all singers who contributed to the project. It was nice to see T.M. Soundarajan and Shruti Hassan share the



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same platform. We brought in concepts like having Tamil alphabet shaped *murukus*, showing Google in Tamil, and making the Chief Minister enact some scenes. It was fun and a tremendous experience for me.

Two of your movies were based on the life of a police officer and both were super hits. What was your motivation to work on this topic?

It's not just the police, I admire men in uniform. I wanted to join the army but my mother wasn't too happy about it. I did take the NDA examination, but pursued engineering. Film making was my passion and so I weaned away. If I did not pursue this career, I might have probably joined the army.

I respect that profession, and am looking at making more movies about the police and the army. I want to show the dreams of one who wants to become a police officer, and how it gets shattered because he has to work within a structure that has been already set up.

I think about men in uniform to be the basic instinct for any action film as they are the only people associated with action in real life. It is easier to write a story for a thriller film with a police officer as a protagonist.

Your films have been milestones in Tamil cinema. Which of them did you most enjoy making?

It is difficult to pick. I enjoy the process of film making. I write what I want to write and make what I want to make. I don't think about what people would think and I don't get bogged down while making the film. It is only when I finish the film do I get into a nervous state as it involves a lot of money.

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The most emotional film for me was '*Vaaranam Aiyiram*'. I made that after my father passed away. The story was about him and his moments with me. Suriya, a good friend of mine decided to play both the characters as father and son. He asked my assistants to go to my house and pick up photographs of my father, and insisted to appear like him in the movie. I felt that I was just five films old, and I didn't want people to say that I spent someone else's money to make a personal film. I was wary, but Suriya insisted.

He said that he knew that the story was about my father and so wanted to look like him in the film. Whenever Suriya would come to the set, I would get emotional. Most of the scenes were shot at home and this made me happy. When the shoot was over I felt that the movie would come out well. It turned out to be a hit and I even received an award for that film.

If you were asked to direct a movie on a social topic, which issue would you choose?

Of late, I have been thinking of doing a film on a person who is able to handle life despite being disabled. I do not conform to that school of thought where you show lives of people who are suffering in order to make one contribute. This is happening anyway.

For instance, issues like a ramp not being provided in a theatre to help disabled persons commute easily are some issues that I would like to talk about when I do a film.

I am becoming socially conscious of late. I always feel that the lesser we talk about it, the better. I somehow conform to that kind of an idea and people who know me will understand. I have contributed to charities and I will. But I would never want to talk about it as my intention is only to make a contribution.

How do you think media could be used to bring about social change?

Even the smallest of scandals are blown out of proportion in the media. When you skip channels and watch news, a scandal is the one you want to watch. That attitude should change. There should be some system like a censor board governing the television channels. We have started a production house and are going to produce television shows and show good content on television similar to American television. There is no mainstream director who would like to direct a television program for the fear of being termed as a television director. I am confident that I can balance both. I am getting into prime time television and looking at doing good content. Hopefully we will try and cover social issues as well.

How did you convince your parents about your decision to enter the film industry?

My parents would never disagree to what I wanted to do. My father did not watch many films, but my mother was a film buff. The films that I watched while I grew up were those that my mother recommended to me.

When I finished my engineering, my parents wanted me to go abroad or seek employment here, but I expressed to them that I wanted to become a movie maker. They were initially worried as it involved a lot of hard work, but I convinced them. Their consent was my motivation.

Whenever I attend a show or a movie, I take my mother along. Recently during the music release function at London, I made A.R. Rahman hand over the first music cd of my film 'Vinnaiyaandi Varuvaaya' to my mother.

Will you encourage your children to enter the film industry?

I don't have any issues, but will not force them to enter the film industry. My children are very young: Arya (8) Dhruva (4) and Adhya (2) are all boys. We decided to make them what they want to be. But, they all must attend college. Arya likes cars and wants to be a car racer. He has just started watching films, mostly animation films.

I insist on college education even for those who come to work with me. Education streamlines a person, and I believe that a lot of taste depends on what you study. The friends you choose and the life you go through during the college days sets you up for the rest of your life.

"I think about men in uniform to be the basic instinct for any action film as they are the only people associated with action in real life. It is easier to write a story for a thriller film with a police officer as a protagonist."



PARAGON OF VIRTUE

Dr. V. Irai Anbu, an IAS officer of the 1985 batch, is the Secretary to Government, Environment and Forest Department. He holds more than half a dozen degrees, and is presently pursuing his second Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. An able communicator in English and Tamil, he is a writer and author; poet and educator; counselor and motivator—in short a multi-faceted personality. He has written over 20 books covering short stories, creative parables, poetry, and essays apart from contributing articles to various publications.

V. Irai Anbu, IAS shares with Marie Banu insights to his success and social issues of today.

As Secretary of the tourism department, you had launched innovative programs, and were instrumental for the department to win eight National awards and one International award for Tourism. In your present portfolio as Secretary – Environment and Forests, what are the innovative programs that you plan to launch here?

In every department, there is scope for innovation and in the Environment and Forest department there is plenty of scope too. I have just joined two months ago and am studying the functioning of the department. I want to start eco-friendly clubs in each and every village.

These clubs can work on tree plantation, sensitize the villagers on the importance of ecology, avoid use of polythene bags and plastic, and provide environmental education. We are looking at introducing guides at Vandalur zoo, and are conceptualizing on a lot of projects.

There are several NGOs working on environment related issues. In which way could they associate with your department?

I am an easily approachable person and I am ready to spend any number of hours with them, if it is going to do something for the cause of the people. I have the experience of being associated with some NGOs in various places. We started moonlight schools in Kancheepuram. I keep track of the functioning of these schools which is meant for children above 14 years working in the looms. We are ready to liaise with NGOs and work in the coastal villages.

A lot of pressing social issues affects our day-to-day lives. Which of them disturb you?

The cost that we are paying in the name of progress is very high. All these could be attributed to lack of work culture and laziness in a few important sectors. I feel that the problem that India faces today is not climate change, sea level rise, population, or poverty. We have started deteriorating in work culture. Many do not have passion for the work. They don't enjoy it. We spend more time on wasteful entertainment and meaningless work.

The focus which we had 1000 years ago is missing. We cannot construct another big Temple today, although there is so much of technology available. We have become money oriented. Easy money and quick money has become the way of life. This bothers me because anything else can be retrieved, but not the loss of character.

After completing half a dozen degrees and a doctorate already, you are presently pursuing your second doctorate in literature? What motivates you to keep studying?

It is a kind of motivation that I have fixed for myself over a period of time. Initially when I joined the university I wanted to pursue

a doctoral degree. Later, I understood that working in a university may not provide opportunities that will suit my taste. I am more a generalist and like to work with people, travel a lot, and understand the psyche of people. I am not a research oriented person and cannot work with machines. So, I decided to come out from the University.

Immediately after college, I joined the department as an Agricultural officer as I did not want to depend on my parents. I moved to a village called Rayakottai, which is around 30 kms away from Krishnagiri, where one should order for an English newspaper a week in advance. My journey for civil services started there. I cleared the Civil Service Exam in the first attempt. I joined IRS. In the second attempt, I got the 15th rank and first place in Tamil Nadu. Hence I entered into administrative service.

Academic pursuit helps a person to perform his job in a better manner. Your ability to communicate improves, and because of this you will be able to excel in your curriculum and impress people who come to talk on business lines with you. The gift of gab is always essential for an administrator, more so in the present times, where it is a conflict oriented society and various interest groups are continuously working for a common cause.

Your books for youth to encourage them take up IAS examinations have been well received. What is your advice for the youth of today to take up civil services?

In those days, when I had appeared for the Civil Service Examination, there was not enough study material. Particularly in Tamil Nadu, not many people were available to give inputs, and even book shops were not available. That is why I wrote books to motivate students of Tamil Nadu to take up this examination and come out successfully.

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Youth are in a better position today, and need not have to sweat out searching for information. They can just ferret out the information from the website. Planning, prioritization of time, preparation, and presentation are very important. There are four aspects for the selection in civil services: selection of optionals, collection of materials, preparation, and presentation. Now, for the first two, a lot of information is available and there are a lot of people to guide students and institutions are available to train them. For preparation and presentation aspects, they will have to work hard.

What were your learnings' and experience while working for the fisher folk at Mudhaliar Kuppam, a coastal village at Villupuram?

Tsunami has taught us that we should have more awareness on environment and we should live in harmony with nature. We should understand nature, appreciate nature, and we cannot fight against nature. Whatever development that we do should be holistic.

The courage of the fisher folk was tremendous. No other community would have had such resilience to come back to normal life with so much of speed. Danger was not new for them. As Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said, the fisherman could be rightly called as people who live dangerously. There are some basic problems that are associated with their lives but that require a lot of education. As we know, earlier there were about 70 percent of people dependent on agriculture, but today, this is not the case. Similarly, dependency on fishing should get reduced. Alternative livelihoods are to be discovered and implemented.

Your advice for NGOs to improve work culture?

There are many NGOs who are working for the cause of the people. There is no point in having a confronting attitude towards the government, because you have lot of well-meaning government

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servants also. No one should have extremism in anything. My point of view is to work on the holistic development of the people. We should focus on education, awareness and educate the people not only on their rights, but also on their duties.

There is no networking amongst NGOs. If there are integrated efforts of NGOs, the results would be tremendous.

"In those days, when I had appeared for the Civil Service Examination, there was not enough study material. Particularly in Tamil Nadu, not many people were available to give inputs, and even book shops were not available. That is why I wrote books to motivate students of Tamil Nadu to take up this examination and come out successfully."

MISSION PASSION

Jayendra Panchapakesan studied Chemistry, but found his passion in advertising in 1978. He started his career as a copywriter in Chennai and then moved to Mumbai. In his years as creative writer he worked with agencies like HTA, Clarion, Ulka, and O&M to name a few. In 1986, he started JS Films (an Ad film production House) with P.C. Sreeram renowned cinematographer and got ad agencies and advertisers turn to Chennai for ad film production. In 1993, Jayendra co-founded Real Image Media Technologies to introduce nonlinear editing with Avid. After nonlinear editing, it introduced digital surround sound and the movie experience in theatres changed forever. Today, Real Image is known across the world for its end to end digital cinema solution called Qube. A technology that even Hollywood has chosen to use.

Jayendra is associated with various social organizations and has created films to bring awareness and funding to a variety of causes. He is also on the board of Trustees of the Bhoomika Trust which focus on relief at the time of natural disasters and in the field of education; Mahesh Memorial Trust which works in the area of cancer care, especially in children; Altius Foundation that focuses on education; and Jeevan Blood bank.

Director Jayendra tells Marie Banu how he finds time for social work.

Rules Kidayadhu (meaning no rules) is the byline of your movie '180'. If you were to evade a rule, what would that be?

I meant it more as 'freeing of the mind'. Constantly our mind gets bogged down by conventional ways of thinking and that itself is in a way a binding rule on the brain. If we start thinking that there are no rules, then the mind becomes free to think out of the box on any issue. That is what I meant by *Rules Kidayadhu*.



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How do you think you can use the larger screen to bring about social consciousness?

Actually, when you make a film you don't try to create social consciousness as a primary goal. Somewhere in the story line it has to be buried somewhere so that people have the joy in discovering it and imbibing the values. After all, movie is for entertainment and we have to package entertainment to get the audiences to theatres. While we are doing this, we can slip in some values that people can unconsciously take in. Because, the minute it becomes conscious, it is like a teaching that people would resist.

About real life violence and 'reel life' violence. What are your thoughts on this?

Violence per say is not objectionable, because it is part of our lives in a very large way. But, the way they are depicted in cinema seems to be the problem. Somehow I think this has a certain negative effect on the society, and triggers people to choose paths that they normally would not have chosen to take. So, the violence on screen—the way it is portrayed, the kind of tools they use, and the absolute nonchalant way of dealing with such things on screen—seems to have made people immune. I don't know whether violence excites people anymore on screen, but we seem to do it and that seems to have some larger effect on the society.

You are in the board of several charitable organizations—Bhoomika Trust, Mahesh Memorial, etc. How do you find time for social work?

I am a multi-tasker by nature. So, I find time for everything. My day starts at 5:00 A.M. I play golf which is a game that takes long hours. Before the day even starts for many people, I would have finished playing.

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Social work is a part of my life. It is like eating out or going for a movie. If you find time for that, then you can find time for social work as well. Social work gives me joy, and therefore it is easy for me to find time for it.

Can you tell us about the educational portal that you are part of?

It is called Gift a Future—an initiative of a friend of mine called Srikanth. He asked me join his Trust Altuis Foundation as a Trustee. Gift a Future (www.giftafuture.org) is a portal where we try to bring donors and children together. We profile the children and give their background so that people can sponsor their educational expenses in parts. For instance, if the fee requirement is Rs. 3,000 one can sponsor in portions of Rs. 500.

Our initiative does not stop there. We also counsel the children and organize face-to-face meetings once in every two months, which seems to have had a dramatic impact on the children. From the time this was started it is observed that the children have progressed well in their studies, and the success rate this year is huge. It was initiated to bridge the economic gap, but now it has ended up in the organization motivating children to perform better.

You have been supporting several charities by making short films to promote their cause. Which of the social issues are close to your heart?

It is like asking what food you want to eat at what point of time. When you are facing a particular cause, you feel that one is the most important.

We have a Mahesh Memorial Trust where we support pediatric cancer care. Whenever I am at the Cancer Institute with the children

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affected by cancer, I feel that this is the most important cause that we have to support. When I find staff of Ekam Trust supporting children at Egmore hospital who are dying for the want of basic medicine, I feel why others can't do something to support such children. I support Sankara Eye hospital that is doing fantastic work for the rural poor. They set up eye camps, conduct free surgeries, and offer free medications. I am a trustee in Jeevan Blood Bank and I feel that the public stem cell bank that they have launched is a big breakthrough for many Indians who may be suffering from an illness that can be life-threatening.

Wherever I am, I feel that the cause is most important. So, I cannot put my heart behind one issue alone.

Which of these roles would you like yourself to be identified with—Writer, or Ad film maker, or Director, or Philanthropist?

I constantly think about it myself, because when you look at my career path—I began as a writer; then I started an advertising agency; became an ad film maker; co-founded a technology company; made the first classical music film; and then a feature film. I also went on to do some path breaking work in patenting some technology in India and United States.

What am I? I would say that I stand for passion, because that is what drives me to do anything. I feel that somehow I have the passion to see anything that I take up.

What is your message to our readers?

Most people think that social work is giving some money, or supporting an organization financially. Social work is lot more than that. Everybody has some skill and talent to give by which the social sector can be enriched. It requires a little bit of time from

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everybody. If they can give that little bit of time—it can be one off, or an interaction with a person on an occasion that requires it. I think time more than anything else is what is required from everybody. I hope they give that!

"Social work is a part of my life. It is like eating out or going for a movie. If you find time for that, then you can find time for social work as well. Social work gives me joy, and therefore it is easy for me to find time for it."



ICON OF MOTHERHOOD

Dr. Kamala Selvaraj, MD DGO PhD. is the Associate Director of the Fertility Research Center at GG Hospital in Chennai. She commissioned the First Test Tube Baby of South India in August 1990 and since then has had many achievements in the field of assisted reproduction. In 2002, she was awarded PhD for her thesis on 'Premature Ovarian Failure and its Management'.

She has many publications to her credit in several national and international journals as first author, and has authored chapters in textbooks on assisted reproduction. She is also the recipient of several awards including Best Lady Doctor award (1993), Mahila Shironmani Award (1995), Rajiv Gandhi Memorial National Integration Award (1995), and Seva Ratna Award.

Dr. Kamala Selvaraj shares with Marie Banu her thoughts on the stigma of childlessness and her efforts to promote motherhood.

Childlessness is still seen as curses in India. What are your thoughts on this?

Society still considers a childless woman as barren and unlucky. They don't pause to think that it takes two hands to clap and that the man could be at fault as well. Likewise, a man always needs to be worked up before we pay attention to the women. Earlier in my practice, some men who had no sperm production used to consult with two wives, often they would be sisters. So, I used to think how lack of examination of the man has destroyed the lives of two women.

Nowadays, although the awareness level has increased and people know that the man can also be at fault, the taboo is still palpable. Women who do not have children are not allowed to participate in

auspicious family functions and are considered as a bad omen. I advise women who undergo fertility treatment to tell their relatives that they are planning to have a child later, and to secretly pursue their treatment. I continue to tell them not to show their weakness and to be mentally strong.

Infertility treatment nearly 25 years ago was not heard of. But, today you have people all over the world consulting you for treatment. Is this due to increase in awareness that infertility can be treated or is it due to the fact that there is a rise in infertility worldwide?

Every woman wants to be independent. For this, she needs to be educated and have a secure job. When she reaches this level she is already 28 to 30 years of age. It takes a while for her to find a suitable and professionally well settled partner. They plan their family a year later as they need time to adjust to each other's lifestyle. The highest fertility period for a woman is between 20 to 28 years of age and they easily cross that!

Infertility rates in the last two years have climbed up owing to awareness and detection, as well as, lifestyle and environmental factors. Stress has been a major contributor considering that couples are working more towards luxury than actually spending quality time with each other. Age of both partners is also important where higher the age, more the chances of babies with down's syndrome and other anomalies.

What is your advice for such couples?

One who is rich is content with what he has; but one who is poor wants more and more. There is no end for greed! If couples cannot prioritize or balance their career versus need for children, then we are certainly going to be handling more and more difficult cases in the future. I always advise couples to plan at least one child before thirty or at least by 35 years of age. If they intend late child bearing

then they need to be adequately prepared physically and mentally, and always plan conception with the help of an infertologist.

You have brought happiness in the lives of many mothers. While the rich can afford the ART (Assisted Reproductive Techniques), what is the solution to those who can't afford it?

I still feel India has better treatment options at a reasonable price in comparison to the rest of the world. Couples should understand that in a private set up, it is only imperative that a lot goes into maintenance and care to give good results. We cater to those that can afford nominal charges, and we also help those patients who fail repeatedly by giving them free treatment.

Every specialist can offer free treatment according to their capacity and power. By and large, the government should avail facilities and make it possible for better reach of ART in Government colleges and hospitals. First of all, the stigma attached to infertility should be abolished and adoption should be advised to those who have been proved that they can never bear a child. This would keep unscrupulous practice at bay and also help adoption of children that need homes.

After the tsunami, there were a lot of women who had lost their children opt for ART. Can you share your experience?

We provided free treatment to all the tsunami patients. Each of the couples had not lost just one, but two and sometimes tragically three. I felt very bad! My mother used to say that when a parent is alive, they should never lose their child. I can't imagine how these patients could still manage to smile at me and say that they were happy to see me. I could not smile back at them!

These women had been sterilized and one of them was premenopausal. I offered free treatment to all of them for test tube

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babies. It was only after they became pregnant I charged them a nominal amount towards room rent charges.

They had lost all their children, but I could give them only one!

Born to yesteryear Actor Gemini Ganesan, what inspired you to choose the medical profession?

After I completed my schooling, my father asked me if I wanted to get married or pursue higher studies, I said that I wanted to study. In those days, he said that there were only two dignified professions for women—teaching and medicine. I hated teaching and hence chose medicine.

Actually, my father had wanted to do medicine. It was for this reason he married my mother who was from a well-to-do family as her father promised to send him abroad after marriage to study medicine. Soon after his wedding, my grandfather expired and therefore he had to stay back to take care of the family. His lifestyle thus changed, maybe for the better.

As his ambition was not fulfilled, he wanted us to pursue medicine. Now, we are nine doctors in the family— three of his daughters (that includes me); my husband; my daughter; my son; my brother-in-law; my nephew; and my niece. I struggled a lot to come to this level. Our future generation now has everything in a golden plate.

You appear to be a very cheerful person. How do you cope with stress?

It is spontaneous and natural. Everybody is going through stress and smile costs me nothing! When I am making someone pleasant, I feel happy.

My elder sister Narayani once narrated an incident to me. She was traveling in a car with my father when she was a child and saw him waving his hand vigorously to a man riding a bicycle. She observed

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that the man did not reciprocate and hence asked my father why he did so. He replied to her: "I thought he waved and so waved back. If he did not reciprocate, it does not matter. If only he had waved and I had not reciprocated, he would have felt bad."

I always remember my father who was down to earth. He used to be cheerful all the time and made the place around him lively.

"One who is rich is content with what he has; but one who is poor wants more and more. There is no end for greed! If couples cannot prioritize or balance their career versus need for children, then we are certainly going to be handling more and more difficult cases in the future."



BOLD AND BEAUTIFUL

Khushboo Sundar is an Indian actor who has acted in over 100 movies, starring opposite to leading actors. Besides, she is also a television hostess and a producer. She is known for her outspoken nature, and has been an inspiration for many social activists. Recently, the Supreme Court had dismissed all the cases that were registered against her in 2005, for her alleged remarks about pre-marital sex and AIDS.

Khushboo Sundar shares with Marie Banu her views on social issues that require attention

You have been extending support to many children pursue their education. While most of the celebrities would want to publicize their social work activities, what makes you different?

When you say that this is what I am doing for a good cause, then it becomes a cheap publicity. My mother has said to me: 'let not your right hand know, what your left hand does'. This is the value I follow. I enjoy the social work I do and I treat it as a private affair. Whatever I do, I feel that it should be known only to me and to the person who has received the support. I am happy with what I am doing and I don't want the world to know what help I am extending to others.

What according to you is the major social issue in Tamil Nadu that requires attention?

Definitely, it is education. We need to come up to a stage where we could say that Tamil Nadu has got at least 99% literacy rate. Unfortunately, we still live in a society which has too many superstitious tags attached to it. Today science is advanced to the extent that we are finding another planet to move and start living

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there. But, there are still people who consider it to be inauspicious when a black cat crosses the road, or when you sneeze. Faith and religion is different and I feel that we should not bring that to the streets.

Education is very important, especially educating a girl child. There are cases where girls are not allowed to study beyond fourth or fifth standard, as their parents feel that they will have to remain in the kitchen to take care of their family and so they need not have to study. People should realize that it is very important for a girl child to study as education will help her to excel in life.

The second serious issue is sexual abuse of young children which is on the rise. This issue has to be seriously deal with. We need to make the laws very stringent. Unfortunately, when you look at it, most of the children who have been through this kind of abuse are because of their own family members or from a person whom they had known. Parents should tell a child the difference between a good touch and a bad touch.

I very strongly feel that when a child is studying in the sixth standard we should introduce sex education. By this time, the girl is mature. If you don't teach them, then they are in the computer 24x7. Rather than them finding it out the wrong way, it is better that we teach them the right way.

Despite urbanization, a large section of our society are conservative and do not wish to speak about HIV/Aids. This stigma largely affects those people living with HIV/Aids. How do you think one can bring about attitudinal changes in our society?

We have to educate people that one does not contract HIV/Aids by sitting together, eating from the same plate, using the same towel, or by shaking hands with a HIV infected person. You have to bring about awareness on what HIV is.

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A HIV affected person needs very strong moral support from his family. Again, it is the woman who is stigmatized here. You will never find a man who will own up and say that he is the reason for his wife to get HIV/AIDS. While he happily sits at home being taken care by the family, his wife is victimized, blamed of loose morals, and thrown out of her home. We need to educate the men and tell them to own up for their mistake.

You have the ability to strive for women's empowerment. Given the challenges you have faced in the recent past, are you still determined to work towards empowering women?

Absolutely! If out of around 7 crore people in Tamil Nadu, 2,000 of them think that I am wrong, they are absolutely free to voice their opinions. There is nothing wrong in that. Nothing will deter me from working towards what I have been working at. There is awareness and there has been a notification that has come in.

Who is your role model in social work?

Absolutely no one! I have never grown up looking at someone saying that 'this is what I want to be'. I am not going to say that 'I want to be like Mother Teresa. She inspires me'. There can be only one Mother Teresa. I want to be what I am, and I want to believe in what I say. I want to follow my heart, of course after applying my mind to it. I want someone to turn around towards me and say 'she is my role model', rather than me saying this to someone else.

If at all there was anyone whom I had idolized right from childhood, then it happens to be Ravi Sastri. He definitely cannot be my role model, because I would have become a cricketer.

In what ways does your family support you in your social work?

I would not have evolved so much as a person, or would not have been so confident in these five years of my battle if not for the

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support of my family and friends. When I say support of my family and friends, it is not necessary that they will have to believe in what I say, or what I believe in. What is important is to let me be me.

I have a huge support from my husband. He is an introvert person, while I am an extrovert. We are like chalk and cheese. The support I have from him is tremendous. When I won the case, I was holidaying with my children in London. The first thing I did when I received the message from my lawyer was to call my husband who was shooting then. When I said that all the cases have been quashed, I heard him scream over the phone with joy, which he never does. When I returned, he received me at the airport and said 'You have made it. I knew that you have been a strong person.'

What inspired you to choose the role of Maniammai in 'Periyar' and what were the challenges that you faced?

I did not choose. I was fortunate that my director chose me to do that role. In fact, few of my good friends went against me protesting that I should not enact this role. An issue was also raised in the assembly that I should not act in this movie. But, my director was very clear that he wanted me to do that project and so, I was in the film.

It was a different experience as it was for the first time I was depicting the role of a real life character. It was tough for me as I did not have any video footage of Maniammai. I just had pictures and so I really didn't know how she spoke, how she walked, or how she would sit. Also I had to put on a little weight for that movie which was a challenge.

You are known to be a wonderful mother; ace actor; and a social activist. Which of these roles, do you like most and why?

Obviously, I like the role of a mother. Mother is a 24x7 job where one can never reach a stagnation point. In a career you keep looking

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at what's next. As an actor, you want to better yourself. But, being a mother it is like you grow up with your children, you become a kid when they are young, and you start re-living your life along with them.

It is a task every day to install good values in your children, and telling them what is right and what is wrong. At every stage, especially with girls, you will have to be a strict mother, but also be a close friend with them so that they are free to discuss things with you. Being a mother is the toughest job, but I think that it is the most lovable one.

"I want to follow my heart, of course after applying my mind to it. I want someone to turn around towards me and say 'she is my role model', rather than me saying this to someone else."

AVANT-GARDE

Dr. Kiran Bedi, IPS, India's first and highest ranking woman officer joined the Indian Police Service in 1972. Her experience and expertise include more than 35 years of tough, innovative, and welfare policing. She has worked with the United Nations as the Police Advisor to the Secretary General, Department of Peace Keeping Operations. She represented India at the United Nations, and in International forums on crime prevention, drug abuse, police and prison reforms and women's issues. She has also been a National and an Asian Tennis champion.

Recipient of the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award (also called the Asian Nobel Prize), and several other decorations, Dr. Kiran Bedi is an author of several books, anchors radio and television shows, and is a columnist with leading newspapers and magazines. She is a sought after speaker on social, professional, and leadership issues. She is the founder of two NGOs—Navjyoti and India Vision Foundation.

Navjyoti India Foundation was established in 1988 as the brain child of Dr. Kiran Bedi. The organization was set up with the idea of promoting welfare policing, the outcome of which was the drug de-addiction program. Since its inception, Navjyoti India Foundation has made significant contributions in areas like education, women empowerment, family counseling, rural and urban development, health, HIV/AIDS, and environment as well.

India Vision Foundation was born with the receipt of the Ramon Magsaysay Award by Dr. Kiran Bedi in 1994. It began its work inside the prison, by setting up a Bread Making Unit within the Prison, for the welfare of the inmates. A Plant Nursery was also set up where rare saplings were grown and marketed outside. The profits earned from these activities went to the Prisoner's Welfare Fund.



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Dr. Kiran Bedi has been voted as India's most admired woman and fifth amongst all Indians.

Dr. Kiran Bedi, IPS shares with Marie Banu and Latha Suresh her views about NGOS and the role of corporates in bringing about social change.

You were the first woman to join the Indian Police Service. What made you different?

Parenting was great. I think it was my upbringing, home environment and school quality. Well, many friends had the same school, but my home was different.

Women all over the world admire you. Who has been your role model?

My role model has been my parents. They were the best and remain the best.

Which of these roles would you like to be identified with: IPS officer, visionary, social worker, role model?

With all! Which is no less important? You can't deny it. People identify me with my project. Some identify me with the prisoner education project while some identify me with the gali school project, because they have met me only there and do not know about the other programs that I am engaged in. It varies from person to person. Some identify me for having written a book, and some identify me with a television channel. So, it varies.

Which are the areas you think NGOs and Police could work together?

Most importantly what an NGO could do is to work with families of policemen. I am already working with the police department by providing computer education to the families of policemen. We

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already have 2,500 children of policemen who have been educated and made e-literate. We opened scores of centers of computer education in the police lines. Others NGOS could not enter here. Who else can enter a police line? We thought we could, and so partnered with Vedanta (Sterlite Foundation) to provide computer education. While India Vision Foundation provided access and linkage, Vedanta provided the computers.

Do you think NGOs are effective in their mission?

They are as effective as they are resourced—both skilled and resourced. They are resourced with leadership, the right kind of people, and have got the way with all. They can be very effective. Our NGO is effective because all my project heads are brilliant. They are youthful, energetic, passionate, missionary, and are secure inside. These are their qualities, and that is why they enjoy trust. They just have to open our mouth to get people on their side.

Your advice for our corporate readers?

Corporates must be the biggest givers. They are not generators but givers. Because, givers will become generators. It is in our interest of being consumers, because it is they who create better consumers. A better consumer means better purchasing power, and better purchasing power means better business for corporates.

Already, India is on GDP of this kind, because we are a major market ourselves. In fact, India survived because it is a market by itself. We still have half of India waiting to become another market. By 2030 we would have added another 30 to 40 million people and would be almost one and a half billion by then. That means, India would have generated much more consumers, and we are creating another wealth of youth consumers.

It is in the interest of every corporate to strengthen and reach out to the youth. Because, if they take them out of the poverty line

and make them educated and enabled, they would be the biggest consumer and a quality consumer. That's when they consume what the corporate produce.

So, it is in our interest. It is a very positive cycle— a corporate creates a consumer through corporate social responsibility, and thus a consumer will demand for a corporate. It is a two way process.

"Corporates must be the biggest givers. They are not generators but givers. Because, givers will become generators. It is in our interest of being consumers, because it is they who create better consumers."



LIGHTS, CAMERA, SOCIAL ACTION

Nandita Das, an award-winning Indian film actress and director, is a Post-Graduate from the Delhi School of Social Work. She has acted in over 30 feature films in ten different languages, with directors of international repute. She is known never to shy away from controversial issues and unconventional roles, and has chosen to be part of stories which she believes in.

Nandita Das speaks with Marie Banu about how she uses films to advocate for social causes.

You are a social worker by qualification and also by experience. You are in the media professionally. Which of these roles do you prefer?

I don't think I really need to choose. My background is in social work, and I was engaged primarily in issues related to women and children. For me, films happened by default. The experiences I had during my work in human rights days have definitely impacted the choices that I made in films. So, I see films as a medium of social change. If you see my work as an actor or a director, it has primarily raised issues of social concern. One can adopt different means, but the goal is the same.

You have worked for Ankur, an NGO. What was your experience working with grassroots NGOs?

Ankur, a women's organization was where I worked first. I was already doing my fieldwork as part of my Master's degree in Social Work there. As I was attached to the community, I accepted their job offer.

I come from a very liberal family where the women got all the space to question and to make choices. But, while working with

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the community, I realized that all women obviously did not enjoy that kind of space. I feel that those of us who are privileged should take on a greater responsibility to become the voice for those whose voices are not heard. This experience was very precious to me, and it exposed me to realities that otherwise I would not have known. It was challenging, and at times emotionally draining, but served as a big eye-opener for me.

How far do you think that the women in India have come today?

Well, there is no simple answer. More women are working, more women have a voice, and more women are raising issues. While all that is true, we also know that there are stark figures for the dropping sex ratio, increasing sexual abuse, female foeticide, and dowry deaths. On every Women's Day, I wonder if we should be celebrating, or introspecting as to why so many women continue to suffer right from the time of their birth. It should be both. We have a cause to celebrate but we have a long way to go before we can say that women have equal choices, or equal opportunities.

Being the chairperson for Children Film Society, what do you think is the most critical issue for a child to be sensitized about?

The mandate of Children's Film Society, India is to produce good children's films that are both entertaining as well as educative, and reach out to as many children as we can. While we are operating in a fairly narrow space, we know that films do impact on people's mind and attitudes, especially that of children who are now growing up unfortunately on regular mainstream films, or reality shows, or often violent series that are aired on television. We have no control on those influences, but we need to create an alternative, an appetite for better and more appropriate films.

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But, the most important thing for a child is to go to school. This is the first step towards empowering children. School is not only meant for studies. It has much to do with childhood itself, to be able to grow with other children, question, play, and blossom into adulthood.

Who has been your role model in films and in social work?

I really do not have any specific role model. Fortunately, I have met several interesting and committed people, those who have overcome challenges in their lives, and have made some very hard decisions. In films also there are many eminent film makers, actors, and technicians that I deeply admire, but there is no need to emulate, or limit oneself to role models.

In social work too, there are many people who have dedicated their lives to the larger good, far away from the media gaze. They are the ones who ought to be called social activist and social workers, and not people like me. I have met many such people, and I have deep respect for them, and have learnt from their perseverance, commitment, and creativity. From the outside, we might think that they have struggled and wasted their lives, and nothing much has been achieved, but they have brought about many changes that the people who have been affected by them will testify. For example Aruna Roy who worked along with her team in bringing in the RTI Act.

Which of the social issues are you most passionate about?

There are so many, that I do not compete with issues. All are important in their respective context. But, the rights of the marginalized, whoever that might be – women, marginalized communities, whether of religion, caste, or sexual preference, children, HIV positive people, anybody who is disadvantaged. Marginalized people often don't have a voice, or the platform to raise their issues. So I try and do it in my small way, whenever I can.

You have produced and directed short films on education and rainwater harvesting. What has been the impact?

These are public service advertisements, and we made it for different organizations with a hope that the television channels would telecast them. But because of TRP rating and airtime being very expensive, the television channels do not want to give even a 60 second slot for free. It wasn't easy to market it. But when the 'Right to Education Bill' was recently passed, the 'Roll Call' film that was done five years ago for Unicef was used for the campaign.

The PSA on rain water harvesting was done for Centre for Science and Environment. They have used it for their campaigns and we learn that they have had a lot of hits on their website. None of these will change the world but are tiny steps towards creating awareness.

What was your larger idea of doing controversial films such as 'Fire' and 'Earth 1947'?

I think anything that we do not discuss openly and we shy away from is touted as controversial. 'Earth 1947' is about the partition and relationships that got affected by it, and there is nothing controversial in it. 'Fire' did become one of the most controversial films that I have worked in, as it spoke about the issues of homosexuality, questioned the arrange marriage system, and lack of choices women have. These are issues that we do not talk enough about. I think there was a healthy debate, and encouraged openness in the public domain. That is how an individual and society grows.

"On every Women's Day, I wonder if we should be celebrating, or introspecting as to why so many women continue to suffer right from the time of their birth. It should be both. We have a cause to celebrate but we have a long way to go before we can say that women have equal choices, or equal opportunities."



REFORM IN UNIFORM

R. Nataraj, IPS, Director General of Police, has used his position in several police departments to bring about innovative schemes and attitudinal changes in the police force. Currently, as Director of Fire Services, the IPS officer has utilized the fire brigade to render social service. He is also famous for having nabbed the Veerappan gang.

In an exclusive interview with Marie Banu, Nataraj shares his experiences and challenges in his career.

What inspired you to become a police officer?

India faced wars in 1962, 1965, and 1971. These ten years were very difficult for the country and there were a lot of expectations from the army. The uniform became a big attraction for the youngsters and a lot of stories were being published about heroic army men. I had a fascination for the uniform and joined the Auxiliary Cadet Code during my school days and later joined the NCC while at college. After graduation, I cleared the Civil Service examination and was selected for the Indian Police Service.

I am the first-generation police officer in my family. Most of my relatives are employed in government services, mostly in the teaching. My father being a government servant himself advised me to join duties as a police officer.

If not the police, which profession would you have chosen?

Being a graduate in physics, I would have joined Baba Atomic Research Centre when they were recruiting technical officers.

I also like to teach. Even now I address college students on public administration and human rights. Teaching gives you a compulsory opportunity to read and update your knowledge. It is only when you

start teaching, you will come to know that you need to understand and reflect on the subject.

You have introduced innovative policies in the fire services as well as in the prisons. Where do you derive the inspiration from?

I truly believe that being a public servant, service should be the focus. The general attitude of a government servant is to continue with the existing arrangement as there is a comfort of job security. You should keep reinventing yourself. I believe in zero budgeting—to start from scratch. I do not criticize what has gone wrong but consolidate and bring in my own ideas to do something new. This is what I did in whichever position I was, and it has been profusely satisfying.

What was the reaction of the inmates when the bakery unit was launched at Puzhal prison? Who consumes these products?

Initially, they thought that working in a bakery was one of the other tasks that they need to do as part of their imprisonment. I explained to them the multiple benefits of this scheme and that, if they were skilled, they could seek immediate employment when released from prison.

In Tihar Jail, the products made by the inmates from consumables to the furniture were branded as '*Tihar Haat*'. The chairs that were made by Tihar inmates were used by Supreme Court judges. Likewise, the products that were made in Puzhal prison were branded as 'Freedom'.

The bakery unit started as a charity along with Give life Foundation, an NGO. The bread is donated to 'The Banyan', a home for mentally challenged destitute women, and the buns and pastries are fed to poor children. We had initially trained 20 inmates and later provided training to more persons.

What has been the impact of the 'Friends of the Police' movement?

'Friends of Police' is a very old concept which was started by the British in 1936 as a Village Vigilance Committee. The village elders were committee members and they used to conduct meetings once in a month. They also organized police-public sports functions.

'Friends of Police' is another form of cooperation between the public and police. If the Sub-Inspector of Police maintains a good relationship with the community, he will have their support when there is a problem. Enforcement of law against bootleggers is a challenge as the police are subject to pressures from politicians and succumb to corruption. In such cases, neighborhood policing is effective.

Was it easy to work with the tribals to nab the Veerapan gang in 2001? How did you gain their confidence?

I learnt that the tribals were angry with the Special Task Force personnel because they disturbed their daily routine. People found the police and the Veerapan gang a nuisance. I directed the STF officers to go to the villages and understand the problems that the tribals faced, and advised them not to ask for any information about Veerapan. Health and education were identified to be the key areas that needed support. The STF personnel were asked to teach the children, and health camps were organized.

These initiatives created a lot of enthusiasm amongst the tribals. Hospitals like CMC Vellore and Apollo extended their services to the tribal areas. The police personnel had an attitudinal change after working with the tribals. In a week's time, the tribals voluntarily started to give us information about Veerapan. We sanitized the entire area from naxalites, and the tribals were exempted from paying a price for the forest produce they collected. This proactive

role had a good impact. All those who criticized the role of STF became our supporters.

Our city is filled with crimes. What are the most important issues in our society today that a citizen should be conscious of?

One should have security consciousness and this is lacking in our society today. If you see an adult walking on the road, you will invariably notice that in nine out of ten cases their child will be on the vehicle side. We do not check if we have closed all the doors and windows before we go to sleep, do not switch off electrical equipment after use, and we fail to be cautious when there is a gas leak in the kitchen.

We should be aware about cyber crimes. Many frauds are taking place through social networking sites and only a few people register a complaint. In many cases undesirable elements network through the internet. They use steganography—the art and science of writing hidden messages—while networking. One has to be very careful when disclosing one's identity as identity theft is prevalent today.

For policemen there is a need to do visible policing. The images in the camera that are kept in public places need to be monitored regularly. In London, although there are 10,000 cameras, all of them are monitored regularly. This helps in preventing crimes.

"I truly believe that being a public servant, service should be the focus. The general attitude of a government servant is to continue with the existing arrangement as there is a comfort of job security."

QUEEN OF JUSTICE

Justice Prabha Sridevan is the fifth woman Judge of the Madras High Court. During her tenure as a High Court Judge, she has been instrumental in delivering several judgments of importance. She now goes to the National Judicial Academy Bhopal as resource person for topics like social justice, gender justice, exclusion, and poverty.

Justice Prabha Sridevan shares with Marie Banu her views on women empowerment.

How did you feel when you were invited to be the fifth woman Judge of the Madras High Court?

I was zapped. That was my first reaction.

You pursued law after marriage. Was this easy for you? Did you choose this subject because you have a lineage of law professionals?

It was difficult. The joke was, ‘nobody studies in Law College.’ I wanted to be a good student. I was much older, and had two children while the rest of my classmates were 13 years younger to me. They were just out of college and were having fun. But, for me it was more serious.

My husband was a lawyer. So, I thought that it would be easy for me to slip into his office instead of going out and working elsewhere.

Which of the professions are challenging –Lawyer or Judge?

My years as a judge were more important to me. I think you can make a social change by your judgments on the basis of what your



philosophy is. You can make a change in a way no other position can, I think.

Being a woman, was it advantageous to have this portfolio?

Women have a woman's perspective. I really think—without talking about quotas—that the composition of the court should be representative of all of us in the society. If the composition of the court is not so, then I feel that an ordinary man is not likely to think that it is 'my' court. So, there should be women, minorities, people with disabilities, and so on. It should represent the society. We cannot get away with the fact that our society has castes. There should be a good mixture of everyone. Only then, the ordinary 'R.K. Laxman' man would feel 'this is my court'.

Can you share with our readers an incident in your career which made you feel proud of being a woman?

There are many such incidents. There are some cases where I felt that it was providential that it came up before me, because I could say what I think on that issue as a woman. Being a judge, I took part in several meetings here and abroad, where I could share my beliefs and my ideas. I would say I feel very happy (the word is not proud) to be a woman!

You want an incident. This is not a particular one, but several times women have come up to me and said, "Ma'am, after reading about you, I too feel I can also start a career or pursue studies after some years at home." The fact that I had been taking care of home and family for 13 years before I started going to law college, and the fact that after so many years I could do 'something' in the public space was important to the women. That made me very happy, as I said the word I would use is not 'proud'. It is important for women to feel that at any stage they can do this.

What is your view on 'woman empowerment'? Do you feel woman today are empowered enough?

Frankly, I really do not know what one means when they say 'empowerment'. If we are talking about knowing one's rights, I sometimes wonder if rural women know more. While I was a practicing lawyer, I had a client, a double graduate, who did not know what her husband was earning. I understand woman empowerment to mean that a woman is in total control of herself, knows her physical autonomy, and is aware of her rights. It is not about something that we exert on another. When women become strong, they know what they are, their worth, and that they have charge over their mind and body—I would call this empowerment!

Two years ago, while addressing a group of educated girls on women's rights, I learnt that they had not heard about the Domestic Violence Act. I said to them, "I am depressed that you do not know". The Act has been widely discussed in newspapers so many times and it is surprising that they had not read about it. There have been jokes on it as well. Is it because we do not care? That was a moment of doubt for me. God forbid, I don't want these girls to be abused. But, they should be able to lend their hands to their less fortunate sisters and for that they should know the law. Empowerment is not fighting, but knowing. It is knowledge and awareness.

About an insurance case that you judged, and the housewife's economic contribution to the household. Can you elaborate on this please?

That was a case in which a young girl Deepika lost both her parents in an accident and her grandfather had therefore filed for compensation on her behalf. How we work out on the compensation is that – we give under various heads e.g. some amount towards loss of love and affection, which is notional, and it varies. For

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monetary loss, we find out how much the breadwinner was earning and work out on an arithmetic calculation. It was easy to work out the loss because of the father's death based on his earning, but for the mother—a home maker—it was a notional value.

Against the award passed, the insurance company filed an appeal before the High Court, saying that they had paid too much already and it was anyway only one accident. It came up before the Division Bench presided by me and I said that actually for the child it was two accidents. Then suddenly, I said to the judge who was sitting with me, "If I do not talk about the value of a homemaker in this case, I will not get another opportunity." So, it was on a tangent I took up this issue. In fact the judgment reads 'really this is a digression..' and starts the discussion on the value of a homemaker.

I realized that I had only some more time as a judge and I wanted to start this dialogue. I found four ways of calculating this and I spoke about it all, and we calculated the value of Deepika's mother's work choosing one of them since only for one of the methods there was evidence before us.

This case is now followed by all the Lower Court Judges handling motor accident cases. Fortunately, a subsequent case came up in the Supreme Court from another High Court in which the same issue was raised, and the Supreme Court approved of the Deepika judgment saying it was an illuminating judgment. Homemakers have to be valued more in consonance with dignity.

Your comments on Anna Hazare's Lokpal bill?

There are difficulties in the draft bill. But, for me I look at it as a moment in history when the society also came out in the open and declared that the evil of corruption must go. Everyone needs one totem pole to go around. Anna Hazare probably provided this. I hope it does not turn out to be just a seven day wonder and all of

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us would go back to our own work. Civil society should work and negotiate at removing the defects and improving the existing draft as it did in the RTI Act.

"Frankly, I really do not know what one means when they say 'empowerment'. If we are talking about knowing one's rights, I sometimes wonder if rural women know more."



A DIFFERENT CUT

Film Director Radhamohan, has exploited the medium of cinema well and has woven a social touch into commercial films. His dexterity to blend humor, strong social messages and serious themes has made him a "Responsible filmmaker". Till date he has directed four films, out of which three of them – '*Azhagiya Theeye*', '*Mozhi*', and '*Abhiyum Naanum*' - are critically acclaimed and are box-office hits.

Director Radhamohan subtly weaves socially sensitive frames into his commercial films. He shares his worldview with Radha Jagan and Latha Suresh.

What inspired you to direct '*Mozhi*'?

When I was in school, I used to see a deaf and a mute girl in our colony. I always used to wonder how she would communicate with others and what was on her mind. Somehow, her image never left me. It motivated me to direct '*Mozhi*'. I enrolled in a sign language course conducted by Ability Foundation to understand the intricacies of communication amongst the hearing impaired.

Do you intentionally wish to convey a social message through your movies?

No, I am just a story teller. I am just doing what I like to do and I am sensitive to the needs of the society. My stories happen to be about a deaf and dumb girl, or about a father and daughter or about a mentally ill person. I make no conscious effort to be different from other film makers. In '*Mozhi*', I did not preach about the way one should treat a physically challenged person. But the message has reached the audience. I was overwhelmed by their reactions and the way it sensitized them. Similarly, in '*Abhiyum*

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Naanum', I highlighted the fact that parents cannot take their children for granted. Parents have to accept them as individuals and give them the required space to grow and live the lives they choose. Many parents have changed their attitude on seeing this movie and they have conveyed it to me at various forums.

Any inspiring moments?

I was a jury member for the International Ability Film Festival. They received over 300 nominations. Each film was of 60 seconds duration and was based on the theme 'Equal opportunities'. Each film had a story to tell and was so inspirational, that I can never ever forget that experience.

What is your perspective on solving Social issues?

Social Issues have always been there. New ones come up with the changing times. We must learn to address social issues in the context of the present day scenario. For instance, we all know that child labor is wrong. There is no second opinion to it. But, how do we address it? Identifying the issue does not solve it. We have to arrive at solutions, alternatives. Simply telling the parents, children and employers that child labor is illegal or wrong would not suffice. We have to emphasize the importance of education to the parents and the children and ensure that the children get the right kind of education without causing a financial strain on the poverty stricken family. We have to learn to emulate the good aspects from the world without affecting our fundamentals.

What do you think should be the role of media with regard to social issues?

Creating the right kind of awareness is the prime responsibility of the media. It should talk about buildings and public places being disabled friendly. How many buildings in our city have ramps or disabled friendly lifts? I remember a bright disabled boy, who had

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to discontinue his schooling as his classroom was located in the second floor. The school did not have a ramp or a lift. The boy and his parents requested the management to move the class to the ground floor which they refused. So he quit school. Not only has the boy has been deprived of the joys of schooling, the school has also lost an opportunity to make itself disabled friendly. This is the sad status of affairs in our society.

What do you think is the social sector's responsibility towards the media?

Many individuals have been sidelined due to various reasons in the society. They may be physically or mentally challenged, mentally ill or whatever be the reason, inclusion of all into the mainstream society should be achieved. For this, we welcome the experts in each field to use media as a platform and reach out to the public and emphasize the facts that all are equal. These experts should write and share facts to create awareness amongst people. This would educate and motivate society to understand the importance of mainstreaming socially discriminated individuals.

Your aspirations?

I want to sustain this effort in social inclusion with open mindedness and play a responsible role. I would be happy if I am recognized as a responsible filmmaker.

"No, I am just a story teller. I am just doing what I like to do and I am sensitive to the needs of the society."



WHITE KNIGHT

Dr. J Radhakrishnan, IAS, is an officer who qualified for the Indian Administrative Service in the year 1992 by securing the 7th rank at all India level and was allotted to the Tamil Nadu cadre. He has held several positions in the State Government of Tamil Nadu and has the experience of serving as Collector and head of four Districts—Salem, Sivaganga, Thanjavur, and Nagapattinam.

He was one of the youngest Commissioner of Chennai Municipal Corporation in the year 2000 and 2001. He has also served in the Secretariat, Government of Tamil Nadu as Deputy Secretary, Joint Secretary, Additional Secretary, and Special Secretary to the Government in the Finance and Education Departments, and also served as the Commissioner Prohibition and Excise department.

In March 2009, he joined the United Nations Development Programme on deputation from the Government, as its Assistant Country Director and is the Head of the Disaster Management Unit.

Dr. J Radhakrishnan, IAS shares with Marie Banu his experiences working for disaster relief programs and his views on social issues.

Being a veterinary doctor by education, what inspired you to join Indian Administrative Service?

Treating animals has its own charm. After completing my Veterinary Medicine Degree, I worked for a short time as an Assistant professor in Kerala Agricultural University. Along with teaching and research I had a lot of time. I had the interest to pursue civil services after reading various competitive magazines.

The challenging assignments and the accompanying responsibilities given to civil servants at a very young age inspired me to make an

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attempt for civil services, especially Indian Administrative Services. I continue to love veterinary profession and whenever I get an opportunity I do visit colleges and hospitals.

You are known to be a compassionate person. Which of the social issues disturb you?

Two issues disturb me—female infanticide and foeticide; and care of elderly.

Female infanticide and foeticide is a challenge in many parts of India, especially in the District of Salem in Tamil Nadu. When I was serving as Collector here, I was involved in the revival of the cradle baby scheme, and activities that were connected with eliminating and reducing female infanticide and female foeticide.

It was very disturbing to see girl children being given away under the cradle baby scheme and it was unfortunate to see cases of female infanticide. This was not due to economic reasons, but due to social problems which of course has been drastically reduced now. When I read about such incidents in Haryana or Rajasthan I still get disturbed.

Similarly, although there are a lot of social protection measures available, care of elderly is becoming a challenge not only for the poor people, but across various sections of our society. Many people do not practice what they preach!

The government is involved in a lot of welfare measures and so are the NGOs. Still, there is a dearth of social issues that needs to be addressed. What according to you should be the effective strategy that government and NGOs could adopt to address these issues?

The ultimate solution for all social issues is to empower people and address the grass root challenges by putting systems in place.

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This perhaps would be an effective strategy. In most cases, we do not have any single solution for social issues. Depending on the type of issue, we may have several facets within the same issue. We may have to tackle one facet of the social issue differently in each area.

Concomitantly, we need to ensure that the required regulations are in place. Government and NGOs should not only implement, but also monitor their programs. The bottom line is that the communities need to be at the centre of all the efforts, and the Government and NGOs should work along with the communities to ensure that the regulations and awareness bring about change in the behavior of people.

As the district collector of Nagapattinam, you have gained national as well as international media attention for your efficient administration of the Tsunami Relief Rehabilitation Programme. Was this encouraging else was it a hassle to tackle media?

In the aftermath of the disasters, media was constructive in its criticism and positive in its appreciation of the good efforts of the Government and the NGOs who were active during that time. Actually, the scale of two tragedies —Kumbakonam school fire accident in July 2004 and the tsunami in December 2004—led to large scale media attention that continued from the relief to the recovery phase.

Media needs have changed rapidly in recent times when compared to the time when I joined service in the early 90's. At that time there were no 24x7 news media, many number of national, regional print or regional media, or social media. In the changing times, if the right information is not shared at the right time with the media, then incorrect information or perception may go. So, I always used to take it as part of our responsibility to ensure that right information is shared.

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Given the tsunami experience, do you think that India is now competent to handle future disasters?

India has always been having a fairly excellent response system. The challenge for India is that close to 60 percent of land is vulnerable to earthquake; 70 percent of the land under cultivation is prone to drought; almost 40 million hectares are prone to floods; and 8,000 km of coastline is vulnerable to tsunami. Surprisingly, the Disaster Management (DM) set up in India has been growing in learning along with the disasters. What has happened is that there is a paradigm shift on the response centric approach for each of these disasters to a more holistic approach addressing all phases of DM, namely Prevention, Mitigation, Response, Recovery, and Reconstruction.

I feel that while a lot has been achieved, there is still a need to ensure that there is a greater community level awareness efforts coupled with robust early warning systems and connectivity till the last mile, so that the people in the habitations are able to respond effectively in the event of a disasters, i.e., the grass root villagers should be able to access information about predictable disasters.

In addition, as already initiated in many cases, specific mitigation projects have to be taken up to ensure that the effect of disasters is mitigated. More importantly, we also need to mainstream disaster risk reduction in the regular development programs. Already, the Government of India and the State Government and the Non-Governmental organizations involved in DM are taking up a number of such projects to address these issues.

You were invited to Washington to deliver a lecture at the United States Department of Education on tsunami-related issues. Can you share your learning with us?

The Department of State has a program through the US Embassy called as International Visitors (IV) program. I was invited to be

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part of IV program which exposed us to the issue of responding to natural disasters and how it is being handled in the US. It also provided an opportunity to share our learnings' from the tsunami relief and rehabilitation program in Nagapattinam with persons who were handling the tsunami response program in other countries.

The exposure visits and sharing of mutual experiences helped in expanding my knowledge and vision about the way in which disaster management is handled in various places.

After handling several portfolios in the government, you have now moved on to UNDP on secondment. Will you return to serve as an IAS officer?

I have always maintained that I would come back to the state, once my present three-year secondment ends in March 2012. My present assignment as Head of Disaster Management (DM) with UNDP India has provided me an excellent opportunity to use the experiences and exposure to DM in implementing and overseeing the joint programs which we implement with the Government of India and the National Disaster Management Authority on Institutional Strengthening and Capacity Building for Disaster Risk Reduction and Urban Risk Reduction.

I am sure this exposure and experience would be extremely useful, when I come back to the state to serve in whatever capacity I am offered at that point of time.

"The exposure visits and sharing of mutual experiences helped in expanding my knowledge and vision about the way in which disaster management is handled in various places."

PASSION AND PERCUSSION

Music invited us to Srinivas's lounge. The kids were at home, and yet it was quiet. We sensed discipline all over the place. Srinivas, who had just returned from a recording session, stood in the balcony admiring the scenery. He welcomed us with his charming smile.

Musician Srinivas shares his societal concerns with Marie Banu and Latha Suresh.

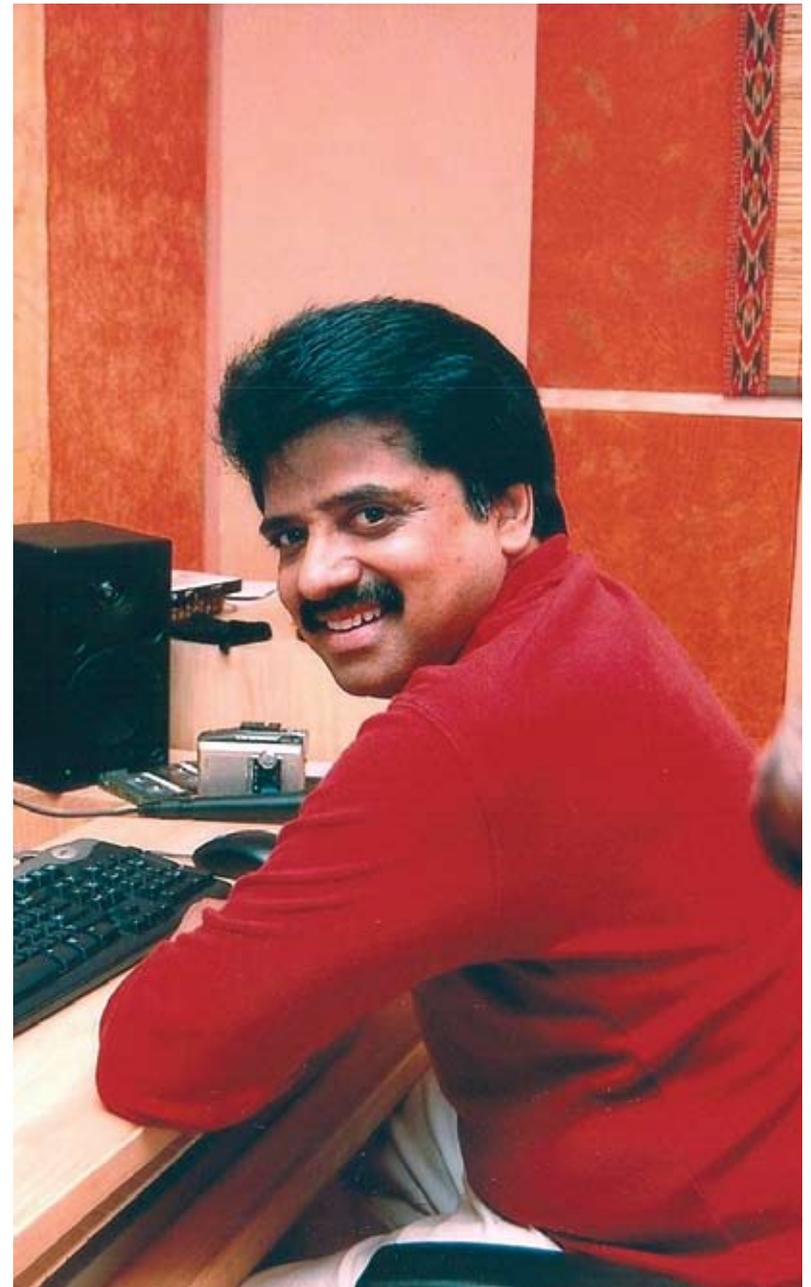
We have heard a lot about your social work. But why is there no media coverage? What inspires you to engage in charity?

No, it is not that. We actually don't do as much social work as we can. Most of us are selfish and greedy. At least when we get opportunities we can be a good person. This is what everybody should be doing all the time. The world we see today is wrong and we are in the rat race. We do not have a choice. But you happen to be in this world which is materialistic.

If I can contribute in a small way, I will do it. And why media hype? Doing something good is a natural thing that people should do without any publicity rather than project it as doing something out of the way.

Is there a difference you feel when you sing for charities and when you sing for your regular music concerts?

I feel very good when I perform for charity. There are people who exploit charity for personal gain. It is important to sift the fake and the genuine. So I do a concert for free only when I am sure that the people and the cause are genuine.



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Which is the song that you like to sing in every music concert?

There are certain songs I want like to sing but am not sure if the audience want to hear them. *Azhagae sugamma* is one song I always like to sing. There are people who really like that song but a larger audience might not. Songs like *Kaiyil midhakkum*, *Minsara poove* and *Ooh la la la*, I have to sing whether they are my favorite or not.

Do you feel that songs would influence patriotism?

May be it can. '*Vande Matram*' really inspired the youth. When you hear Rahman's '*Vande Mataram*' you really feel energized.

Which social causes are you passionate about?

Our world is full of issues. Ultimately we realize that we have also contributed to the problem. So, why not help to resolve the issue?

Education for the underprivileged is crucial for a country like India. We can save the world if we can educate the children now.

Religion has become a social issue! Religion which is supposed to be a savior for mankind is turning against mankind today. I don't think we should have religion at all. We should realize that all human beings are equal. Let us not say that I am a Hindu, or a Muslim or a Christian.

Your memorable achievements?

I think it is yet to come.

Do you intend to start your own charity in a few years from now?

I do charity in a small way and care more for my family and children and immediate circle. I hope I become a little more enlightened and start my own charity.

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Does your family also get involved in your social work activities?

They do not have any objection in me doing charity. My wife and my daughters empathize with the causes I support, while they have their own causes that they are passionate about. I would like my children to be humane.

Your advice to social workers?

They are great and have an enviable attitude. Corporates, celebrities, businessmen, politicians and all of us should change their approach to society completely to make the world a better place to live in.

"I don't think we should have religion at all. We should realize that all human beings are equal. Let us not say that I am a Hindu, or a Muslim, or a Christian."



HER MELODIOUS MISSION

One pictures Padmashri Sudha Raghunathan as the lady with the awesome voice, wearing a silk saree and jasmine flowers, busy performing at live Carnatic music concerts all over the world. That is a whole lot, but that's not all of her.

This beautiful nightingale has another side to her personality – that of a passionate social worker.

I reached her residence earlier than scheduled for the interview, having learnt that she was disciplined about her appointments. While waiting in her living room, I admired all the award certificates, including that of Padmashri, Kalaimamani, and Sangeetha Choodamani. The ambience was divine, even the silence felt melodious.

Sudha entered the room with a gleaming smile and wished me 'Happy Republic Day!' She added, "I think that patriotism is very important. It gives you that moral responsibility."

We soon slid into a discussion about how she used music to fulfill her desire to serve the deprived.

Padmashri Sudha Ragunathan talks to Marie Banu about how she uses music in social work.

What inspired you to start Samudhaya Foundation?

It was a time when we were reading so much about the Kargil war – about families who had lost their sons, some newlyweds having lost their spouses and many who lost their fathers. I was deeply moved and wanted to do something for the families who had lost their loved ones. I wanted to somewhere get connected and tried to contact a few organizations who were mobilizing funds to support these families.

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I wanted to do it with my music.

Even prior to 1999 I was involved in social activities and sang for music concerts to raise funds for charities outside my organization. But I was singing for others and for the cause they chose. I realized that I wanted to have the individuality and the independence to do what I wanted and when I wanted, with nobody questioning it.

I spread the word around. A lot of my friends were passionate but did not have the time or the inclination to start an organization. Some friends wanted to contribute but did not know whom to give to.

I reflected on this and told my husband Ragunathan, "We must do something about it." He encouraged me. We decided to launch a trust.

I sang on behalf of all the organizations who were contributing for the Kargil Relief Fund. Mr. C. Subramanian, former Finance Minister of India, inaugurated the event and Mr. T.T. Vasu, trustee of Samudhaya Foundation, was present. We raised Rs. 5 lakhs and contributed it to the State Relief Fund for the Kargil defence personnel.

The first project gave us the motivation to do more. The same year we had the Orissa Super Cyclone. I performed Hindustani along with Aparna Panshikar at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. It was a one and a half hour concert and we raised a small amount of Rs. 1 lakh and gave it to the Governor of Orissa.

This was followed by the Gujarat earthquake relief. I asked Shri. O.S. Arun, senior Carnatic vocalist, "Can you do it for us without your usual professional charges?" He was kind and obliged to sing, while Smt.Urmila Satyanarayana performed Bharatanatyam.

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We raised around Rs. 4 lakhs and contributed it to the State Fund.

This was how we started our work in Samudhaya Foundation in 1999.

What are the key social causes that you are involved in?

While I was mobilizing support for national level disasters and calamities for the first few years, I realized that I should do something for our own city, our own states, and for our own causes. And somewhere children have been always very close to my heart.

In Tamil we say '*kann parvai pattalae pothum*' which means, 'It is enough if we just look at them', this would make them happy. We supported organizations like Sri Arunodayam, Banyan and Kakkum Karangal. We also started distributing Sadhana awards to recognize those who have made a mark.

Most of our projects were connected with children. We donated Rs.10 lakhs to the Cancer Institute to support poor children affected by leukemia.

I woke up one morning and called my friends and said that I wanted to mobilize a donation of Rs. 25 to 30 lakhs. I spoke to my contacts in Singapore who spread the word about the concert. The program was scheduled on 23rd August 2008 and by the 15th we had raised only Rs. 30,000. I got a little nervous and started looking at my own finances. We had already identified an organization to support children for free heart surgeries through Ramachandra Medical Hospital. We kept receiving cheques in dollars and by the 22nd of August we had already mobilized Rs. 26 lakhs. We gave the funds through Shri. S.M.Krishna, former Governor of Maharashtra, at a formal event.

We gave Rs. 25 lakhs and enabled surgeries for 100 children. We also gave Rs 5 lakhs to Sri Arunodayam to help them build infrastructure. This year being the tenth year of our Trust, we have decided to identify ten different organizations and contribute Rs. 10 lakh each. If God is kind, we would be able to mobilize a total of Rs. 1 crore to contribute to these organizations.

Who is your role model in social work?

Mother Theresa. There is no match for her compassion, sacrifice and selflessness. She is a saint. When we go out and meet people there are many social workers working with a lot of passion and compassion. You realize that what you do is just a drop in the ocean. All the different social workers who have lived or are living are also my source of inspiration. I am especially touched by women social workers.

Do you think that Carnatic music can be taught to underprivileged children through recordings?

It is very difficult to teach Carnatic music through recordings. It is simpler to teach devotional music or patriotic songs like 'neeradum kadal muzhathu' or 'senthamizh naadu'. Carnatic music is more like a language. It has its grammar and parameters of rhythm and each raga has certain limitations. Like a person, it has an identity of its own. So to get that flavor, I do not agree to people teaching music on Skype. It should be live and taught one-on-one.

You are a singer, social worker and home maker. How do you manage to juggle all these roles?

I believe that if you have the attitude, you can find time for everything. I do not believe in delegation. I like to give a personal touch right from planning the backdrop to the invitations and to whom the invitations should go for each of my events.

Your advice to social workers?

The younger generation should be influenced to take up social work early in life. It should start in schools and colleges.

When a child is one-year old, he recognizes another child and smiles at him even though he is in the midst of a large group.

There are many organizations waiting for support. Schools in that locality can look for organizations in their area and extend support through their students. In old-age homes, there are those who just need people to visit and listen to them.

My daughter Malavika is involved in events organized for Samudhaya Foundation and so is my son Koushik. You give them the opportunity, they will do it. When they do it, they experience joy and their commitment becomes a virtue. It is all linked

I regret having wasted 30 years not doing social work. I would have done much more if I was exposed to social work during my school days. Today, I am satisfied that I am able to do something.

"While I was mobilizing support for national level disasters and calamities for the first few years, I realized that I should do something for our own city, our own states, and for our own causes."



STAR SOCIAL WORKER

Suhasini Maniratnam has been part of the film industry for 25 years as actor, director, dialogue-writer and producer. She won the coveted National Film Award for Best Actress in 1986 for her role in the Tamil film '*Sindhu Bhairavi*'.

In 1996, Suhasini stepped into direction, helming her first film Indira. She also wrote the screenplay for the film. The project was produced by G.V. Films. She and husband Mani Ratnam, are both involved in the running of their production company Madras Talkies.

This award-winning actor has been actively supporting many charities and has a passion towards working for the cause of women and children. She chooses roles that portray an empowered woman and has inspired many women through her characterizations.

Suhasini Maniratnam shares with Marie Banu her views on the social sector.

What motivates you to engage in social work?

I get motivated when I see other people who are passionate and single-minded about the work they do as a duty to fellow humans, and not out of pity or guilt.

Which of the social issues are you most passionate about?

Issues concerning women and children are what I am passionate about.

What according to you is the role of a celebrity for an NGO?

A celebrity should know when to be a volunteer and when to be a beggar and when to be a celebrity to the advantage of the cause that he or she is working for.

Who is your role model in social work?

Mr. M. B. Nirmal of Exnora International and Ms. Jayashri Ravindran of Ability Foundation have been a major inspiration for me to get involved in social work.

How do you think the media can be used as a tool to bring about change?

Media is the voice. There is no war or peace without voice, word and language. Media creates all these three. Hence media is a powerful tool to bring about social change.

How can we bridge the rural-urban divide?

It has already been achieved in many villages. My village is unrecognizable and so is my school. Children have become smart in my native town Paramakudi. But I feel that the urban monopoly would go away if the voices of the rural folk are heard more than that of the urban.

"A celebrity should know when to be a volunteer and when to be a beggar, and when to be a celebrity to the advantage of the cause that he or she is working for."

SUNSHINE ACTOR

Suriya Sivakumar, the iconic actor, is known for his humility and charity. Born to an actor, his films have become benchmarks for others. He has won national recognition including three Filmfare awards and three Tamil Nadu State Film awards.

Suriya launched Agaram Foundation in 2008 to work towards prevention of school dropouts. Along with the Ministry of Education in Tamil Nadu, he produced a short film on child poverty, labor, and lack of education.

Suriya shares with Marie Banu why he puts charity before films

What inspired you to start Agaram Foundation?

The society has played a major role for what I am today. Every one of us owes to the society. Agaram is one of my small and wholehearted initiatives in fulfilling my social responsibility. It has been my father and many samaritans around me who have been a major source of inspiration to start Agaram Foundation.

There are so many pressing social issues. Why did you choose education as a focus area for your trust?

I strongly believe that education is the only tool which can bring about change. It promotes civilization, and enables an individual to conquer challenges. Education is no more a want, but a basic necessity in life besides food, shelter, and clothing. It is an answer to overcome the economic imbalance of not only the individual, but the family, and ultimately the society. The help extended to a person in any other form would benefit only that particular individual, but when one imparts education, you are providing hope to the whole family which in turn benefits the society.



Who has been your inspiration to engage in social work?

My family has certainly been the best source of inspiration for me to engage in social work. Since childhood, they have imbibed in me values and ethics. Ultimately, this is what makes me feel that I am not doing social work, but just fulfilling my basic responsibility.

Can you share your comments on the recent bill on Right to Education?

Education is the right of every child. It is after 63 years of freedom, the buds of our country have had their opportunity to blossom. The privatization of education was actually creating a social imbalance. This scenario would change with the implementation of this Bill. The quality of education should be focused to develop educated, cultured, and strong individuals who will have the courage to forge a strong and successful future for themselves, and for their community.

It is learnt that the children are best at their learning capabilities when they are 3 to 6 years old, and the period to shape a child for its future is when he or she pursues graduation. I believe that this bill would be at its best if these points are noted.

What are the measures that one can take to prevent school dropouts?

Ignorance is the root cause for school dropouts. We need to bring about awareness on the importance of education in society. The prevalence of dropouts is more amongst the weaker section. This is because most of the children are being sent to school to benefit from the mid-day meal scheme until he/she is old enough to engage in labor. It is during this period the child's parent should be counseled by the school authorities and be encouraged to continue educating their children.

Did you engage in social work as a child? Can you please share a memorable incident?

My father Sivakumar, since his hundredth film, has been giving away cash awards for children who topped the Plus 2 examination. These events have always been close to my heart. I used to be astonished looking at the kind of devotion these children had towards education. It was remarkable to note that children who could not afford one square meal a day had put in all their efforts and vigor to top academics and life. Meeting such children year after year has been a great source of inspiration for me.

Once a student named Rajini Kanth who hailed from a deprived family and backward community was offered an award for his excellence in academics. At the time of the prize distribution function, after he received the cash award from my father, he said: "I am happy to have the privilege to collect this award. But I have already received sufficient funds towards my education expenses. Many of my friends, classmates, and girls who live in my village do not have proper clothes or uniforms to wear. I wish to give this award money to them." I was dumb struck when I heard this. A child from a poor background, who cannot even afford a proper meal a day, is now ready to take up some responsibility. This has been one incident which I shall never forget.

Your father also has a charity named Sivakumar Educational trust. What has been your role here?

Sivakumar Educational trust has been the basis for Agaram Foundation's activities. Of late, Agaram has taken the responsibility of choosing the poorest of the poor to benefit from the awards that are offered by Sivakumar Educational Trust.

Being a leading actor, how do you find time for social work?

Any day, Agaram Foundation tops my priority. The sense of satisfaction I receive from this can never be compared with anything

else. It's just not the satisfaction but more a responsibility that I owe here. I would never give up this responsibility and Agaram would continue to be my first preference.

What are the future plans of Agaram Foundation?

Agaram aims to bring about a significant positive change in the socio-economic status of rural children. Agaram and its activities are all backed by volunteers who spend their time for the benefit of these children. Agaram strives to reach to all deserving children. This year, through one of Agaram's initiative named 'Vidhai', we are sponsoring 150 rural children to enroll in professional courses such as engineering and medicine. Through this program, we not only aim to fund their education, but also look at their holistic development. Children will be mentored during their entire course of education and will be offered training programs and workshops to boost their morale and increase confidence.

Education should reach everyone in our country. I am sure that Agaram would definitely lead to become a peoples' movement.

"It was remarkable to note that children who could not afford one square meal a day had put in all their efforts and vigor to top academics and life. Meeting such children year after year has been a great source of inspiration for me."

DR. INSPIRATION

Dr. C. Sylendra Babu, IPS, Commissioner of Police, Coimbatore, is an inspiration for thousands of youth who aspire to join the civil services today. His zeal in directly engaging in rescue operations at times of need has won him several laurels. He is the recipient of the Chief Minister's Medal for outstanding devotion to duty in 2000, Prime Minister's Medal for saving the lives of 18 bus passengers in 2001, Chief Minister's Police Medal for Gallantry in 2001, and President's Police Medal for Meritorious Service in 2005.

Dr. C. Sylendra Babu, IPS talks to Marie Banu about the need for discipline in society today.

What inspired you to become a police officer?

I had a passion for uniform even during my school days. I was a NCC cadet and later became the NCC Sergeant. Amongst hundred cadets, I was the chief in school. Even in college, I was the Senior Under Officer, a top position. It was since then I had a passion to wear the uniform. I came to know about Indian Police Service through one of my seniors who had passed the IAS examination—Mr. V K Subburaj, Secretary, Health. He was my pioneer.

You have written several books, most of them motivating youth to join the civil services. What is your impression about the youth of today?

I find happiness in the midst of children. My hobby is to motivate adolescents and I have written a book titled 'Be ambitious'. It is one of the interesting books that I wrote, and children like it. I was able to reach to more youngsters, particularly adolescents through this book. They talk to me freely, and interact through my website which has more than 43,000 hits and over 1500 interactions.



Inspiring Conversations

I also train youngsters on competitive examinations like civil services, and I have written a book titled ‘You too can become an IPS officer’. From the beginning, I liked to guide children and I always find time for them. They are good and have aspirations, but their circumstances are not good—particularly their parents who have a different set of ambitions. For instance, if a youth wishes to pursue aviation or shipping, his parents would want him to study electronic communication.

Civil Services provide a person with a higher position and responsibilities at a much younger age. Is this an advantage or a challenge?

Young age gives one many advantages. You can take decisions fast, lead from the front, and you have all the energy. Even if you are given a high responsibility, you can discharge it to the admiration of those whom you lead. IPS training is for a period of 2 years and 4 months and it could be even more, if you include the probationary period. During the training, you would be taught law, investigation, evidences, man-management, and inter personnel skills.

Being asked to manage responsibilities at a young age is a real thrill, and I loved it. My first posting was in Gopichettyalayam when Veerapan was reigning supreme. He was in control of most of the villages in the hills and it was a big challenge. We fought against him for about a year and brought him out of his place. There were a couple of firings and encounters in which I shot two of his men, and he in turn shot my own men. I was fortunate enough to get such challenging postings.

You have been directly involved in rescuing accidents victims. If you were not a police officer, would you have still does this?

I really don’t know. But there are many people who come forward to help accident victims. They offer help to hospitalize the victims

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and even stay with them for a long time. I could have been one among them.

But, a vast majority of people avoid helping an accident victim. Maybe, they think that they will have to come for future litigations to give evidence about the incident. It is one’s responsibility to give a complaint about the accident, if he is the only man who has witnessed it. To the maximum, you will have to appear in the court for one day to give evidence of what you have seen. But, if you wish to opt out of this, it is fine. We will find another witness or police themselves can serve as witness.

Helping a victim, assisting him in the accident site, and saving his life is in itself a great honor. In a lifetime, one may get only one chance to do this. I will advise every citizen who happens to see an accident to offer help immediately.

You organize summer camps for children in your neighborhood and in this teach karate and spoken English for children. Would you like to mentor such camps in rural areas?

Absolutely, if, there is a need, we will come. But, it would not be possible to do this on a regular basis.

We have been organizing summer camps at Mogappair in Chennai since 2002 for the underprivileged children as well as children who belonged to the middle income group. We started with a physical fitness program. As we had a good karate team in the city, we formed a boys club and offered free karate training. Few parents requested us to provide tuition for their children in English and mathematics. So, we extended our support by teaching spoken English besides karate training. Some of our students have excelled in school and college, and few have joined the software industry. My son is also a student in this club.

Your advice for people who are involved in social work?

Professional social workers are doing extremely well. It is better if social workers do not look at personal gains or publicity and really do a good job. For instance, I know one Air India pilot Mr. Nandakumar who is running a school free of cost and he never claims to be a social worker. Also, I know a couple who worked in Kodai International School running a school free of cost in Thiruvarur. There are people like these who are silently doing good work. Social service should be obvious. One should do the best they can, the most they can, and talk the least about it. If you start doing things for publicity sake, the work will be less and concentration will be more in investing and meeting people, bringing them to your place. As a result, time is lost, and in this process effort is also lost.

What would you like to say to the Conversations readers?

This message which I have for the readers of this magazine is that self-discipline is the solution for most of the social problems today. Individual persons should know his responsibilities better than rights. Today people are aware of their rights rather than their responsibilities.

In our place, in our dealings with other people, in our personal living, if every citizen is disciplined, it will be more useful to our society. I come across cases of dishonesty and people easily get cheated. If a man takes advantages of another person and takes away his property or money, the same person should be ashamed and he should realize that there is a society that is watching him.

The society should come down heavily on a man who is trying to cheat another person. Even his own wife, children and close relatives should hate him. Instead, if a man is amassing wealth and is well off, he is appreciated. People like to be his fan and would like to take a picture with this man who is successful, despite

the fact that he has achieved success through the wrong way. We should aspire for a society that does not tolerate indiscipline, crime, corruption, and nepotism. Like Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam's vision 2020, we should have a super India with super powers by 2020.

"From the beginning, I liked to guide children and I always find time for them. They are good and have aspirations, but their circumstances are not good—particularly their parents who have a different set of ambitions."

DARINGLY DIFFERENT

J.K. Tripathy, IPS took proactive policing to a new level by listening to peoples' needs and expectations. An IPS officer from the 1985 batch, he received the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Public Administration in 2008. He is also the recipient of the International Community Policing Award conferred by the International Association of Chiefs of Police at Toronto, Canada in 2001, and also a Gold Medal for 'Innovations in Governance' at Glasgow, U.K. by the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management in 2002.

He received this award for introducing an innovative 'Community Policing Module' in Trichy where he served as the Police Commissioner. He had also launched a 'Slum Adoption Programme' in which orphans, drop-outs, children mostly from broken families, ex-convicts, etc., were provided an opportunity to go to school or take up vocational courses in order to improve their employability, and deter them from being driven to delinquency.

J K Tripathy, IPS shares with Marie Banu his views on how NGOs and Police could work together to bring about change in the society.

You have received an International award for introducing community policing at Trichy. How can this model be replicated in Chennai?

I did not win this award. It was our team! This system gave good results in terms of controlling crimes and enhancing police performance in all parameters by empowering the citizens and constabulary, and to fight crimes of all types thus improving police image. Definitely, this has to be scaled up.



Your first case as Chennai Police Commissioner was solving the case of kidnap of a three-year-old girl from the Marina. How can parents and the community be precautious of such instances in future?

Parents are cautious. What we need to do is to educate the child—both in school and at home. They should be told what to do and what they should not do. It is not only about their safety, but also against any abuse.

Parents play a very important role. When they go out or when they keep the child in somebody else's care, they should be doubly sure about it. We offer to conduct antecedent verification of the domestic helps they employ, but they should be absolutely careful while giving custody of their child to somebody or while taking them out.

On our part, we are taking strong action against those who indulge in kidnapping children for the purpose of illegal adoption or subject them to any kind of abuse.

There are many crimes happening in the city. Which of them do you think is the most challenging to curb?

First of all, I do not know how to qualify 'many', while comparing the present crime rate with the previous and the corresponding period, as well as with the crime scenario in other metros.

I meet around 100 people every day. I very rarely come across someone who say, "I am a victim of an offence, and the police did not register my case". This implies that police are registering complaints and statistics can be trusted. Chennai is the safest amongst all metros, and we are striving to make it 'still safer' by effectively handling snatchings.

I see crimes as a socio-psychic problem. As long as poverty, unemployment, greed, and other diversions exist, the society

will be burdened with this menace. However, we are equal to the task with the active cooperation of the NGOs and the community.

Which are the areas you think NGOs and police could work together to bring about change in our society?

For us, in every scheme of things, we can enlist NGO participation. NGOs can play a vital role in empowerment of the community and in our fight against crimes. They can support our slum adoption programs, Boys Clubs, rehabilitation of criminals, etc. We have a women help line through which we try and rehabilitate the women victims through NGOs. Overall, they can create awareness on various issues concerning the people while acting as a bridge between us and the community. Depending on their level of commitment and capabilities, it is for the police to network with NGOs and enlist their support.

As a police officer, one is expected to be available 24x7. How do you overcome stress?

I do not get stressed at all. I just keep working through.

I am missing my games, but this is an initial job demand. There might be some element of de-stressing while playing, but it is not a soul war. I have held several positions and I have enjoyed each of them thoroughly.

Your advice for youth, who aspire to join the police?

I really have a dream for the youth to grow up as good and responsible citizens, upholding ethical and democratic values. If some of them wish to join the Police, they are welcome. Whichever field they are, let them not be self-centric. They should always be asking themselves—"What are we giving back to the society?"



CREAM OF THE CROP

Vikram, 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.

Chiyaan Vikram shares with Marie Banu 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 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 endeavor 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 Università 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!

"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."

LAUGHTER THERAPIST

Padmashri Vivekanathan alias Vivek, a post graduate in Commerce, is a leading comedian in Tamil film industry. His first debut was in ‘*Manathil Uruthi Vendum*’ a film directed by K. Balachander in 1987. He has won 5 Filmfare awards for ‘Best Comedian’, and received the Padmashri award from the Government of India for his contribution to the arts in April 2009.

He is more of a satirist than a slapstick comedian, which is usually popular among the Tamil film industry. His roles usually draw humor from scenes of daily life. Some of his most popular jokes relate to serious subjects, such as bribery, over-population, and political corruption.

Padmashri Vivek shares with Marie Banu his view about humor and its importance in one’s life

Why did you choose to enter the film industry?

Actually, it was an accident for me. While working at the Secretariat, I was a main entertainer in the ‘Madras Humour Club International’ where people used to come, sit, and share jokes. I was a pioneer who started acting a joke, i.e. pantomiming a situation. This fetched me the ‘Best Entertainer Award’ many times.

I did my M.Com and was working as a telephone operator in Madurai. I used to come to Chennai, entertain the members of the humor club, and return. P.R. Govindarajan, known as Kalakendra Govindarajan, was a member of the humour club. He introduced me to his friend K. Balachander, film director, who asked me: "What do you want Mr. Vivek." I replied: "I don’t want anything, Sir." Both of them exchanged looks. Govindarajan said to Balachander that I was a raw talent from Madurai and did not know how to talk. I stood looking at both of them and did not know what to say.



Balachander said: "Neither Chennai nor Madurai, I cannot help you. Try to get a transfer".

I then applied for a transfer and moved to Chennai. While working, I appeared for the TNPSC examination, and got selected in the Group IV category. I joined as a Junior Assistant in Madras Secretariat. All fell into place.

I started writing scripts for Balachander for over four years. One day, he explained a situation and asked me to write a script for 16 characters. I finished this task overnight. It was actually a test, which I did not know. Later, he told me that I would be acting as one of the brothers' of Actor Suhasini in the movie '*Manadhil Urudhi Vendum*' in 1987.

I wanted to be a writer, and then become an assistant director, but I turned out to be an actor.

Unlike others, you are more of a satirist than a slapstick comedian. Who has been your inspiration? How do you conceive your ideas?

N. S. Krishnan was the first comedian to bring social issues into humour. Both NSK and M. R. Radha have been my inspiration. Like them, I have also spoken about the future. In one movie, I appear as a *yagava munivar* (yogi) and say that London will get submerged into the sea in the next 200 years. It was just a fluke statement and this was much before the issue of global warming was brought to the limelight.

For certain scripts, I pre-plan. I discuss with my team about current issues and work on the scripts. I am careful to tell even serious issues in such a way that it does not hurt the sentiments of anyone. It is a tough job. They always say that comedy is not a joke.

How important is humor for one's life?

Mahatma Gandhi has said: "If I had no sense of humor, I would long ago have committed suicide." Humour brings laughter and when you laugh, certain hormones are produced. This is equal to the state of a yogi who receives deep enlightenment after meditation.

Humour is of paramount importance in everyone's life. Laughter is an expression of joy and happiness. Everybody wants to be happy. In Psychology it is said that the goal of life is to get more happiness. Laughter has become a therapy now. Cancer specialists and cardiologist are prescribing their patients to watch comedy clips from movies.

Your jokes often relate to social issues of today (bribery, overpopulation, and political corruption among others). There have been instances when some social issues have been solved? How do you feel about it?

Ernest Hemmingway, a noble laureate has said: "Whenever I dip my pen into an ink bottle, I leave some flesh into it. When I receive recognition, I feel proud for having given some purposeful humour.

You have been supporting charities in your very own way. What is your impression about the social work sector?

There are good and bad people. The system is very bad and there is no town planning. In western countries, and even underdeveloped countries like Indonesia and Sri Lanka, the streets are clean. But, here in our city the planning has been given to a real estate agency who encroaches every nook and corner, and even the main road. This is why we have so much of problems with traffic.

I have a charity formed in the name of my mother through which I help poor children for their education and health. I am presently

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supporting a medical student who is pursuing her doctorate degree in Stanley Medical College at Chennai. I donated a vehicle to Mullaivanam, a poor boy who dwells in a hut. This boy never rests even a day without planting a tree sapling. Although he does not earn a single pie from this activity, he takes good care of the plants and trees in our area. We have good people around and need to support them.

Would you call yourself a social worker as you have been indirectly trying to solve social issues in your own style?

I am working in the society. That's all! I do not deserve the big title of 'Social Worker'. There are people who have totally devoted their life for the society and I stand no way near to them. If something in my humour evolves as a social message, I am honored.

You are a role model to many youth of today, if you were to capitalize on this strength and create awareness/solve some social problem, which are the issues you would like to address?

Global warming is threatening, for which I would like to campaign for. The next issue is about young couples admitting their parents in old age homes as they do not have time to take care of them. Children want to settle in the United States once they grow up. Their parents who have been with them and have struggled for their upbringing are left behind. I would like to strengthen the value of parent-children relationship. There is a joke: 'A mother wrote an email to her son which read as: 'My dear son, how are you? Here me - your mother, sister, and all are okay. It's long since we have met you. If you have no work, please come down and we shall have dinner.' The email was sent from a mother to her son who lived in the same home. This is the type of parent-children relationship we have today. This was once the only culture that India was proud of.

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Students should enter politics. Educated people do not cast their votes nor speak about politics. Then, how could you exercise your right? Nearly 35–40 % of their votes are being wasted or misused.

"Humour is of paramount importance in everyone's life. Laughter is an expression of joy and happiness. Everybody wants to be happy."

PHILANTHROPIST INTERVIEWS



PHILANTHROPIST SPEAK

Mr. R.P Krishnamachari, Managing Director and CEO is the founder of Tex Biosciences. A Chemical Engineer by qualification, Mr. Krishnamachari holds 35 years of operational and managerial experience in the Bio-tech industry. As a philanthropist, he has been an inspiration for many.

In an exclusive interview with Marie Banu, he speaks about his experience being a first generation entrepreneur, and his philanthropy.

Being a first generation entrepreneur, what has been your experience?

I am a graduate in chemical engineering. My father was a professor in Kumbakonam Government College. After working for three years in a private company, where I worked under Mr. P.N.Devarajan, I started my own business. In 1976, I started this biotech company. This was the first biotech company in the SME sector. Now, biotech is a high tech area, and we are making various products in the area of pharmaceuticals, poultry, etc.

My mother had faith in me and gave me Rs. 5,000 towards my first investment. My father did not accept me to leave a secure job. I belonged to a Brahmin family, who was very conservative in opinion, and they did not want me to risk my career. From 1976 to 1982, I faced a lot of struggle. There was no guidance available in the field of bio-technology nor was there foreign collaboration. Today, Tex biosciences is one of the leading companies in India. We export our products to over 25 countries all over the world, and we have around 200 staff working with us. I have completed about 35 years in this sector, and my company has one of the most modern facilities available.

Why and when did you start being a philanthropist?

During college, I belonged to the communist party and was later associated with the trade union. I had a strong feeling to repay my debt to the society that has given me such a good life. Once my company started making profit, we made it a policy to contribute 30 to 40 percent of our earnings towards charity. Luckily, my son and daughter have accepted my decision.

What are the social causes that you support?

We have selected a few projects and we have been supporting them continuously. For instance, for CSIM, we have contributed nearly 40 to 50 lakhs so far. We also sponsor 5 to 6 candidates to undergo their PGDSIM course here. Besides, we extend support to Madras Medical Mission's National Heart Foundation through which more patients are able to benefit from this programme.

We also run three schools at Kanyakumari district—Thakkalai, Karungal, and Radhakrishnapuram. These schools that are already functional are being provided with infrastructure facilities to the tune of Rs. 1.5 crore. About 3,000 children belonging to the fishermen community benefit from this programme. Supporting the cause of education is my first and top priority; next is health. We also run 280 single teacher schools in remote villages across India. In the north this is called '*Ekal Vidyalaya*'.

Can you tell us more about the single teacher schools?

We offer Rs. 50,000 to each of the single teacher schools every year, and engage a local person who has completed graduation as the teacher. Community space is used for teaching, and we provide the children with reading material. The syllabus adopted in these schools is approved by the Government of India, and donations towards this programme are 100 percent tax exempt. This effort has created a tremendous change at the village level. Children studying

in government schools are not taught about culture and heritage, whereas in '*Ekal Vidyalaya*' this is done.

Classes are scheduled from 6 P.M. to 8 P.M. Besides good education, children are also taught moral values. Around 4,000 students are reached through this programme. We identify the area, meet the Panchayat leader, recruit the local teacher, and provide them training for 15 days. We have a full-fledged staff employed under Vivekananda Rural Development Society to manage this programme which is operational for the past 10 years. We contribute around Rs. 10 to 12 lakhs every year, and also collect donations from our friends. This is our major project!

The single teacher concept is a huge success. In Thiruvallur district alone, we run 40 schools. The enthusiasm you see in the children is remarkable. This programme has made a total change in the lives of these children. They are the future and we have to mould them.

Has the social service activities made a change in the working culture of your organization?

Our staff relate to each other as family. Whatever good we do, it percolates down. We at Tex-Bio do not share a boss-employee relationship, nor do we compel our staff to participate in the social work activities. Recently, I was told that my staff has contributed Rs. 25,000 for a charity and collected Rs. 4 lakh in 10 days' time for the DOS programme. The DOS programme, as you know, is managed by Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani and encourages donors to contribute Dal, Oil, and Sugar, which is distributed to charities in and around the city.

What are the pre-requisites for a charity to seek your support? Your advice for CSR programmes?

I don't think that we have a pre-requisite to contribute for a specific cause. I don't think that I have done something great, and I should

be patted. Sharing and caring should be in one's culture. I am not competent enough to give guidance on how a CSR programme should be done.

About your association with the Lions Club?

I am one of the trustees of Lion's blood bank. We were the first to organize a camp with Padmashri Kamal Haasan. Today, we are one of the leading blood banks and once in three months our employees donate 30 to 40 bottles of blood. Recently, We donated an ambulance to a hospital at Cherakulam near Thirunelveli district.

Most of the young corporate employees today do not have exposure to the ground realities in our society? Your advice for them?

They should visit villages. Today, whatever you may speak about GDP, it is about the upper strata of the society which is hardly two percent. One would realize what real poverty is and the problems they face only when you visit villages. Only then, you will know the other side of India, which is very important. Every day is a struggle for them.

I tell my corporate staff that by making a donation after reading an appeal does not suffice!

"We at Tex-Bio do not share a boss-employee relationship, nor do we compel our staff to participate in the social work activities. Recently, I was told that my staff has contributed Rs. 25,000 for a charity and collected Rs. 4 lakh in 10 days' time for the DOS programme."



POSITIVE ENERGISER

Mahadeva Murali began his career at Sri Krishna Sweets as a young entrepreneur by joining the predictable path of the family business, and today championed the development of this organization by extending its branches to 28 outlets in Chennai including Pondicherry. Sri Krishna Sweets has a total of 54 outlets in three southern states, as well as in Maharashtra and Dubai.

Murali spearheads these projects religiously following the principles laid down by his father Sri.N.K.Mahadeva Iyer, founder of Sri Krishna Sweets. As he has a mind set to share a part of his income generated through business with the public, he conceptualized a unique social responsibility program under the banner Chennai-365. In this, programs in the area of art, Culture, Education, Health, and Environment are organized through the year in various parts of Chennai. This novel concept aims to motivate the public to do a good deed every day.

Murali is a recipient of various awards and titles. To name a few: the prestigious Sir M.Visvesvaraya Award instituted by All India Manufacturers organization in 2002; The Loyola Environment Award 2002 instituted by The School of Entomology and Center For Natural Resources Management; Socially Responsible Corporate Award for the year 2004 awarded by the Rotary Club of Madras Chennai; The Lions Humanitarian Award conferred by The Lions Club of Chennai, and Prakruthi Ratna Award instituted by Exnora International. Besides, Sri Thiagaraj Sangeetha Vidwath Samajam has conferred him with a title 'Kala Seva Nirata' for his excellent support to culture.

In an exclusive interview with Marie Banu, Mahadeva Murali shares his journey in Philanthropy.

What inspired you to become a philanthropist?

I am sitting here because of the society. I want to reciprocate it. I am just sharing what I can to make people happy. This is the reason we organize various programmes, and this year we plan to conduct over 2000 events. We are not doing this for publicity!

Through our events we reach to all segments of the society—children, college students, adults, housewives, and elderly. We organize specific programmes for each of these segments and also have volunteers who serve as lifeguards in the Elliots beach. These volunteers have saved around 75 lives so far.

In 2011, we are sending our volunteers to perform cultural programmes in temples, during auspicious days like *Pradosham*, *Chathurti*, *Sashti*, *Ekadasi* and *Pournami*, which accounts to 108 days in a year. We have named this ‘Divya Dhinangal 108.’

We organize a monthly event named ‘*Magizhvom*, *Magizhvippom*’, where we would be honoring people from the downtrodden who have not been recognized for their work. For instance, a lady who has been selling flowers for 70 years; and a labourer who has been working for 50 years. Like these, we have many more events.

Our intention is to radiate positive vibration. Music, speech, comedy, dance, and drama give positive vibration to the earth which has life. We ourselves have felt many a times that something good has happened somewhere, and this is because someone has done good.

There are many people who render social service. I am not doing anything in a big way, but am extremely happy in what I do in a systematic manner.

Which of the social issues are close to your heart?

There are a lot of verticals. My priority issue would be to give love and affection to all human beings. Once you are a lovable person,

and you like and treat everyone equal all problems would be sorted out. It is not possible to go and hug everybody, but you can create energy similar to the one you received from your mother. This atmosphere is enough to change the world!

You have received several awards and recognition for your business as well as for social work. Which of them do you cherish?

Whenever I receive an award, I think of my father. I am just representing him. Yesterday’s success will not get you today’s applause. It is over. What is today and what is next is what you will have to look on.

What inspired you to launch the event ‘Salute to Mothers’?

A mother’s love is ultimate. There is a Jewish proverb: ‘God couldn’t be everywhere, so he created mothers’. This was my inspiration to organize this event.

As an entrepreneur, what were the challenges you faced and how did you overcome them?

There were a lot of problems which I would rather term as challenges. My father had faced a lot of challenges, which I have overcome. I don’t want to tell from ‘where to here’, but rather say from ‘here to where.’

Your advice for youth?

Youth are not ‘useless’, but are ‘used less’. They are not ‘careless’, but ‘cared less’.

Today’s youth think that they know everything. The television and internet has widened their knowledge. The issue is that they think that only they know everything. This is because of their age. If they

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cross that limit, they are great! Information is good, but one should take it in the right sense. If you have ego that only 'I' know, and that only 'I' can handle, then it is a problem.

Philanthropist Interviews

"There are many people who render social service. I am not doing anything in a big way, but am extremely happy in what I do in a systematic manner."

THE FOUR T'S IN ACTION

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," said Lao Tzu.

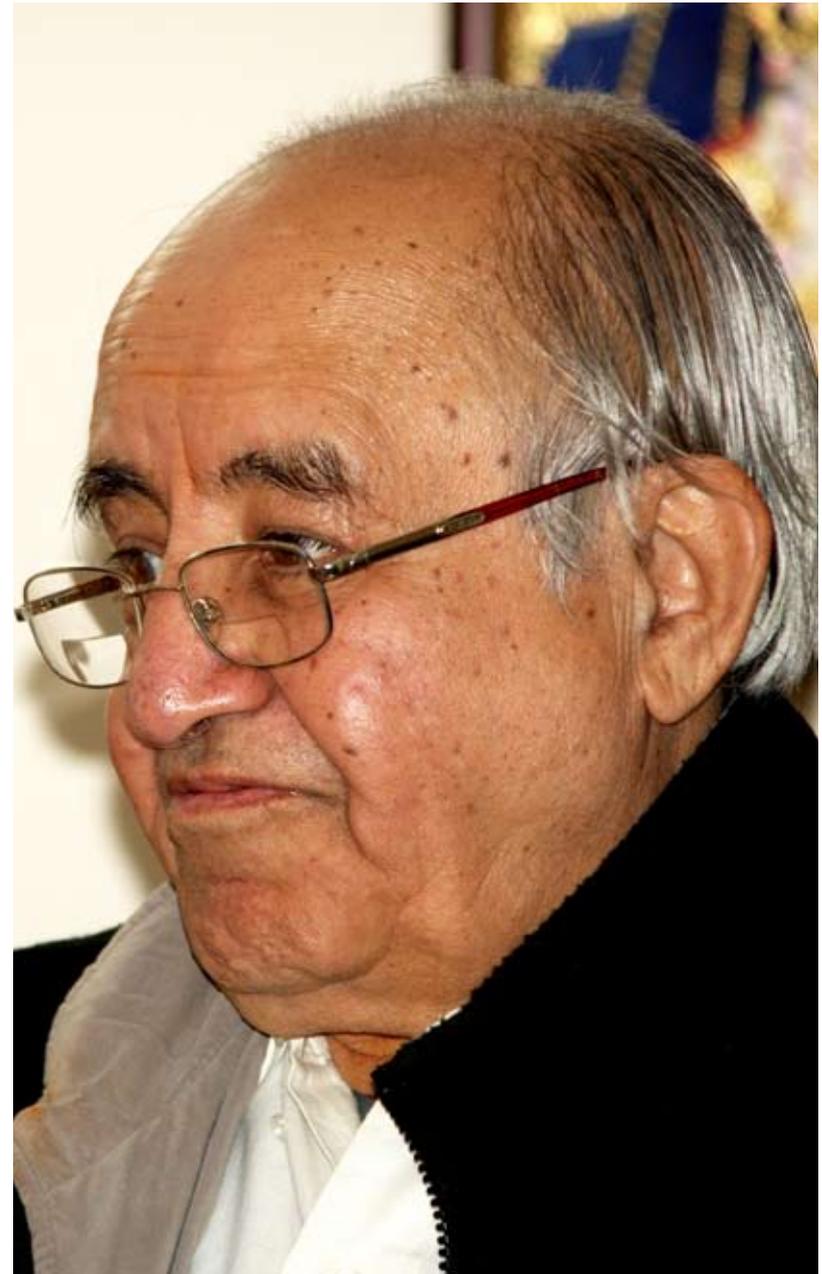
81-year-old C. Sarangapani believes in doing more than preaching. He combines humour with deep spirituality in his day-to-day interactions with young children as he helps them to take their first crucial step in life's journey.

Fondly known as Pani Uncle, his latest venture is teaching three slum children for two hours a day in his home. This former Executive Director of IDBI is an Electrical and Mechanical Engineer by training. He found his vocation in social action post-retirement—thanks to the inspiration of his close friend and mentor Sri P.N. Devarajan.

It was Sri Devarajan's example and words which impelled Pani Uncle to donate his large bungalow in Bangalore to Siva Sakthi Homes—an organization working for the mentally challenged. To this day, he collects more than Rs 25,000 a month (in cash and kind for the Home) by going around in his car picking up rice, dal and oil from the homes of donors. Siva Sakthi Homes dedicated in memory of his late spouse Smt. Jayamani Pani was launched in January 2001 and presently has over 28 children residing here.

Pani Uncle's support for CSIM, a management school for the social sector, is equally heartfelt and hands-on. He finds donors, attends classes, participates in events, and motivates the students and the faculty with timely, humorous narratives.

As for Pani Uncle's latest venture with the three children, he adopts a unique teaching methodology. Padma, Vijayalakshmi, and Anusha start their classes with a prayer for peace and oneness, followed by



storytelling that is punctuated with jokes, and lessons on values. He allows the children to play with the educational software that is installed on his computer to help build their English vocabulary. He asks the children to describe simple action pictures in English, and make them work out mathematical problems and write stories. This unstructured meandering is deliberate as it enables him to earn their trust and affection.

Pani Uncle claims that he was inspired by Sri P.N. Devarajan's teaching of the '4 T's of social action'. He states: "One doesn't necessarily need a huge budget and a strategic plan to do good. All that one needs to do is to share a little—Time, Talent, Treasure (in this case, his computer, books, his house), impelled by the Touch of compassion for the have-nots."

The reverberations of these simple actions are already being felt as the three girls are able to clearly articulate their ambitions. Padma wishes to become a doctor and offer free treatment to patients, Vijayalakshmi aspires to become an engineer and build schools and hospitals, and Anusha too wants to become a doctor and treat senior people like Pani Thatha (meaning grandfather). The influence has spread to the parents of these children too. Now, with Pani Uncle's help these children wish to enroll themselves in the National Open School system to complete their long-discontinued education.

It only takes a little stretch of the imagination to envision the possibilities—inspired neighbours taking up the education of their house-maids' children or encouraging drivers to attend night schools.

Pani Uncle's latest journey has the potential to touch a thousand years and a thousand generations.

In a chat with Aruna Subramaniam, he shares his milestones in social service.

Q&A

It has been said the Philanthropy is a state of doing where the giving is easy. You seem to be a perfect example. Your comments?

You get many more times than what you give. One's karmic balance in the bank of God gets credited and one derives the benefit of this credit either during one's own life time or in a subsequent birth, as for example, one takes birth in a good and prosperous family.

What motivates you to give selflessly?

Life is an endless journey; one is born, grows, dies, and is reborn again. This journey goes on and on till one finally gets liberation from rebirth. Bhagavan Baba in one of my visits to Puttaparthi in 1984 advised: 'If one has less luggage, there will be more comfort, and the journey of life will be a pleasure.' I realized the wisdom of this profound message after going through the traumatic experience of losing my life partner and mother, and when all my children settled in distant lands.

Can you share with us a memorable incident while doing DOS collection for Siva Sakthi Homes?

Yes. Smt. Radha and Sri. Ananth who live in L&T South City, a large complex with about 20 towers and may be around 6,000 residents take the trouble of organizing collection of old newspapers, magazines, etc. every month. They collect an average amount of over Rs 50,000 through this programme and distribute the collection to several institutions. From this, Siva Shakti Homes received Rs.2500 every month.

This example has been replicated more recently in other smaller complexes. For Instance, at Gopalan Jewels Smt. Maya Prabhakar collects old newspapers and donates about Rs.2500 every month

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to Shiva Sakthi Homes. The potential of replicating this effort in a large city like Bangalore is immense and one need not spend any money to buy Dal, Oil, or Sugar. It is a kind of recycling your waste to make an economic contribution to deserving NGOs.

Today's youth are busy with their work and find it cumbersome to engage in social work activities. What is your advice for them?

I do not agree. In my work with CSIM, Bangalore, I have found many young people quitting their high paying jobs due to burnout and have joined NGOs for a living wage or have started their own NGO. Ms. Ramalakshmi left Oracle to join us and help us with her professional skills and experience. It is for us to lead by example. As Sri. PN Devarajan aptly puts it, "Be a Servant Leader and not a Power Leader!"
