

UNSUNG BEACONS

VOLUME II

*Stories of people for
whom humanity matters*

*A compilation of inspiring stories featured in
'Conversations' - a tabloid on social issues*

By CSIM PUBLICATIONS

First Edition: March 2012

Copies: 1000

© Copyright: Centre for Social Initiative and Management
Chennai - 600 116

Price: Rs. 150.00

Published by
CSIM Publications
391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar,
Alapakkam, Chennai 600 116.
Phone : (91-44) 42805365
Email: chennai@csim.in

Laser Typeset and Printed at
R.Arunachalam
Mobile: 9840674604
Email: arun_goodluck@yahoo.com

Sl#	Contents	Page no
	Founder's Note	7
	Foreword	9
I	Alumni Talk	
1	Arun Fernandez	13
2	Balaji	18
3	Karthikeyan Vaideeswaran	22
4	Kaviya Suresh	26
5	Mahalaksmi	31
6	Mahendran	34
7	Morarji Desai	38
8	Muthukrishnan. M	43
9	Pavithra K L	47
10	Radhakrishnan	52
11	Rubina Mazher	56
12	Senthamizh Selvi	59
13	Sivakumar	63
II	PROFILE	
1	Aid India	69
2	Aruwe	74

Sl#	Contents	Page no
3	Ashirwad	78
4	Alpha to Omega Learning Centre	84
5	Bhoomika Trust	88
6	Centre for Social Initiative and management	93
7	DEAN Foundation	98
8	Dear India Trust	103
9	Dignity Foundation	107
10	Dream A Dream	110
11	Ekam Foundation	117
12	Koshish	122
13	Mutually Beneficial Activities (MBA) Foundation	127
14	Mirakle Courier	133
15	Mitra Jyoti	137
16	Multiple Sclerosis Society of India (MSSI)	141
17	Nalandaway	145
18	Nammalwar Ecological Foundation for Farm Research and Global Food Security Trust	149
19	Narikuravar Tribal Society	155
20	Navjyoti India Foundation	160

Sl#	Contents	Page no
22	New Life Charitable Trust	165
23	PCVC - The International Foundation for Crime Prevention and Victim Care	169
24	Prathyasha - Home of Hope for Children	173
25	RMD Pain and Palliative Care Trust	177
26	Sai Kripa	181
27	SNEHA	186
28	STHREE	190
29	Vishvodayaa	195
30	Water Literacy Foundation	199
31	Wild Wing Society	206
31	Winners Bakery	210
III	Corporate Social Responsibility Programmes	
1	Forbes Marshall	215
2	Laser Soft Infosystems Ltd.	219
3	KC Mahindra Charitable Trust	223
4	Orchid Chemicals & Pharmaceuticals Ltd.	227
5	Tata Council for Community Initiatives (TCCI)	232

Sl#	Contents	Page no
IV	Pioneers	
1	Achala Pani	238
2	Anjali Chandrashekar	242
3	Chenraj Jain. R.	246
4	Gouthami	253
5	Guliya Bai	257
6	Senthil	260
7	Suhas Gopinath	264

Foreword



Unsung beacons – Volume II is a collection of stories of hope, triumph, trials, and tribulations of unsung heroes who have made a substantive contribution towards the betterment of society. These change agents have risen above challenges and followed their beliefs with determination to bring about change.

Not many of us would know that several people in India still do not have access to basic eye care. For Sivakumar, it was the impetus to launch the ‘Sight Care Institute of Optometry’ and offer certificate and diploma courses in optometry to boys and girls. That’s a true example of not just being concerned about a situation, but taking a step ahead and providing a lasting solution.

There are many more examples of ordinary people who champion causes such as upliftment of Muslim women, providing healthcare facilities to children affected with HIV, and much more. For instance, a school pass-out declining the offer to pursue higher studies abroad to do community service in India does say a lot about the conviction with which some school children choose to make a real difference in the lives of not-so-privileged people.

This publication is not just a compilation of stories to be read and forgotten; there’s a heart and soul to it. It makes us think and introspect. Many a times, we talk about issues like recession that is leaving many unemployed, poverty, lack of basic education, and lack of health care our country is facing. But these discussions sink

Unsung Beacons — Volume II

into oblivion sooner or later. We hardly do anything about it. After going through this publication, I have come to realize that if each one of us accepts our individual responsibility, we can do a lot to bring about a positive change in our society.

Dr. J Radhakrishnan, IAS

*Assistant Country Director (Head DM Unit)
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*

FOUNDER'S NOTE

I love reading stories as I believe that a story speaks to the soul, not the ego; to the heart, not the head. Stories have power as they enthrall, touch, teach, inspire, motivate and, most importantly, they help us understand. This was the reason for CSIM to launch *Conversations*, a monthly tabloid, in January 2010. We narrate the work of aspiring social entrepreneurs in a story format through *Conversations* every month.

We have now compiled all the stories that appeared in 2011 as *Unsung Beacons - Volume II*. *Unsung Beacons* is an innovative tribute to and celebration of the work done by many social entrepreneurs in India who have carved an exceptional niche in the sphere of their work.

This book is intended to inspire the readers, trigger their social consciousness and also imprint a picture of social change in their minds. Just like how parables tell of truth and morals, *Unsung Beacons* narrates stories of change that have impacted society and empowered millions of disadvantaged people over the last decade. These are true and living stories as the champions of each story are still pursuing their social mission. Age or gender or social circumstance has never been a barrier for them. Let us learn lessons of courage and commitment from them.

Do share these stories with your friends and join us in our journey of spreading goodwill and hope.

P. N. Devarajan

*Founder
Centre for Social Initiative and Management*

ALUMNI TALK

Stories of social change agents who have pursued their social entrepreneurship course in Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM)

PEACE IN VOGUE

With the Board Exams now behind them, walking the roads with a new spring in their step are teenagers who are ushering in their college days. Uniforms discarded, updated on the latest in fashion, and having a makeover from head to toe, college life means a license to bunk classes, to participate in all kinds of cultural activities, subscribe to different clubs and committees, form friendly gangs, and celebrate every day. Though we may superficially sum it all up as above, we must not forget that there are a few profound lessons that silently seep into our system and make a permanent stamp in our personalities. Class Seminar Teams, Department Clubs, Cultural and Sport Committees, National Cadet Corps, National Service Scheme, and Students' Unions are some of the sub-systems of college that ensure such varied exposure.

Community service, when taken seriously can be one of the more rewarding components in the college extra-curricular activity scene. As for CSIM Alumnus Arun Fernandez, the Outreach Programme in the Commerce Department at Loyola College made such an impact in his mind that he traded off a career in international business in favour of indigenous social action.



"When graduating with a B.Com degree in Loyola College, I had two offers from universities abroad to pursue a Master's Degree in International Business. My father, a businessman, was toying with the idea of me helping him expand his business. However, I couldn't think of leaving Peace Rangers."

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

Why "Peace Rangers?"

"Peace-building is a lifestyle that we have adopted" says Arun. "We have around 250 volunteers studying in different years at college, and we asked ourselves one day what we should do to make Peace a lifestyle? For instance if we're on the road and a cyclist or motorist narrowly brushes past us, hitting our side-view mirror in haste, what do we do? The commonest occurrence is that each one shouts on top of the other and try to up his score on the list of abuses he hurls at the other. Instead, if we trained ourselves to ask him or her, 'Are you hurt?' then their instinctive reaction would be a polite 'no

damage to your car either, sir!.' We tried this and found it to be an extremely useful tool of peace."

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

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

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

oodles of encouragement which I knew was because of the school's setting. As I was very confused with writing, I required the help of scribes to give my exams. When I was to enter the 11th Standard, there came a turning point when I learnt about the Alpha to Omega Learning Centre and went on my own to talk to the Principal. She was impressed with my courage to seek admission on my own, and offered me a seat on one condition—no scribe. My heart jumped," he says.

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

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

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

—Archanaa R

If you wish to get in touch with Peace Rangers, please contact Arun Fernandez at 9840222460 or write to jcisinarun@gmail.com

A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

Championing the cause of children infected with HIV is Balaji, Founder Trustee of Real Charitable Trust, a home "not unlike any other". Balaji is an alumnus of CSIM, having completed the Post Graduate Diploma course in Social Initiative and Management (PGDSIM) in 2006.

Surely to be working in this sensitive field, there must be an unusual background which would have urged, inspired, or even despaired one enough to start thinking of ways to improve care for the sufferers? There might even have occurred a moment of calling, a singular, deeply felt moment of truth that changed one's life forever, leading (in this case) Balaji to set up 'Real Charitable Trust'?

Hearty laughter retorts the very suggestion, which confirms how oddly naïve the question itself was. "I have no stories of loss, grief, suffering, or inspiration to tell you," he chuckles, adding that, "I was born to liberal parents who encouraged me to pursue my passion. I studied in Ramalinga Mission School, where service was a part of our daily routine. Since serving people has been my lifestyle, it never occurred to me as being different when I chose to continue in



the same path. Indeed, the idea of caring for HIV infected children in a familial environment flashed across casually when I was sorting out my priorities in setting up my own organization. It appealed me enough to settle for it".

Nevertheless, volunteering for a long ten years at the Family Planning Association of India (FPAI) gave Balaji the exposure and insight that are essential when working with people infected with HIV.

"While I was volunteering at FPAI, I would frequently avail leave from work to pursue my volunteering services," he admits. Armed with a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration, Diplomas in Networking, Hardware, Autocad, and Air conditioning mechanics, Balaji was designing machinery for few companies. "Although I did actively continue volunteering for several years, the thought of starting an organization was actually conceived while I was pursuing the PGDSIM course at CSIM. Senthil of Child Charitable Trust, a good friend of mine, introduced me to CSIM. Here, I learnt the basic lessons such as how to choose a specific issue or area of interest, how to set up an organization, etc. I can claim to have been trained well in all these lessons today, given that my organization has stood up on its own feet now," says a confident Balaji.

All funds are now flowing in from individual donors, most of whom are childhood friends of Balaji. He also ploughs in the consultation fees from his work with several organizations. When asked how he manages work and family he says cheerfully that when he met his wife for the first time, he made it clear to her that he would be able to only provide her the basic amenities. Luckily, his wife now partners with him in nurturing the kids who come to them for care.

"I had made a network of contacts of many of the prominent organizations that work in the area of HIV/AIDS, and to gain more

experience, I worked for a year with YRG care after I completed my course at CSIM. As Training Officer, I traveled extensively all over Tamil Nadu, and continue to be a consultant with all organizations related to HIV/AIDS. In 2007, Real Charitable Trust was established. We started with 5–10 children who took shelter with us from time to time, for a period of about two months each, i.e. until their most crucial treatment period was over. In another year, we will be moving into our own premises, a space which can house 10–15 children at least," he says, if thinking out aloud of his plans for the near future. He adds: "Ours is not a hostel. It is a home in every sense of the word. My wife and I treat our children as they should be treated in every household—with a sense of belonging, freedom, and also the occasional restrictions. For instance, when we plan an outing with the children, we do not think about attending a charity event; we usually visit our family friends, go to the park, beach, or attend family functions," quips Balaji.

On the background of children who come under his care, he says: "There are some children whose either or both parents are alive. Children are free to live with their families and visit us for treatment alone, or they may choose to stay with us for a certain period of time. The choice is theirs! These children are boys, usually belonging to the age group 7–15 years. There are practical problems with taking in girls. We did have one young girl of 15 years who lived with us for a short while. However, when she turned 16, her mother insisted that she gets her married to a boy who was also HIV positive. That was the last we saw of that girl."

The children attend regular school at their neighborhood in Vanagaram, where the Principal and the teachers have been informed about their medical condition. According to Balaji the school is very supportive. "We take leave of absence at the slightest

hint of cold or any other common ailment, and ensure that the children get proper medication and rest before they get back to school," says Balaji solemnly. He adds: "A couple of months ago, one of our children who looked apparently healthy suddenly fell sick, and within a span of one week passed away. Ever since, we have been extra careful about our children. We maintain a strict regimen for their daily medication and hygiene."

"Children are children. Why discriminate them on any grounds?" he asks. Easy laughter, suggesting a cheerful and optimistic attitude, Balaji may well be an icon among today's youth who are looking to fulfill their life's calling. He also exemplifies the thought that small or big, genuine efforts will always pay off rich dividends.

When asked to recount his most important achievement so far, he says: "It has to be this little boy Vijayakumar, who shares a close rapport with me. Although he went to his home after being with us for only a few weeks, he did not quite want to leave us. In the last one month, his health has been deteriorating and he did not cooperate with his family members. This led to hospitalization and his worried mother called me to say that he wanted to meet me. I rushed to see him, and he brightened up immediately. We chatted for a while and he said that he was unhappy living in his home, and asked me if I would take him back. His family was hesitant at first, but considering that he definitely was feeling happier in my presence, agreed and allowed him to live with us. I think this is my biggest achievement so far—that a child has trusted me enough to leave his family and be with me. I must be on the right track, then!"

—Archanaa R.

*If you wish to support Real Charitable Trust,
please contact Balaji at 9600115782*

EXPERIMENTS TO OBSERVE AND CONTRIBUTE

Opportunities may be hard to recognize, but not for Karthikeyan Vaitheeswaran, National Consultant–Livelihoods, FAO, who found one in every kind of circumstance. He first embarked on a wine shop to learn about business and was marveled by the amount of money flowing in. "There was so much money that one can't sit and count. It was all packed in sacks and dumped in the godowns", he said.

Intrigued by the potential to earn money Karthikeyan carried out a string of experiments with a grocery shop followed by a cement shop. During these stints, he observed that the ability to earn money through small businesses apparently had a visible impact on the standard of living of people. His experiments did not end here. While in college, he started a poultry farm and also tried his hands at goat rearing and mushroom cultivation. "All this while I gradually understood that businesses could help one to earn for self and contribute to the public good as well", quipped Karthikeyan.



He found it hard to believe that there was a Department of Social Work in his college, Bishop Heber College, Trichy. "How can one be trained in social work? Wasn't that supposed to be rooted in passion?" he exclaimed. With more such observations and his volunteering experiences showing the way, Karthikeyan pursued his post-graduation in NGO Management at Centre for Entrepreneurship Development, Madurai Kamaraj University.

He joined South India Producer Associations as Program Officer, where he got an opportunity to travel extensively in spearheading the fair trade business model across NGOs. On being identified by the Tamil Nadu Rural Development Department as a Trainer for organizing capacity building programmes for NGOs, Cooperatives, and SHG Federations, he left no stone unturned in exploring the principles and intricacies of rural marketing.

"This is when my network expanded. Interaction with the foreign buyers made me more curious about the developed world and the mechanisms by which formal and informal economies were integrated," he said.

With a want to experience the ambience of the developed world first hand, and to delve into the principles of For-Profit organizations, he pursued his MBA from Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia. Multiculturalism being the most intriguing part, his volunteering experiences here opened a volley of questions pertaining to livelihood issues back home, and the concept of sustainability. "Awareness at all levels mark a huge difference between the developed and the developing countries," opines Karthikeyan.

On return from Melbourne, he engaged himself with the Tsunami rehabilitation efforts by providing market based skill development programmes for the Tsunami affected people, especially youth and

women. Since then, promotion of sustainable livelihood became his prime area of concern.

In 2005, he joined as Project Officer, International Labour Organisation in Chennai. He organized several skill training programmes on livelihood development and facilitated social dialogue between various stake holders to reiterate the significance of livelihoods, skills and entrepreneurship development within the realm of policy making.

"Appropriate training programmes play a crucial role in establishing sustainability in the informal economy. There is a lot that the government can learn from the NGOs in this aspect," said an enthused Karthikeyan.

Having worked with NGOs, government departments, international bodies one would want to know what the non-profit sector can learn from the government. "This is a tricky question! Quick deployment of resources and the scale of operation in situations that demand swift action is something we have to learn. NGOs are largely governed by mandates that affect their response to situations," he added.

Involved with different institutions at various levels on the issue of livelihood development, Karthikeyan began to understand the scope and significance of social entrepreneurship. He enrolled at CSIM and pursued the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme. "Social Entrepreneurship is very simple, yet a vast concept. The course helped me realize that social entrepreneurship thrusts upon revenue generation models that prove to be an effective catalyst for social change," he explained.

"There is a very subtle difference between a social worker and a social entrepreneur. The lack of knowledge amongst NGOs

about funding organizations, training programmes, and relevant job openings does have an impact on the reach of the project undertaken".

"The numerous projects undertaken certainly need visibility", said Karthikeyan, who is also an Advisory Board Member for CIOSA—Confederation of Indian Organisations for Service and Advocacy.

Being part of CIOSA, Karthikeyan initiated the Tamil Nadu Development Dialogue—‘a monthly series of dialogue where socially committed citizens from different strata of the society come together and interact with representatives from organizations that are actively working towards social change’.

In recognition of his achievements, Karthikeyan was awarded the ‘2011 Australian Alumni Excellence Award for Community Service’ for his active involvement in Tsunami Rehabilitation Programme and for his association with several non-profit organizations and corporate houses in their community development programmes.

"The engagement between the government and NGOs must be comprehensive and complementary. This is where people like us come in", said Karthikeyan, who strongly believes in social dialogue and networking.

Let's wish him the best in his endeavours!

—Shanmuga Priya. R.

*If you wish to get in Karthikeyan, please write to
kaarthee@gmail.com*

A HEAD FOR BUSINESS — A HEART FOR WORLD

‘Some people strengthen the society just by being the kind of people they are’, said John Gardener. And they surely know how to accommodate their interests within the opportunities they come across. So true! Not being able to pursue an M.A. Social Work did not stop Kaviya Suresh, Regional Coordinator, SIFE India, from engineering a process of social change. She enrolled herself with the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook program (SEOP) offered at CSIM. "The course gave me a comprehensive understanding of the various social issues and the need for an entrepreneurial approach to handle them". On completion of M.A (HR), she joined Students in Free Enterprise* (SIFE), India as its Regional Coordinator in Chennai.

SIFE, operating in 39 countries, is a unique network of business heads and colleges that focuses on enhancing the leadership roles of college students. SIFE acts as an incubator by providing a platform, guiding and mentoring students to make an economically sustainable model that addresses a social cause. It in turn, provides



an interface between the social issues that have long been affecting different communities and students with an inclination to make a difference.

SIFE, India started with eight colleges in 2003 and the number has grown to 65 across India, with 25 colleges in Tamil Nadu. Over the years, SIFE India has established itself as one of the premier student-based organizations in India supporting free enterprise and entrepreneurship.

The students of a college enrolled in SIFE, work as teams to address a particular community in need, and design and implement a sustainable business model that would empower them. And here, the word ‘community’ subsumes almost every kind of people... From *idli* vendors, mechanics, transgenders, commercial sex workers, self-help groups, differently abled, beggars, to plantation workers. "We do not have set categories of communities as they tend to reduce the space for experiment and thereby reach. Students are free to work with anybody. The only criteria to be satisfied is that the community should be the one in need", says Kaviya.

As an alumnus of CSIM, she explains, "I could incorporate my learnings from the course in my work. I could orient students from all that I had picked up during my visit to organizations and practical exercises that was part of CSIM’s curriculum". Her role now in SIFE is to facilitate students to take the lead in identifying the community, building rapport with the members, identifying the need, and bringing out an outcome based project. The concept of Social entrepreneurship is thus indirectly addressed to these students.

Kaviya was an active SIFE member during her college days. In one of the projects that she was part of, the team had worked on teaching mentally challenged children to make greeting cards. "This

was an unforgettable experience. Teaching the challenged children helped me and my friends understand their needs and abilities. The success of the project was not just about the profits made, but the change the activity brought in the lives of the children as well as in us," she says.

Every student involved in SIFE works around a shared cause. Apart from making a difference amongst the needy, these students also have an opportunity to mentor, get inspired, network, collaborate and learn, find great talent, start a career, and be recognized for support and achievement.

In one of the projects she explained about how students from an engineering college worked on providing skill addition and quality education to the automobile mechanics. 14 of them were enrolled in Diploma in Mechanical Engineering and thereafter, all of them were employed by Hero Honda. In another instance, SHG members in a slum were assisted in buying a machine to make sanitary napkins. Today, the members of the SHG manage the entire cycle of production and marketing. "SIFE is a great platform to showcase your talents and your skills. I think nothing can be better than realizing your potential", says Vishal Parmar, an alumnus of SIFE.

One of the most memorable projects was that of seaweed cultivation introduced in Akalmadam the village at Rameswaram. The aftermath of tsunami and the bilateral issues with Sri Lanka restrained the fishermen from fishing. There was no alternate source of livelihood and the men got into practices like gambling and alcohol. A group of biotechnology students came up with the idea of promoting seaweed cultivation in the shallow waters to extract a component that had multiple applications in pharmaceutical industry.

"Convincing the people was a big task in itself", says Hagini, another alumnus of SIFE. The students approached Mr. Sakthivel

of Aquaculture Foundation of India. Besides providing the technical knowhow on the project, Mr. Sakthivel facilitated the communication between the students and the community members.

"Once the project took off, we wanted to make sure that the men did not waste the money that they earned out of this project. Hence, we organized workshops to help them understand the better side of life. Each of the community members started earning Rs. 9,000 a month, and soon they took complete control of the project", says Hagini.

Every country that operates a SIFE programme organizes a national competition, from which one institution will be named National Champion and advance to compete at the SIFE World Cup. This process provides teams with the opportunity to present their outreach projects to a panel of judges who evaluate and determine which team's project has had the most social impact.

Once a year, the National Champion SIFE teams from around the world meet at the SIFE World Cup where they present the results of their community outreach projects to a prestigious group of international business leaders. India has participated in the world cup over the last 7 years and has been a finalist for the last three consecutive years. (Alpha Arts & Science College & Loyola College from Chennai qualified as finalists.)

In effect, SIFE enables students to understand social responsibilities. Kaviya's vision is to see SIFE in every college/university after ten years (like NCC and NSS). That's certainly a head for business and a heart for world! This indeed is a novel CSR project that has honed both leadership skills and social responsibility amongst the student community!

* WNS Global Services and KPMG are the Platinum Sponsor of the SIFE India and Mr. Keshav R. Muruges, Group CEO, WNS Holdings is the Chairman of Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE), India.

—Shanmuga Priya R

If you wish to know more about SIFE, visit www.sife-india.org.

CREATING NEW HORIZONS

A home maker with a little formal education, Mahalakshmi started a Self-Help Group in October 2005. Based in Ekkattuthangal at Chennai, she is now the leader of 150 SHGS that consists of 3,000 members in total.

"Though I had been working for about three and a half years, my meeting with Mrs. Latha Suresh and CSIM has been a blessing. After I joined the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Program (SEOP) at CSIM, I got answers to many questions, a focus on my goal, and the right direction to move on. The SEOP course helped me to a great extent and I motivated three people to enroll for the same course in the next batch!" says Mahalakshmi.

Mahalakshmi's work does not stop with just providing loans and micro credit to the self-help group members. She is insistent on providing all round support for her group members so as to improve their quality of life to the maximum extent possible.

"We make our members realize that their role in the family is much beyond what they think. We inculcate team spirit, and work towards



including the disabled and senior citizens who are often ignored by our society," she adds.

Since 2005 till date, Mahalakshmi's SHG federation has disbursed loans amounting to Rs. 1 Crore. She proudly says that there have been no defaulters so far. At times when some of the members who had availed loans disappear, she reports about this to the other group members. "We are very transparent and straightforward in our activities. I have personally helped 250 people to open accounts with State Bank of India. Eclab India, a funding organization, has supported our group immensely," says Mahalakshmi.

The loan amount provided to SHG members allows them to commence small business activities, thereby enhancing their household income. The SHG provides training to its members in toy making, embroidery, tailoring, and also produces organic food. She says: "Few of our group members are vegetable vendors. They approach their customers who place an order for onions, potatoes, and tomatoes that they would require for a week. The group members procure the items from the wholesale market at Koyambedu, and supply them to their individual customers at their door steps. This activity is even more profitable when there is inflation on the prices of food commodities."

Besides increase in household income, the group also brings in change and improved lifestyle amongst its members. "In our group, there is a family who is engaged in wig making. All the family members were habitual alcoholics. They used to drink liquor every day as they believed that it helped them to tolerate the stench that emanated in the process of wig making. They did not eat healthy food and never sent their children to school. They lacked personal hygiene too. After they joined our self-help group and attended our meetings, their life style has changed. We counseled them to overcome alcoholism. Now, their children attend school, eat

healthy food, and bathe daily. They are happy to have changed and improved their lifestyle. What more, they even save up to Rs.10,000 every month," says Mahalakshmi.

The group conducts eye camps, health check-ups, and double up for families who do not find time to take care of elders at home. They also assist in obtaining birth, death, and community certificates from the government. Mahalakshmi conducts regular meetings with the group leaders on the third Saturday of every month. She meets the group leaders, helps them to plan their activities, discusses their problems, and proposes solutions.

"From a naive home maker, I have discovered the power within me to work, motivate and lead a group of 3,000 women. Thanks to the SHG movement and CSIM," says Mahalakshmi.

—Radha Jagan

You can get in touch with Mahalakshmi at 9884188667 to support her SHG activities.

FOR NATURE, FOR US!

Discontinuing studies after tenth standard did not affect Mahendran's childhood dream of becoming a businessman. "It was my love for nature that brought me here," says Mahendran, Managing Trustee of Annai Bhagyalakshmi Trust.

Nature amazed him in many ways. Observing the plants and trees grow in his home town, he realized that plants must be protected and preserved. "Whenever I saw a useful plant, I used to request my neighbours and friends to plant it on their land. I would then frequent the place to ensure that the plant is safe, and it is watered regularly," he says. Today, Mahendran revels at their growth, appearance, and usefulness.

"Unlike humans, plants cannot deceive anybody. They gave way to our development dreams unquestioningly. The chain of usefulness multiplies in multiple ways. Helping plants is equivalent to helping thousands of people," he states.

Owing to his interest and concern, Mahendran started reading zealously about plants and herbs, their needs, usefulness,



methods of cultivation, seeds preserving techniques, and role of earthworms.

"Every variety of plant has a unique way of keeping the earth's temperature under control. For example, Jackfruit tree is said to have the ability to attract rain to earth, and hence has the ability to contain global warming. But people are not aware of this, and continue to live with misconceptions and stereotypes," laments Mahendran.

Voracious reading led Mahendran to his Guru, Mr. Shanmuga Sundaram who expanded his knowledge manifold. His influence made him even more passionate about plants and its presence which is a non-negotiable for the survival of humanity. "You don't have to do anything. Just do not disturb them! They have their own mechanisms to survive and birds are their distributors," he states.

In this context, he expounded the disappearing trend of sparrows. "It is the warmth of the birds that is responsible for the seeds of the peepal tree to germinate. Similarly, a region with no crows has no neem trees, for crows are the carriers of the seeds and pollens. With the increasing number of mobile signal towers, nature's mechanisms are getting disturbed," says a worried Mahendran.

"We do not do good, nor do we let the birds and trees do their part—we are humans!" he shrugs.

After discontinuing his schooling, Mahendran had a brief stint at a gum making factory. He worked in two shifts a day—from 6:00 A.M to 2:00 P.M; and 2:00 PM to 10:00 PM—and earned a meager amount of thirty rupees a day. Later, he worked with a matchbox supplier, and then started his own small store opposite Ramachandra Medical College at Porur in Chennai.

"Do you remember the earliest model of train that we used in India?" he asks with inexplicable excitement. Pausing for a while, he says: "It also comes in the Tamil movie Indian." Mahendran bought one (coach) through his contacts and started a tea stall in the train which was named "Indian Tea Stall". His creativity worked with the tea stall as well. The unusual interiors gained him popularity in the region.

"One day, unexpectedly, the trees and plants on both sides of the road were cut off for the expansion of the road. I could not stand the heat and so did everybody. I went to Bangalore, bought four trees and planted them in front of my shop. When the expansion was reworked, it was time to give up the stall," he reminisces.

In the early 1990s, at a time when possession of a mobile phone was a rarity, Mahendran was among the very few who had a mobile phone. He knew how to operate it thoroughly, so much so that he used to guide others. He was offered a commission for every recharge card that he purchased for others. "I did not have any formal education. Only practical knowledge kept me on," he says.

On the advice of a friend and well-wisher, Mahendran decided to open a showroom. "I wanted it to be different and inexpensive. I designed the shop using used and discarded pieces of log and wood. My love for nature and creativity worked wonders. It was the first shop in my circle," he recounts proudly.

With the business growing successfully, his love for nature also grew. He launched the Annai Bhagyalakshmi Trust. The core activities of the trust included planting trees in public places such as temples, parks, and hospitals, and regularly inspecting their growth. The trust also provided plants to other likeminded NGOs and individuals.

"It was during the formative years of the Trust that my friend referred me to CSIM. On his suggestion, I decided to do the

Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management. My communication skills have undergone a remarkable change. Besides the course content, the interaction with resource persons has made me feel more confident as a socially responsible person," he states.

In an area of 1800 square feet, his building occupies only 450 square feet. The rest, undoubtedly, make the garden. Insulin, *tulsi*, neem, oregano (known as *karpooravalli* in Tamil), lemon grass, cloves, and around 30 varieties of plants decorate his garden. With plans only to continue his work uninterrupted, he wishes that people start realizing the importance of plants and our interdependence.

Let us support his mission by planting trees wherever we can!

– Shanmuga Priya. R

If you would like to contact Mahendran, please write to sri.mahendran28@gmail.com or call 9840600752.

A TURNING POINT FOR EVERY CHILD

Whilst still a teenager, Morarji Desai realized his innate leadership qualities, when during his high school days he would volunteer to read for the visually challenged. While pursuing his Bachelor's Degree in Tamil Literature, he volunteered at several charitable organizations which gave him ample exposure to the grinding life in the slums in and around Chennai. Before you wonder, we are not talking of the illustrious national leader of the yester-generation here, but an equally promising social worker who was born to a patriotic police officer and raised in a selfless, service oriented familial environment.

Talking enthusiastically of his background, Desai says, "During 1995-1998 I studied at Loyola College, Chennai, and enrolled in All India Catholic University Federation (AICUF). It was through AICUF that I started working part time in 'Nesakkaram', an organisation which promoted education awareness in the slums in collaboration with the police. I also worked for a while with 'Solai' an organization that worked with at-risk children in Thiruvanniyur."



This, he says was the turning point in his life, as working with at-risk children deepened his passion for child welfare.

Desai continued to work in the slum areas for a couple of years until tsunami hit the sub-continent in 2004. As tsunami heightened the proliferation of slums and poverty, he began to grow increasingly concerned about the future of the children who dwelt in them. "What will happen to these children if they were to rot in the squalor of these slums?" wonders a fervent Desai.

"The environment maketh a man. What children need is not just a school to go to and a roof over their head, but a conducive environment for their personalities to develop holistically. For that, starting from a young age, they need to be nurtured in a safe, healthy and balanced environment that is based on values," he explains and has set out to practice just that, through his organisation called Turning Point Charitable Trust.

Registered in 2008, Turning Point was started under the guidance of Morarji Desai's mentor, Rotarian Gopinath. Currently funded by the multinational company Grundfos Ltd., the trust works for the promotion of quality education among children in slums, focusing in the slum at Rotary Nagar near the Marina Beach.

"Initially, a group of volunteers worked full time to add momentum to our work. We have always strived to maintain cordial relations with the police. Inspector Rajalakshmi, who is one of the most dedicated police officers I have known, introduced me to Rotary Nagar," says Desai, who regards police support and contribution as being pivotal to the success of his endeavours. He has garnered enough goodwill through his multitudinous slum interventions.

Travelling rearwards and recollecting his journey in promoting child welfare, he says: "I always knew how to care for children. My

various volunteering exercises and a short stint at ‘Childline’ taught me the nuances of child care really well. However, after two years of running Turning Point Charitable Trust, I found myself struggling with the whole burden of responsibility towards the Trust. Though I was leading a small team of workers, I held most of the reins up to the minutest detail. I also had to learn a lot about major things like finding financial support and running the organization from a larger perspective."

Desai joined CSIM's four-month certificate course on Social Entrepreneurship in 2010. "I have learnt some of the most valuable lessons pertaining to running of an NGO from this course. I have to thank CSIM for equipping me with the necessary skills to efficiently run the organization," says a grateful Desai.

When asked to talk about the achievements of Turning Point Charitable Trust, he first calls out to Mani who was in the nearby community hall getting ready for a dance rehearsal. "Mani used to be the chairman of the Children's Parliament that we helped set up a year ago. He should be able to tell you about the progress we made last year, as he was the one managing the affairs of the parliament even when the adult monitors were not around" smiles Desai.

Mani rants off one after another in quick succession of the activities of his Children's Parliament. "We conducted a survey in our neighbourhood to identify non-school going children and found that there were at least a hundred of them in our midst. The Trust is relentlessly lobbying with the nearby schools to admit these children and has been running a tuition centre in the community hall for over a year now," says Mani.

"The children need to be made aware of the progress they had made since the day they started paying slightly more attention to their studies. For that, the Children's Parliament decided to reward the

efforts put in by deserving students. We have instituted an award for every child who has progressed from a lower rank to the higher rank. A child who probably had failed earlier, but now managed to pass all his/her papers would also get an award, as opposed to a relatively better ranking student who either maintained or fell short of his/her rank," adds Mani. This idea was thought of solely by the children and it is evident that Desai is a proud man thinking about the extent of insight these children have shown.

Mani runs off shortly after to join his friends who were rehearsing for a dance performance to be held in a few days' time. The collective energy of the children is infectious and we take a quick peek into the dancing crowd, only to find our own feet tapping to the rhythm involuntarily. With just an hour of practice, the young ones twirl and twist with great elegance and style.

Desai has chosen to take his calling in this field unflinchingly, even though he may have initially faced some resistance from his family. However, today he has struck a balance between his twin passions—home and work—by dividing time proportionally and dedicating himself on both fronts. "Wherever I may be, Sundays are strictly for my family. I do not take up any work asides of what my family demands of me on that day," says Desai.

About the plans for Turning Point Charitable Trust in the near future, Morarji Desai would like to expand the geographical horizon of the Trust's outreach from its existing boundaries in T.Nagar, Rotary nagar, Ayodhikkuppam, and Parry's, to Kannagi Nagar. The trust has been working hand-in-hand with a few other NGOs in Ayodhikkuppam as well.

Though there is a lot of internal conflict among organizations with similar interests, Morarji Desai believes that the more of them

get together to work, the better it will be for the society. We wish him all the best in his painstaking journey toward crafting a bright childhood for children, which is the most difficult task to do.

—Archanaa R.

*If you wish to support Turning Point Charitable Trust,
please call Morarji Desai at +91 9790811339.THE*

TRADITIONAL ART IN HIS OWN WAY

Art and mythological characters in one frame brings in images of Tanjore paintings in our minds. One of the most elaborate forms of traditional art, Tanjore paintings have always added beauty to the surroundings. The embellishments over the sketches using gold foil, gems, Jaipur stones, and others, gives it a dimensional effect, making this art form very unique.

The fact that Tanjore paintings have survived through generations has always intrigued

Dr. M. Muthukrishnan of Ramana Arts and Crafts. Having come from Kamatchipuram village of Theni District in Tamil Nadu to Chennai in 1997, he had made up his mind to pursue art as a career. Interestingly, his interest in art sprang from those laborious diagrams of biology lessons. "The science diagrams captivated me. I began to try pictures from calendars and posters," said Muthukrishnan who would draw different pictures and gift it to his loved ones.

Past class ten, he tried his hands at making sign boards, posters, number plates, and reflection stickers. With no formal training or



professional guidance, he explored every opportunity that came his way. While in Chennai, he met Mr. Indrajith, whom he calls his guru, who inspired him to take up work immediately.

Soon, in 2000 he established his own business 'Ramana Arts and Crafts' with the blessings of the great divine sage Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi, and managed it with the help of his family members. He believed in handling his customers directly and this approach did pay off. Today, his clientele covers people from India, US, UK, Singapore, South Africa, Malaysia, Nigeria, New Zealand, and Japan.

"Sculptures and pictures of deities have a meaning only when devotees can connect with them. One of my customers who bought my painting of Lord Muruga once said to me, 'Muruga is laughing in our house everyday'. Another NRI couple who had no children was referred to me by their friend. The couple bought my painting of Lord Krishna, and in a span of two years they were blessed with twin girls. It is this happiness in my customers and the satisfaction that motivates me," said Muthukrishnan with a twinkle in his eye.

There have been views that Tanjore painting is more of reproducing the older paintings. He chose to silence these criticisms by attempting new things. The best of these novel attempts is the creation of the portrait of 'Aandal Thiruppavai' (a collection of thirty stanzas written by Aandal in praise of Lord Vishnu) in thirty pictures, comprising of 450 faces in all, measuring between 0.5 and 0.75 centimeters. Muthukrishnan continues to make his characteristic mark in every painting.

There are paintings of Brahma and Saraswathi where Saraswathi is sitting on Brahma's lap and that of Lakshmi-Easwara-Ganapathy which is a combination of all the three gods in one picture, the first of its kind. While speaking of paintings, an excited Muhtukrishnan

says, 'Trying different ideas that have not been tried enthuses me very much. God created us and I am creating God through my paintings.'

Driven by involvement and a great sense of satisfaction, Muthukrishnan attempted to bring modern art and tradition together. His Tanjore paintings were not restricted to the depiction of gods and goddesses alone. There were yogis too in the gallery—Sri Ramana Maharishi, Sri Swami Narayan, and Sri Ramalinga Swamigal to name a few. The best part of each of the painting is that the eyes in the pictures look at the viewer wherever they are positioned.

"For me, my favourite hobby earns my bread", said Muhtukrishnan who has won many accolades. He is the first artist to be awarded a doctorate degree for his brilliant creation of divine paintings, especially Tanjore painting, by the International Tamil University, Maryland, USA. He has also won the Kalai Vandan award for best Thanjavur painting artist by the Tamil Nadu Film Fraternity, and the Seva Ratna award in recognition of his social initiatives.

His ambition is to 'Create a Creative Community' and his vision is—to initiate, to innovate, and to integrate the people, especially physically challenged by forming University of Arts. As a first step in this direction, he has started the 'Jayam Charitable Trust' in 2009 to create a source of income for the physically challenged. With the help of his wife, they have evolved a Nutrition and Art therapy programme that creates awareness on nutritional intake along with training in making Tanjore paintings.

"Charity is not a solution. People need skills to earn their living independently. We realized the need to understand the details of working this out professionally and this is when the SEOP programme at CSIM came handy. Instead of just dreaming, we could speak it out, expand our contacts and meet the right people.

CSIM has helped us to identify the right contacts and develop our public relations. We also learnt about funds and proposals and recommended our friends to take up these courses. For artists like me with big dreams of social engineering, CSIM provides the right package of knowledge and skills," stated Muthukrishnan.

Muthukrishnan is an artist on the one hand strictly adhering to 'Samudrika Lakshanam' and referring to the ancient manuscripts to create portraits, and on the other a social engineer who believes that education must help the learner to open the tap, rather than just filling the bucket.

Let's wish him success in establishing his dream university!

— Shanmuga Priya R

If you would like to get in touch with Muthukrishnan, please write to muthu.thanjavurpainting@gmail.com.

THE SPIRIT OF YOUNG INDIA

The young in India today have spunk, character, and a sure-footedness that comes from deep within where they believe they can achieve the impossible. Challenges don't deter them and circumstances are momentary. They are ambitious and responsible. They are courageous and willing to be accountable. This is a series of stories, I would like to bring together, of young people who inspire with their spirit and grittiness.

The strength of Spirit: Pavithra K L

I met 16-year-old Pavithra, and I saw a spark of promise that inspired me to invest in this young girl. Residing in my neighbourhood, Pavithra once walked into my office and passionately presented her case to work with us. She had no skills, but had this strong conviction—she will not hear a 'No'. We gave her a volunteering project to manage a summer camp for 'Dream A Dream', and as they say the rest was history!

Two months after the camp she parked herself again at our office seeking a job, and she got it. This unsure shy girl had the spirit of a



fighter and winner and it was this spirit that told us that we should invest in her.

Pavithra relates to herself as the Panda character in Kungfu Panda who is chosen by Master Shifu as the Dragon Warrior. Like the Panda she was unsure, but there was something special within her that was yet to be discovered. Dream A Dream as the Master brought out the best in her.

Having born into very difficult circumstances and being the second girl in a cohort of 3 sisters, Pavithra has never had it easy. With very limited resources and a society that didn't believe much in the capability of girls, she grew up to much ridicule and a consistent message that 'You are good for nothing!'

When she came to Dream A Dream she was unsure of herself, but desperate for support. Her father had stopped working and her mother had always been a home-maker. She was asked to drop-out of college and instead work in order to support the family. This young girl took it upon herself to change her family's situation, but not at the cost of her own education. She chose to join an evening college and approached Dream A Dream for a job. Her family was disappointed and relented with this decision as they were not happy to have their daughter return home late night. But, Pavithra pursued her decision as she wanted to do something good with her life and wanted to prove to her family that she can!

Pavithra joined Dream A Dream as an intern in March 2007 with very little knowledge of working in a professional environment, nor having English or Computer skills. She was scared, but willing to give her all. Her role as a Dream Funday (half-day to one-day learning exposure for children) coordinator gave her the essential skills of project management. She visited places in Bangalore, which she had never visited earlier and learnt to interact with volunteers, teachers, and vendors to get her work done.

She worked for nearly 14 hours a day and during every weekend, but never complained. Spending her day at office, rushing to college in the evening, and returning home late night to take care of household chores and supporting her family became her routine. She set challenging goals for herself, and in the next two to three years achieved them all. She repaid the family debts and her personal debts that she had taken to support her education costs. She further supported her sisters with their personal goals and aspirations.

Pavithra's journey has not been easy. There were days and moments when she was in doubt; days when she was overwhelmed with the enormity of personal challenges in her life and wanted to give it all up. Many a times, she wanted to drop-out of college and wondered if she will ever be able to live up to her own expectations. Fortunately, these were momentary and her inner spirit finally won.

In the last 5 years, Pavithra has matured into a young, inspiring changemaker who is creating ripples in the community around her. She continues to have strained relationships with her father who still struggles to provide for the family. She has taken charge of the family and has set goals and tasks for her father to achieve in his life. She attempts to inspire and motivate him to not give up on life and that he is capable of changing his circumstances.

Today, Pavithra helps her mother understand that she has her own identity in life that is different from her husband's, and that she needs to find the woman within herself and celebrate it. She supports her young sister's education and guides her through her adolescent phase. She convinced her graduate sister who was earning a meager Rs. 4000/- a month that she is capable of earning a better salary and inspired her to find another job which today pays her four-times the old salary.

Pavithra has transformed the life of all her family members and today they enjoy a quality of life that did not seem possible a few years back. All this has been possible because of a 16-year old girl who did not want to accept what life had given her, and had the courage to change it.

In professional life, Pavithra has taken on bigger responsibilities. She currently manages a computer education program for over 500 young people at Dream A Dream. While she has built excellent project management skills, she is learning the fine art of building and nurturing relationships with stakeholders, learning to motivate and inspire a team of facilitators and volunteers who support her in the program, and also learning to build a larger vision for the program. Pavithra is consistently aware that she has a long way to go and continues to invest in her own personal growth. She is a lead facilitator and trainer at Dream A Dream. She is part of a team of Lead Trainers with another youth focused organization called 'ICreate' where she trains young people from difficult circumstances to start their own business.

Pavithra also completed the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Program at CSIM to broaden her knowledge and understanding of the social sector and also get exposure to causes different from children. She volunteers for a Wildlife Conservation group and supports them to track various animal and reptile species in the Western Ghats of Karnataka. She also volunteers with a women's initiative called Ubuntu assists them to mobilize women from her community into their network, besides conducting art workshops for the women in Ubuntu programs.

Pavithra believes she needs to get a wider exposure to the hundreds of challenges that our country faces and wants to channelize the energy of youth in solving those challenges. According to her, this is just the beginning of her journey. She has bigger goals in life and is on course to achieve them.

She has many dreams and talks very passionately about each of them. She wishes to work in the space of empowering young people, giving them access to the opportunities that she got at Dream A Dream, and inspiring them with her own story. She wants to be a donor and support causes that she is passionate about and support organizations that have high standards of professionalism and accountability, something she has learnt at Dream A Dream. She also wishes to be a business entrepreneur. She has a few ideas in mind that she is currently working on and hopes to launch one of them in 2012.

Pavithra represents the spirit of the young in India— restless, ambitious, and responsible. She is a Changemaker, and with everything that she has achieved in transforming the lives of her family and people around her she is unique. She is just at the beginning of her journey and one can only imagine what someone like her can achieve with the spirit of a winner deep within her. Watch for this young, spirited girl who is all of 20 today, but is already building a vision to transform this country!

– Vishal Talreja

*If you wish to contact Pavithra, please write to
pavithra@dreamadream.org*

PARTNERS IN GIVING

"So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole world" goes the saying. Here is an individual who has taken it upon himself to forge friendships and unite strangers so they may lighten up the lives of hundreds, one person at a time. Thozhan Charitable Trust was registered on 13th August 2007. Its Founder Trustee Radhakrishnan hails from Kumbakonam. Having lost his parents while young, he was raised in a modest household by his maternal grandmother—his biggest influence in life. He recounts, "My grandmother showed me by her own example that it does not take extra time or money to be charitable. She hardly ever gave alms but whenever a hungry person came to her, she would always have some food, or at least bananas to give. Though her own income was meager, she would volunteer to pay for one or more of my friends' expenses at school. She said to me that it was important to feed the hungry, because a filled stomach always inculcated a sense of gratitude and goodwill."

Her words of wisdom stood true when years later, after she died, Radhakrishnan faced difficult times, and it was his friends who got



together, paid his college fees, and helped him graduate in IT with flying colours. He is full of stories of kindness shown by friends who collectively worked and got him out of troublesome situations. "I did not quite get the Diploma certificate," he quips. Because, I was short of about Rs. 6,000 and although I was a gold medalist with an 'O' grade, the institute withheld the certificate" he says ruefully.

Realizing the importance of having the right opportunities and the basic needs met to maintain a dignified lifestyle, Radhakrishnan and his friends decided to get together and help charitable organizations—particularly homes for the orphan, destitute, and the elderly. The group met on the first Sunday of every month and discussed their plans. They started out on an initial corpus fund of Rs. 1,800 and committed to contribute Rs.25 per person per month for their activities. As the idea for 'Thozhan' was conceived, the activities also became more structured and today the organization runs three projects—Asan; Ashramam; and Samudayam.

Asan

Volunteers from Thozhan visit the Ramakrishna Mission's Vivekananda Vidyalaya school at T. Nagar in Chennai. These volunteers facilitate the learning of specific current topics among students by having them interact with experts in the concerned field. They have also set up the National Green Corps through which the students undertake environment consciousness related activities around the city regularly. Besides, competitions are held once in three months to motivate the children.

Ashramam

Thozhan mobilizes people to visit homes, and contributes resources to meet the basic needs of the inmates of these homes. "We create hubs of volunteers in different localities who will regularly keep in touch with these homes so that they become self-sustained. When a

lot of people start visiting, we move on," says Radhakrishnan. The main premise for this project is that we should contain the growing number of homes in our society as it is not a good indicator of the society's overall development. "Initially I was moved by the plight of abandoned people and wondered if I should also start a home. However, I soon realized that increasing numbers of hospitals and homes are merely indicators of greater problems in a country touted to be one of the powerful nations of the world," says Radhakrishnan. At this juncture he reminisces his time as a student at CSIM. He says: "It was here at CSIM that I learnt what my true calling is. My passion lay in serving as many people as possible. However, it was during these classes that I learnt how important it is to lay out short-term and long-term goals. The clarity provided by my teachers at CSIM encouraged me to pursue the work at Thozhan with greater vigour than ever before."

Samudayam

Thozhan volunteers have branched out in different parts of Tamil Nadu and they have gathered a database of donors who have pledged their eyes and other organs. The work of conducting blood donation camps as well organ donation drives are being carried out by his friends—Selvakumar at Trichy, Murugan at Tiruppur, and Pandian at Rajapalayam. Radhakrishnan's expanding network is now 660 strong. 17 organ donations, 44 eye donations, and 90 regular blood donors have been mobilized so far. Their work has been acknowledged both in the print as well as in the visual media.

"We have set ourselves on a target of completing 100 eye donations and 50 organ donations in the next three years," says Radhakrishnan adding with childish enthusiasm, "we have also resolved to meet Dr. Kalam at least once by then. It would be highly inspirational for us to be in the presence of someone so great and to take his guidance."

Talking about his family, which today comprises of his wife Karthika and three-year-old daughter Yaazhini, Radhakrishnan speaks with contentment and self-assurance, "My wife has been my biggest support since my college days. She manages the accounts of Thozhan and also handles most of our interactions with other organizations, leaving me with just the supervision work. Most importantly, she is the one I turn to when in need of comforting words."

When asked to share lessons with our readers, a rather shy and hesitant Radhakrishnan says, "In giving is joy. Everybody thinks that you need to be a Gandhi to be able to change the world. I say that just as hunger and sleep are natural instincts, so is service. If only we cultivated a habit of it, we need nothing out of the ordinary to make a difference."

—Archanaa R.

*If you wish to support Thozhan Charitable Trust,
please write to thozhan.org@gmail.com.*

THE MAGIC CARPET

Rubina Mazher is one such participant of the 8th batch of SEOP in Hyderabad, whose idea gained ground and took shape while she was doing the course with CSIM. Rubina's Magic Carpet project is about empowering economically backward women of the Muslim community without disturbing their cultural ethos. She chose to adopt a strategy that will help build trust among the community and then deliver the goods.

Rubina's firm conviction that women are agents of change for future generations, led her to start SAFA Society targeting Muslim women in Hyderabad. A personal insight of the dynamics of the community helped her to crystallize intervention plans for these women.

Magic Carpet is a project that provides economic support to families below the poverty line by introducing a work-from-home model. The women are taught embroidery and tailoring and produce mats, bags, pouches and dresses from their homes. 225 women have been trained and 52 of them are part of the SAFA core production group who has started the production. SAFA provides market liaison support to sell these products. Rubina actively networks with



professional design institutes to offer training to these women, which makes their work elegant and professional. SAFA is adapting the MOVE program —Market Oriented Value Enhancement program—that has been successful in Karnataka, to motivate the trained women towards entrepreneurship.

"Any skill training given without the value addition of motivation, vision setting and market orientation is a waste of NGO resources. Even our Henna/tattoo design team of young girls customizes their craft and are now armed with a design book and rate card," says Rubina.

The Magic Carpet project is about getting the women to do value addition on handloom mats sitting in the house. The carpet is used predominantly for religious purpose and the profit earned by its sale is shared with the women. The earned income is channelized towards the education of the girl child in the family. This two-pronged strategy helps in addressing the problem of today as well as the future. Besides, as the women of the house need not have to go out to earn that income, it fits well within the community's norms. As she contributes to the family's income, her respect and self-esteem is bound to grow which will help her in taking bolder and progressive decisions for the family.

The product chosen is extremely sensitive and attractive which is sure to appeal to the religious sentiments of the community. The carpets are targeted for the prayers in local mosque, exports, and as corporate gifts. Rubina is working toward seeking support from funding agencies and corporate houses for taking the initiative forward. As it has an income component integrated in the enterprise, she envisages making the project sustainable in a period of two years.

"Over a period of two years we are also producing yoga/prayer mats which are now designed by a NIFT designer. Besides, we also make unique jute and other cotton products too," adds Rubina.

Realizing that education is a tool for sustainable development of children SAFA has launched two programs and two projects. Roshni club is a weekly club based activity program for women to educate them on common diseases, women's hygiene, and low cost nutrition. Awaaz —an interactive and comprehensive program for children on health, hygiene, sanitation, interpersonal relations and general awareness. As the dropout rate amongst Muslim girl children in very high, she has launched 'Neenv Project'— a sponsorship program to ensure continuity in education for the vulnerable children. Till date, around 140 children have benefited from these programs.

Rubina is currently working on starting an online and stand-alone store for the SAFA products in Hyderabad. She proposes to launch a sanitary napkin unit to generate income for 20 homes. She also plans to reach out to 250 girl children and ensure that they do not drop out from schools. Ready for launch on 1st of May 2011 is a campaign called 'Bleed Green' based on promoting environment friendly carry bags at retail outlets. The main objective of this campaign is to create an income generating activity for 20 women (who sew the bags) and add no to plastic them.

A true social entrepreneur indeed, Rubina wants to replicate her model in many slums of Hyderabad and in other cities too!

—Latha Suresh

If you wish to support SAFA society, please contact Rubina M at + 91 9866174665 or write to majidrubina@safaindia.org.

SPECIAL CHILDREN IN A SPECIAL SCHOOL

The birth of a child is the best moment that every parent can be entitled to. Ten months long wait and anticipation now transforms to apprehension about when the child will become active, crawl, walk, and talk. These are moments that they long for. What if the child was different from every other kid? What if they need more time and assistance to manage their day to day activities? What if they have to live their entire life with such help?

"It was like all hell breaking loose", says Senthamizh Selvi, Principal, Kumaran Special School. This school was started by her in 2002 with the aim of facilitating effective inclusion of disabled persons in the working society. Being a mother of two sons—affected by mental retardation and cerebral palsy—has taken her through a journey that culminated in the establishment of this school.

Recognizing the special needs of her children, she admitted them in Maduram Narayanan Centre at T.Nagar in Chennai to provide them



training in basic activities required for everyday routine. "This was when I came to terms with the needs of my children and joined the school as a helper. My children, along with others, were taught to dress, eat on their own, speak, and use the toilet," says an emotional Selvi.

"It was here I realized that my children were better than many others, and understood the limits of their capacity. As my children grew here, I too grew as a parent of special children. I won the 'Best Parent' and 'Full Attendance' prize in Madhuran Narayanan Centre. Initially I thought that training would make my kids completely normal. Only later did it sink in my mind that they can only be trained and not completely recovered," she adds.

On completing her teacher training, Selvi decided to open a school that will cater to the needs of special children. Having begun with six children, including her sons, the school now trains 35 children up to the age of 22. The services provided here include yoga, physiotherapy, toilet training, vocational training, and special training.

Children learn to make paper bags, candles, jute bags, pen-refills, handkerchiefs, hand-towels, leather key-chains, phenyl, liquid soap, and decorative flowers made from waste silk cocoons, etc. The latest introduction in the school is the ceramic unit and horticulture. "While counting the *agarbatis* (incense sticks), they forget what comes after 12. They also grow to assist the other children at the centre", recounts Selvi.

Kumaran Special School also has a job-oriented Vocational Training programme called 'Able Art' which imparts training on tailoring, food production, weaving, printing, desktop publishing, and front office training.

"When I see them doing their work slowly, I feel happy and liberated. It reminds me of the days when I decided not to go to temples after I learnt that my children were mentally retarded", she adds nostalgically.

Running the school with seven staff members is quite a task she explains. "Regular funds have been a persistent problem for us. The monthly fee of Rs 200 that is charged per student is our source of funds for sustenance."

"The Social Entrepreneurship for Vocational Rehabilitation Programme at CSIM has helped me to understand the basics of fundraising and equipped me with skills to manage my organization. It is only through this course that I came to know that funds can be raised. Besides, this course also gave insights on caring for the hearing and visually impaired, and providing training in speech therapy", she recollects.

After completing the course at CSIM, she applied for funds to purchase a van for her school and succeeded. "The children are now picked up and dropped back at their residences. The course has been an eye opener! I learnt that I could approach the banks for funds," she says gleamingly.

When asked about the response of the parents of the special children studying in her school, Selvi says: "They see me as a role model. On sharing my experience with the other parents in the school, I think I have instilled the confidence in them to accept their children and care for them."

"My elder son used to be hyper active while my younger son could not even sit straight. Through training they began to ask what they needed. It was a milestone for me. Their progress has been my energy! My elder son is not an engineer, nor is he a doctor. He is

independent, working in a rabbit farm", says a proud Selvi who adds that her younger son can write the channel number to ask for his favourite programme on television.

How supportive has the family been was a very fulfilling question to her, for her husband definitely needs a mention. "He is very patient and never allows me to lose my temper with the kids. He respects their choice and wish, instructs me to ask their favorite color while purchasing their clothes," she says cheerfully.

As for future plans, Selvi wants to see Kumaran Special School develop into a residential programme.

– Shanmuga Priya. R

*For more information about Kumaran Special School,
please contact Senthamizh Selvi at 9840423125 or
write to kumaransplschoo124@gmail.com*

VISION UNLIMITED

The sound of a van halting in his village and a few men wearing white coats alighting from it caught the attention of fourteen-year-old Sivakumar. He rushed to see the men in action and realized that they had come to his village—Padavedu—to conduct an eye camp. He stood in a corner watching them work, and what fascinated him most was seeing his fellow villager, a paramedical worker, washing his hands often and vigorously in a unique way. He picked up a conversation with him and learnt about eye camps and the role of optometrists.

The story of eye surgeries narrated by the paramedical worker in the following days, inspired Sivakumar, and it was then he decided that his mission would be to restore eyesight to people. He completed a Diploma in Optometry at the Government Regional Institute of Ophthalmology in Chennai. His perseverance and hard work sought him employment at Sankara Nethralaya, a leading Tertiary Care hospital of Global repute, in Chennai.

With over a decade's work experience at Sankara Nethralaya, Sivakumar clearly understood the major role optometrists played



in the society. He understood that uncorrected refractive error was the major cause of avoidable vision impairment, the second most common cause of blindness in India and the world generally.

He was deeply shaken by the WHO's Vision 2020 declaration, which clearly stated that "Millions of people in India (and the rest of the world) still do not have access to basic eye care and refractive services, mainly due to a shortage of trained personnel to provide them. There are only 1,200 Optometrists against the need for 11,000 of them." This made him realize that India needed many players in the field of Optometry, and Refractive Error focused eye camps at the door steps of a common man needed to be organized in order to overcome this problem. Thus, he started Alayem Eye Care, an optometric clinic where he identified and diagnosed refractive errors, and prescribed and marketed spectacles at prices which were affordable to all sections of the society.

Sivakumar grew anxious when he learnt that the weaker section of the community would not voluntarily have their eyes tested. The social entrepreneur in him found an innovative solution to resolve this issue, and address the optometric needs of the urban poor. He purchased a portable computerized eye testing equipment and conducted eye camps for the weaker sections in Chennai and its suburbs. He networked with the Lions club for financial support and with the support of few philanthropists he performed one eye camp in a week. These screening camps not only created awareness for the people at their door steps, but also helped Sivakumar to identify people with refractive errors, cataract problems, and those with other eye related problems.

Within four days of the camp, Sivakumar would provide spectacles from his shop 'Aalayem Eye care' to patients identified with refractive errors, at their doorstep. He referred people with cataract

problems to hospitals within Chennai for free surgery. Other patients were referred to ophthalmologists for treatment at subsidized rates. These services enabled Sivakumar increase the sales margin from sale of spectacles, and the added earnings helped him to resolve the problem of needless blindness.

Strong networking with service providers, transparency, counseling, and follow up services were Sivakumar's USP. A true social entrepreneur indeed! He continued to research for newer avenues to scale up his work.

He enrolled at Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) to develop his social entrepreneurial skills. He began to interact with other players in the field of vision care and also read about many social entrepreneurs. The course offered by CSIM helped him hone his entrepreneurial skills. He understood the magnitude and severity of the problem in a holistic way and decided to reach out to the villages surrounding Chennai as well.

He organized outreach camps every weekend and deployed a team of five persons to rural areas, suburban areas, slums, and industries to conduct vision check-up, and provide spectacles to those who needed them. Further, patients with other eye related problems were referred to local hospitals. It was at this point in time he realized the need for trained optometrists to scale up his mission to reach out to 10 million eyes.

Sivakumar believed that Optometrists, who were primary healthcare practitioners of eye and vision, can successfully manage the leading cause of vision impairment (refractive error), and can also help in alleviating the burden of other causes of blindness through diagnosis, management, and referrals. This prompted him to launch the 'Sight Care Institute of Optometry' and offer one-year and

Unsung Beacons — Volume II

two-year certificate and diploma courses in Optometry to boys and girls.

"I hail from Ayyaneri, a hamlet near Sholingar Village. After completing my 12th standard, I underwent the three-month course on Optometry that was offered by Aalayam Eye care at Anew. I now work as an optometrist at KBKL optics at Mambalam, Chennai and earn Rs. 6000 a month. This course has changed my career and I want to become the best optometrist in the city one day", says Asha.

Sivakumar envisions creating 200 Optometrists every year, which would provide succor to at least 300,000 people a year by solving their eye related problems. This would enable him reach his goal of reaching out to 10 million eyes within a span of 6 years.

– Latha Suresh

*If you wish to contact Aalayam Eye Care, please call
+91 9840369969 or write to sightcarefoundation@gmail.com*

PROFILE

**Inspirational stories of uncelebrated people
whose organisation strive to make a
difference in the lives of the deprived.**

EVERY CHILD CAN

Manjula arrived at the tuition centre at 6:00 P.M. There were over 20 children waiting for her, few seeming exhausted after play. "Can you teach me subtraction, please?" asked Kasi opening his mathematics book. Manjula was pleased to know that her student was eager to learn. She wrote on the black board '17 - 8', and asked Kasi to solve this problem.

Kasi counted his ten fingers, and looking at his toes continued to count until 17.

"What are you doing?" asked Manjula. "I am subtracting, Miss," replied Kasi.

Manjula drew him nearer and taught him to solve this problem quicker. She held his hand and told: "Start counting after 8 and stop when you reach 17." When Kasi finished, she asked: "What is the answer?" "It is 9, Miss" said an excited Kasi.

Manjula, Aid India volunteer, spends her evenings during weekends at Kalpakkam village to teach the poor children to read and write.



"I have been volunteering for this centre for over two years now. Teaching children mathematics and English through simple methods motivates them, and I thoroughly enjoy their company," she said cheerfully.

Aid India was founded by Balaji Sampath, an Asoka Fellow, in 1996. After completing his B.Tech in IIT Madras, and PhD in Maryland University at the US, Balaji decided to work full-time on education, health, and livelihood for the rural children. Currently, Aid India reaches to over 60,000 children. Cumulatively over the years Aid India programs have impacted over two million children.

Having won several accolades including the Times of India Social Impact Awards in 2011, Aid India is now striving to create awareness on the quality of education that is being provided in rural India. Their objective is to increase resources that would help to improve the quality of education.

"Although there are educational institutions—government schools; low cost private schools; community run schools; and NGO run schools—that cater to the poorer children, we observed that there was an issue of quality in all of these services. Aid India therefore worked towards developing substantial material on low cost, and good quality teaching pedagogy to provide the right teaching inputs to children," said Balaji Sampath.

Reminiscing the early years of Aid India, Balaji stated: "We first focused on building a team in Tamil Nadu—volunteer base, and NGO partners. It is only for the last 7 to 8 years that we have been focusing exclusively on education. We mobilized volunteers from software companies and students from IIT, BITS, and Madras University who had engineering and social science backgrounds. Our core area of work was to teach children an easy method of learning science, mathematics, and English."

"Our focus has always been poorer children, and we ensured that our methodology was simple for them to understand. We worked with teachers—government school teachers; and teachers who were not qualified but worked in difficult circumstances and communities. A few village schools had also asked us to train their teachers, put in processes, and make their school in an overall much higher level than it was. We developed pedagogy, methods and materials which ensured that the quality of learning levels of children increased."

Talking about the process of developing teaching methods Balaji enthusiastically said, "A lot of effort goes into developing the pedagogy. We start with a basic idea that is well researched. But, what has been said in a world level research need not necessarily work out in a small village like Satyamanagalam or Dharmapuri. We therefore test it out and bring about changes. It sometimes takes up to one or two years to come out with a good solution to solve a problem in science or mathematics."

"We know that all children can't learn at the same pace. We therefore identify children who are lagging behind and specifically teach them. Our modules have the same problem being taught in many different ways and is done through a lot of fun activities that interests children. Given that the teachers work in difficult circumstances and the children are from poorer backgrounds, we fine tune the methodology to fit in the existing curriculum and ensure that the technology works in all situations. For instance, we started teaching fractions to a large number of children and spent nearly one and a half years to arrive at a methodology to teach it in an easier way. Today, our team is an expert in teaching fractions in different ways," Balaji quipped.

Besides Science and Mathematics, Aid India also researched on spoken English in over 100 schools across the State. "Most NGOs have focused on children's access to education, while ours have

been to ensure best quality learning for children. Working on modules is a continuous process. We recently printed one lakh books in English and Tamil and distributed them to rural children," remarked Balaji.

Raising the bar for social service, Aid India is now organizing a marathon in Chennai on the 12th of November, 2011 to sensitize the larger public on the quality of education that is being provided to rural children, thereby facilitating a platform for advocacy with the government.

"The idea is to mobilize support and make people aware of the problems that children face, particularly in rural areas. Around 2500 people (both adults and children) from all over the State will participate in this event and several children will share the struggles they faced to get educated. We do not want people to consider it as an accepted factor that the government school quality would be poor, and that the children who study here would not be able to read or subtract. The basic idea is to spread the message that children today are unable to read, while every child can!" explained Balaji.

"If only we continue to allow this to happen, we are speaking about 10 million children each year who would lack the ability to access resources and claim their rights. We feel strongly that this has to stop urgently! People will contribute money, participate in the run, and demonstrate their support. We feel strongly that if the public pressurizes the government, then there would be a change in the entire educational system," he added.

"Right to Education does not mean right to children's access to school alone. Although 99 percent of the rural children in our State attend school, 53 percent of the children studying in fifth standard at government schools are unable to read; 47 percent of them unable to subtract. This shows the society, government, and education

system's gross negligence. We are not talking of their ability to do algebra or fractions, but their problem in learning the basic skills. Most of these children are from marginalized communities, those whose parents are not able to help them in their studies or monitor them. As there is no public outcry and demand for better quality education this problem continue to exist. We want to get people to say— I care about it," opines Balaji.

Balaji Sampath believes that with concentrated effort this problem can be solved in just four months' time. He recalled his experience teaching the rural children and said, "After one of my sessions, a child held my hand and would not let me go. Their affection has been my motivation to continue my work. Support from people has been spontaneous. Becoming an entrepreneur is not a big deal. Continuing and sustaining is the hardest part."

Let us join Balaji Sampath in his mission to provide quality education for the rural children in whichever way we can!

—Marie Banu

*Aid India is located at: No. 7/4, Besant Road, Royapettah,
Chennai- 600014. Phone: 42636125 or 28350403
Email: info@aidindia.in. Website: www.aidindia.org.*

TO LIVE IS TO LOVE

Sandwiched between narrow lanes of houses in Ayanavaram at Chennai, is a house which looks not very different from the others. Opening its gates, one is met with a sight peculiar only to familial occupation. A moment's hesitance to knock proves helpful as a friendly man guides me upstairs to the canopied terrace, where Aruwe's office is located. "This is my parents' home. I pleaded them to let me use this space to set up the organisation and it has stayed since," says Aspy Joyson casually.

Aspy Joyson and Rachel Xavier were students of Stella Maris College, and they pursued their Master degree in Social Work in 1991. While working as student field workers, they were inspired to start something for their own community, Ayanavaram, where they resided. There were not many NGOs in the city back then, and before they officially started Aruwe, both of them networked with existing governmental as well as non-governmental organizations and organized medical camps.

"We had done some field work with CEWA (Centre for the Welfare of the Aged), Chennai. That organization is a pioneer in residential



care for the elderly in India. Our interest in taking care of the elderly sprang up from the services and dignity maintained by CEWA. There used to be a few homeless elders thronging the streets in Ayanavaram, often found begging. We, along with a few friends started to bring food regularly for these people, and no sooner had we done that some of them decided to stay," says Aspy.

Starting with three elders and expanding to seven, Aruwe has provided them with residential care and has accommodated a few children as well. "In 1996, we came across school and college students who were finding it difficult to pay their fees. Some parents requested us to provide a tuition centre for their children. Ayanavaram used to be an area in which education was a highly neglected option, what with the presence of alcoholism among men and women, and abusive relations spoiling the peace at home. So, a few children just took to the streets. Some were even encouraged by their parents to beg, as a child sometimes earned more than an adult would, by seeking alms. People should stop giving alms to children," says a furious Aspy. "We should feel guilty for actually spoiling the child's future while answering to their begging calls," she adds.

The work at Aruwe keeps expanding like an umbrella, and to hold it all together must require the joint efforts of many people. "We are glad to have very helpful collaborators" says Aspy. "Our patrons Dr. Udaya Mahadevan, Associate Professor of Social Work at Loyola College, Chennai, Mrs. Janaki Arunkumar, Commissioner of Customs and Central Excise, Mr. M.S.Jain and Mr. Sridhar of Maithri Educational Trust are all truly committed individuals who keep our motto alive—To live is to love. We also have a few corporate sponsors who fund our programmes. Mr. Paul of Little Drops Home for the Aged has been offering instantaneous support

whenever we needed to drop in an elderly person at his home for want of better care," says Aspy.

Speaking of alcoholism and disturbed family relations, Ayanavaram locality has been witness to an alarming increase in suicidal rates in the last ten years. As in most of these families, the women were the sole bread winners, and also victims of domestic violence and other forms of crime. Referrals for counseling, legal advice, and treatment was started by Aruwe in collaboration with other NGOs. In this, the support and committed services of Mrs. Beulah Azaria and Ms. Isabel Richardson are noteworthy. In July 2010, Aruwe along with the Banyan Foundation set up a mental health clinic in the neighborhood. Other organizations that served as a catalyst in helping women were the International Foundation for Crime Prevention and Victim Care (PCVC), Madras Christian Council of Social Service (MCCSS), and Pen Urimai Iyakkam, to name a few.

"At Aruwe, the call to work can be expected to come at any time, and from anywhere," says Simon Johny, who manages Aruwe's programmes. He adds: "Our friends often spot individuals in need and contact us immediately for help. They may be calling from the other end of the city, but it is our duty to attend to their call and we do it gladly. Once, an old lady was found living on the pavement near St. Thomas Mount railway station. Upon reaching there, we chatted with her. It turns out that her husband, a porter died of an accident on the railway track many years ago. Not wanting to leave the place and the memories that it contained for her, she chose to live very close to the site where the incident occurred. We decided against forcing her to come away from there, and instead arranged for food to be provided to her regularly." "On another occasion, we were visiting Plesipalayam, a village situated in the Tamil Nadu-Andhra Pradesh border, to purchase a piece of land for setting up

our own premises. There we found the issue of heavy malnutrition and neglect of education. Particularly, there was a girl who had incurred a huge debt with paying fees for her Teacher Training Programme. We mobilized funds for her to complete her training, and also gave her hope as we found her on the verge of committing suicide. We ended up serving the people residing in Plesipalayam although our land buying prospects are yet to be finalized," says Simon.

The multifarious efforts put in by the members of Aruwe, their friends and collaborators have borne fruit in the changed mindsets amongst the members of the Ayanavaram community towards education and income generating capacity of women. The seemingly silent Simon Johny says: "Service should be cascading like the waterfalls. To some, our work may seem to lack focus, because we deal with not just one issue. Our purpose in being here is to serve and to spread the message of love. In the process of attaining common standards of 'professionalism' we do not want to lose out on the human essence to our work."

Here is an organization that prefers to mould itself to suit the needs of the people it serves!

—Archanaa R.

Aruwe is located at No.11, Solai Amman Koil Street, Ayanavaram, Chennai- 600 023. For more information write to aruwe@rediffmail.com or visit www.aruwe.org

LIFE IS A MIRACLE!

(A gynecologist, mother, disability rights activist, life-skills coach and environmentalist, Dr. Neelam Sodhi, Founder of Ashirwad Trust, Ludhiana knows a thing or two about perseverance, dynamism, and faith. Excerpts from an interview with the winner of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani Award for the year 2011)

Introduction

"I am basically a gynecologist who until six months ago was working at Guru Teg Bahadur Sahib Charitable Hospital. I hail from Ahmedabad, but after marriage settled in Ludhiana, pursued my higher studies, and subsequently started my career. I have been fortunate enough to be gifted with a lot of work always. In my field, services cannot be timed. Babies never tell you when they come. So, when duty beckons I have to be there."

"When I had conceived my first child, I was in the midst of hectic activity. Before I realized it, problems arose in my pregnancy and my son Jaswinder was born pre-term. Soon, I had a hint that



something was wrong with him. When he was eleven months old, I took him to my parent's home where we had him diagnosed. It was then I learnt that he had cerebral palsy."

Early years of motherhood

"About two decades ago, there was literally no physiotherapist, or credible forms of treatment available for cerebral palsy. I learnt physiotherapy and occupational therapy, and shuttled between Ahmedabad and Ludhiana to meet with various people who taught me how to practice remedial teaching methods. I learnt that unless you stimulate the child's mind continuously, the inherent potential of the child cannot be tapped. So I constantly played with my son, talked to him, and looked out for plausible responses to the stimuli."

"Raising my son during his early childhood was the most stressful, yet a life-changing experience for me. I was juggling a career with at least 40–50 patients a, taking care of my family, raising my son and personally administering him therapy, and taking lessons about different teaching techniques. That phase had its share of joys as well as surmounting pressure."

Birth of an idea

"When my son was about 7 years old, his teachers called me often to discuss his inability to register and reproduce the regular lessons that was taught to him. They complained about his inability to read or write a single word even after repeated teaching. Each time, I pleaded to them to give him another chance at learning. But, they were insensitive. I felt perturbed and wondered why they only saw the problem and not realize that Jaswinder is an intelligent kid. This anger created a lot of energy within me. I lunged at books to learn more about teaching techniques such as mental mathematics, and

other such Montessori methods. Gradually, though without holding a definitive degree, I was becoming a physiotherapist, occupational therapist, a special educator, a trainer, all at once. However, all the work that I was handling was growing on me, making me very tired. I wanted something simpler in life."

"While trying to distract myself from all the stress, I took to teaching adolescent education and environment-consciousness in schools. One day, when I was feeling the lowest, with utter self-doubt and lack of confidence, I was requested to address 150 girls on adolescent education programme. It surprised me how despite feeling so low, I could sound so sure of myself and comfortably talk to the crowd that day. Sharing my experiences helped me to connect with them as a woman, breaking the wall between the audience and me. I felt an immense sense of satisfaction and this occasion was a big turning point. I decided to have another child. Also around that time, many people were urging me to start an organization and work on the issue of Cerebral Palsy."

"The idea of conceiving another child was ridden with a lot of anxious questions. 'What if the next baby also has a disability?' This was one of my biggest fears that my family shared as well. After giving it much thought, I decided to leave everything to God. This newfound spirituality gave me strength to continue with a new vigour. And then, merely two months before my daughter was born, I launched my organisation Ashirwad."

"My daughter Arzeen was born eleven years ago, a healthy, full term baby, and she practically brought back life into our family's existence. She amazed me in the way she grew, crossing one mile stone after another without a struggle. Life is a miracle, and we often don't appreciate that!"

About Ashirwad

"Ashirwad was set up in 1999, by three parents of children with cerebral palsy. Our major focus areas are: early identification and early intervention. We have been engaging with the government, NGOs, and the general public, utilizing every possible forum to discuss openly and plainly about disability. I have been actively working on the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which has been doing some really marvelous work at the grass-root level in Punjab. Nine organizations have especially come closer through our Annual Disability Day conferences, and our strength lies in our absolute cooperation and coordination sans a sense of individualism."

Expanding vistas for dialogue and understanding

"It has been a painstaking journey to raise a lobby for disabilities, what with the State of Punjab having so little awareness and sensitivity towards people with disabilities. When we started, there were around four to five NGOs working in similar areas, but they were obscure. Today, there is a steady increase and having developed a strong network in the last decade the state boasts of around 30–40 organizations working on different disabilities.

"Visibility is an important factor in determining the success of your efforts. We have always tried to put in a word about our children, or have them meet other people, in different fora. We put up cultural performances as an exclusive contingent in the state level Republic Day Parade in 2010. People were moved by the effort put in by these children, and several people have been asking us to conduct such performances again. The larger success lies in the fact that the very public which shied away from these children is now opening their arms to them. Acceptance levels have gone up and talking

about disabilities is no longer such a tedious issue. I am optimistic that if organizations shed all their inhibitions and take on a more positive and rights-based approach, things will change for the better.

Meet the family

"My son Jaswinder is the first child in Punjab, and probably in the whole country, who is attending Engineering college, managing his work independently and perfectly. For me, as a mother, I feel very fortunate to be my son's parent, because he made me appreciate anybody who has faced exclusion, be it disability, colour, race, class, or anything else."

"I have always loved talking and whenever I felt inspired to do something, I went for it. I have managed to keep afloat all the while, workload notwithstanding. What has really worked for me is the story of my son—a role model. Personal experience has the capacity of bringing hope to those who are on the verge of giving up."

"My husband, Dr. R.S. Sodhi is my pillar of support. Through all these years, he has shared my pains and struggles, and more importantly has left me to expand at my own space and pace. Being an orthopedic surgeon, when my son needed a crucial surgery, he took on the task and performed the operation himself. Today if I am here, it is because of him. This story is not a single story. It is as much about me, as it is about a man who stood by his wife, it is about a family that stayed together, it is about a boy who faced all the pain of a medical condition called cerebral palsy added to which was the pain inflicted upon him by the society and how he has overcome them. Every day is a challenge, but there is so much to life that we must appreciate and be grateful for."

"Being bestowed with MSDS award has boosted my morale by leaps and bounds. It has come at a critical time in our census related

work. I can tell you that we have made a little more progress than we would have, thanks to the cheer of winning this award."

—As told to Archanaa R.

*If you wish to contact Dr. Neelam Sodhi, please write to
drneelamsodhi@yahoo.com.*

HEALING THE 'HIDDEN HANDICAP'

"If a child cannot learn the way you teach, then teach him in a way he can learn." This is the maxim which informs the curricular structure of Alpha to Omega Learning Centre, an organisation that specializes in educating children with Learning Disability (LD), and also in training prospective remedial educators. The information brochure on the school says: 'Our school is mainstream in structure, but specialist in nature'.

Learning Disability, also known as the 'hidden handicap', is a delicate condition in which although there are seldom, if any, apparent physical signs of disability, the affected person finds it difficult to perceive and comprehend academic and related instruction. Telltale signs of learning disability (as given in the brochure of the school) include difficulty in: (a) recognizing letters, (b) recognizing numbers, (c) following more than one step or instruction at a time, (d) holding the pencil properly, (e) copying basic shapes accurately, (f) pronouncing some sounds or words, (g) answering questions, and (h) understanding directions. If a combination of three or more of these symptoms are observed in a child, he or she may be having LD.



Talking to Founder Director Lalitha Ramanujan, an established rehabilitation psychologist and trained instructor of remedial education, one is apt to seek answers to many questions that arise out of a widely held misconception about Learning Disability. "LD is not mental retardation" she clarifies. "It is not a condition of below average intelligence levels. In fact children with LD are usually of average or above average intelligence levels, and are very creative. If taught using appropriate techniques that are tailor-made to their distinctive learning styles, these children can reach their full potential" she says.

A group of like-minded people, of which Lalitha was a part, started helping children with dyslexia in 1988. After school hours, around 30–40 kids would come to the learning center for one-to-one remedial help.

Learning disability is a combination of several problems that may have been caused before, during or after child-birth. Epilepsy and birth trauma are two examples. There may also be overlapping symptoms which can be really difficult to differentiate, even in clinical terms. Therefore learning disability is usually diagnosed using academic and psychological testing methods. The saddest part of this rigor is that most people in the society refuse to understand the problem as there is no outwardly appearance of disability.

"In the year 1995, a group of boys aged around 14–15 years came to us with the complaint that their schools turned them out because of 'insufficient' scores in the examination. We rented out the upper portion of a house, and with 4–5 of us initiating it, we started taking regular classes for these children. We started with 17 children, but by the year 2000 the number quickly grew to 90. We then shifted to the campus at Kilpauk in Chennai. Around the same time, we purchased a piece of land in Kalipathur on which 6000 sq.ft. of constructed area houses our day cum residential school. This school has been functional since 2005" says Lalitha.

The school offers yoga, music, dance, drama, sport, speech and occupational therapy, as well as counseling services to its students besides the regular curriculum. "We feel that every child has the ability. We tap into all kinds of creative resources so that the children may fully enjoy their childhood as well as bloom to their fullest potential. Every child needs his/her play time, drawing and painting time, music, and everything else that is a part of a healthy childhood. It makes their childhood more fun and keeps their innocence intact. Our children are simply adorable. They may be arguably the most mischievous, but they seldom carry a grudge and disarm you with their innocence," says Lalitha with a warm smile.

While talking about the lack of trained teachers to bring about the desired change in our country through educational reforms, Lalitha shares information on the training programmes offered by Alpha to Omega Learning Centre. She says: "We started training educators in 1993, and our focus to this day remains to increase the numbers of trained educators in this field. We are certified trainers of Kansas University Centre for Enhancing Learning, as well as the International Centre for Enhancing Learning Potential. Although we have not gone on a grand commercial scale with our training programme, we manage to train around 25-30 people within the city every year. We also travel extensively all over the country, and through our 7 week intensive training programmes, we train around 100 people every year. The fact that many of these trained educators are actually going and helping people is what we consider as our success."

"Our training program blends in theory as well as practice. We believe that only by engaging with real children who have in real life faced the problems pertaining to learning disability, will our educators understand how to effectively implement the methods and techniques taught to them. A remedial teacher is always on her toes,

looking for the bleakest of signs that may signal improvement or need for the same. There are good days and bad days for the same subject. Therefore, practicing with models is simply not enough" says Lalitha.

"Eventually we want to emphasize on training and keep the school as a model laboratory to implement our teaching-learning methods. In a few years, by adding another floor to our Kalipathur campus, we will be establishing ourselves as a full-fledged model school that caters to the overall development of our children" says she.

Being a pioneer of sorts in this field, Alpha to Omega Learning Centre has several plans for expansion that will improve accessibility of remedial education as well as the training for the same all over the country. Says Lalitha, "In the U.S. and in the U.K. there are hundreds of organizations that are doing tremendous work in this area. To encourage more activity in India, we also conduct international conferences. With every conference we find that more and more organizations are coming together. We will be happy to have 10 more centres of this kind. We welcome suggestions to spread awareness about LD as well as about the options available to treat it."

As she is about to sign off, Lalitha gives an express clarification that at once swipes clean of a singularly most important apprehension- "We do not use any kind of medication to treat our kids for Learning Disability"

—Archanaa R.

Alpha to Omega is located at: No. 58, New Avadi Road, Kilpauk, Chennai – 600 010. Phone: 044 26443090 or 2647.

Email: atolc@eth.net Website: www.alphatoomega.org.

TOUCHING THE LIVES OF OTHERS

Shobha and Anand had a mixed culture marriage. The wedding was to be held in Chennai as Shobha's parents lived here while Anand's parents dwelt in Delhi. Both the families differed 180 degrees in their views on religion and rituals, and so the couple decided to handle the wedding arrangements themselves.

The mandap was beautifully decorated and both the bride and groom looked their best. After the wedding ceremony was over, the guests congregated to congratulate the couple. All of them had one thing in common—huge gift packets. Some of them took over an hour to get their turn to wish the bride and the groom.

"I think we would need two cars to transport the gifts that you received today. It is going to be tough for me to sort this out," remarked Anand's mother Manju.

Exchanging smiles, Shobha and Anand replied in chorus, "No worries! We shall help you out."

The guests were getting disbursed after lunch and Manju ensured that each of them collected their return gifts.



After the rituals were over, the couple seated themselves amidst the gifts and took turns to open each one of them. "Can I open the first gift?" requested Shobha. She grabbed the packet near her and spent the next five minutes to unwrap it. "It is a wall clock! We can put it in our room," she expressed. Next was Anand's turn. "I have a wall clock too!" he mumbled.

After sorting out over half a dozen of wall clocks, many sets of cutleries; picture frames; and others, Shobha found an envelope that caught her eye. She paused for a moment and not wanting to make any more wild guesses, opened it.

Noticing Shobha turn quiet, Anand caringly asked, "What happened to you? What did you find in that envelope?"

Pausing a moment, she replied, "There is a gift certificate for a free eye surgery that has been given to a visually impaired girl to mark our wedding day."

"It must be Visu. He is known to make such gifts for occasions," he said cheerfully with an attempt to bring back the smile on his wife's face.

Holding back her tears, she quipped, "It is a lovely way to start our life together. I never knew that you had such wonderful friends."

Both Shobha and Anand were immensely pleased that their wedding has made a difference to someone whom they never knew.

Two years passed quickly for Anand and Shobha. Having purchased an apartment in Chennai, they were now planning to organize the housewarming ceremony.

"I hope we will be able to manage this event. Guess I should ask my friends for help," said Anand. Shobha remembered the gift that Visu gave for their wedding and said, "Yes! I would need your

friend's help. Not to help in organizing the function per se, but to help us in sharing the gifts that we would receive."

Anand could not comprehend what Shobha's thought was. Sensing this, she added clarifying, "There is an organisation called Bhoomika Trust that coordinates gifts for people who are in need. It was through them that Visu had made the donation towards free eye surgery for the nine-year-old child on our wedding day. Let us invite the Trust representatives for our function. We can request our guests to share their gifts through them to those who are in need of."

"This is a brilliant idea. Let's do it!" said Anand.

Shobha was happy that her suggestion was accepted. They started to work on the event invites which included a subtle note: 'If you wish to gift, we will give you an opportunity to share it with someone who would value it more than us.'

The day of the housewarming party arrived bright and clear. Shobha and Anand welcomed their guests with a warm smile.

After lunch, Shobha announced to the guests: "We have Bhoomika Trust representatives here with us. They have set up a stall for 'True Gifts'. This is an initiative that coordinates gifts for those who are in need. You can gift to one among fifteen organizations that are listed with them. The minimum value of a gift is Rs. 200 and you have the option of choosing amongst 100 types of gifts. Please do visit them before you leave."

Guests were curious to find out what gifts they could offer. Few were eager to be the first to make the gift. After the guests had made their choice of gift and made the payment towards it, True Gift volunteers issued a gift certificate so that they can present it to the intended recipient of the gift.

The guests thanked Shobha and Anand for having given them an opportunity to know about such a wonderful initiative to share their gifts, and disbursed with a sense of satisfaction.

"It was interesting to see the guests quickly browse through the options they had, and spontaneously offer their gift for a cause they chose. I was at first apprehensive if this idea would hurt the sentiments of my friends, but was wrong. We had over 200 guests who chose to donate to 10 organizations. Few of them have even said that they would like to do this at the time of their next domestic function," said a proud Shobha.

Jayendra, Founder, Bhoomika Trust said, "Not knowing what to gift someone on a special occasion is a dilemma that people often face. With this in mind Bhoomika Trust set up 'True Gifts'—an initiative that links donor contributions with needs of NGOs. Through a careful selection process NGOs are enlisted in this initiative and their needs are included in the True Gifts Wish List."

"The gifts encompass various categories such as education, health, differently-abled, women, children, and the elderly. Sample gifts include sponsoring an outing for special children, gifting a dialysis treatment, supporting the cost of milk for one day for spastic children, sponsoring a special lunch for children living with cancer, supporting a child's education, etc.," he added.

Through True Gifts, occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries and remembering loved ones can be made more meaningful by touching the lives of others. You can share a gift at <http://truegiftsindia.org>. Please click it now!

—Marie Banu

Bhoomika Trust was established in February 2001 with a focus to support the educational and livelihood needs of the underprivileged. Bhoomika Trust has also worked extensively with earthquake victims of Gujarat and the tsunami affected people of South India.

The education support program of Bhoomika Trust caters to the needs of deprived students by assisting them to complete their education. Presently, this programme is done in partnership with Gift a Future programme of Altuis foundation (www.giftafuture.org).

Bhoomika Trust is located at: Flat No: 3, "Saravanalayam", Old No: 19, New No: 33, P. S. Sivaswamy salai, Mylapore, Chennai - 600 004. Ph: 044-2498-1967. Email : bhoomikaindia@yahoo.co.in

CREATING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS

Until a few years ago what was your image of the "average" social worker? Positive or negative? Did the person inspire confidence or trust or did you get the feeling that he or she was in the NGO sector for purely the wrong reasons, not to serve the community, but more with an eye on the funds (*phoren*) perhaps, or looking to use the route as a short cut to media coverage or publicity or to further his/her own personal agenda. Sounds like an exaggeration? The truth is while there existed notable exceptions of people who did outstanding work, the average social worker evoked pretty much the above response.

It was precisely with the motive to equip the prospective social entrepreneur with the necessary wherewithal and skillsets to run his/her NGO efficiently, to shore up his image by enabling him establish his credibility through sustained development, and most importantly to manage the voluntary organisation profitably without having to go around with a begging bowl that the Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) was founded by corporate honcho Mr. P.N Devarajan, former Group Vice President, Reliance. In simple terms, CSIM is a business school for social entrepreneurs.



What prompted Devarajan to launch CSIM was the realization that while the sector was peopled by NGO founders who had dedication and fire in their belly, conventional social work knowledge alone was far from enough. Lack of critical skills retarded their progress and stretched their capacity in the early stages. What was clearly missing were/was management skills and leadership orientation, which probably resulted in the temptation to go in for shortcuts. A customized training programme for social entrepreneurs was just what was necessary to put them through their paces, besides mentors to do some handholding in the initial stages.

Says Mr. Devarajan, "As we face the twenty first century it is increasingly clear that non-profit managers and leaders face many challenges—growth, new social problems, government funding cutbacks, and public scrutiny. Non-profit organizations must become clearer about their mission; better at managing people and money; and more effective in marketing and fundraising. These challenges call for modern skills, adoption of tried and tested business strategies used by leading businesses and non-profit enterprises, continuous evaluation of client outcomes, and performance indicators amongst other things."

Starting off with 8 students in the year 1999, in the face of severe skepticism, CSIM has so far trained 252 Prospective Social Entrepreneurs (PSE) through its one-year PG Diploma in Social Initiative and Management, and four-month Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Program. Of these, 117 were heading their own NGOs at the time of enrolling in the course.

CSIM started in Chennai, but has today spread to Hyderabad, Mumbai, and Bangalore. Mr. Devarajan's vision is to have about 100 centers across the country that will become a one-stop shop for social entrepreneurs.

The curriculum for the one-year full time programme and short-term programme was evolved after a great deal of deliberation with social change agents, academicians, industrialists, and volunteers. A combination of classroom learning and practice school training (field visits, block placement) exposing students to existing NGOs, interaction with development personnel was formulated. A lot of ground is covered in the courses that CSIM offers. From managing social change to NGO business planning, to Financial management, People management, Communication, Fund raising, Public relations, Legal aspects, Documentation and Networking , Human rights, Gender development, Human behaviour, Values, Ethics, Counseling, Project monitoring and exposure to various issues in the development sector— nothing is left to guesswork.

At the end of their graduation PSEs learn to create an operating model that will adapt and sustain in any situation, understand the need to be transparent, and apply successful business practices while retaining the service mission, appreciate the advantages of working synergistically with other NGOs, and most important of all figure how to get better bang for their buck .

The changing profile of the PSE graduates is also gratifying . While 42 students have gone on to start their own NGOs—thirty in number, others have returned to their jobs in the social sector armed with practical knowledge that enables them to function more effectively.

Incidentally CSIM has looked at the exercise with service mindedness. For many students who cannot afford it, the fee is completely waived or highly subsidized. At this juncture it is relevant to record that CSIM is the project of a registered public charitable trust called Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhini. The Trust gives away the prestigious Sadguru Gnanananda awards to

renowned women social entrepreneurs and offers fellowship to social workers. Yet another idea initiated by this trust is the DOS scheme i.e. dal, oil, and sugar distribution scheme to benefit needy NGOs.

In order to raise social consciousness, trigger action, catalyze social change, and make the world a more equitable place, CSIM has tried to engage a cross section of society. It offers modules on social entrepreneurship to college students and NSS students of IIT Madras, besides organizing Social Action Group lectures and conducting capacity building workshops for NGOs. Foraying into research activities CSIM has been recently commissioned by the US Embassy New Delhi to undertake a study on the feasibility of establishing a Women's fund in Chennai.

So what has CSIM's impact been like on Prospective Social Entrepreneurs and what kind of a difference has it made to their thought process? Perhaps the best testimonials come from the alumni themselves.

Says Kalpana of Ramamoorthy Educational Trust which runs a home for children: "My aim in life has always been to become a social entrepreneur. But, I simply didn't have the courage. I was also very shy by nature. CSIM gave me the confidence to follow my dreams and communicate my ideas to people. I learnt how to demonstrate my involvement in a practical way."

Chezian, a visually challenged person who runs Mercy Charitable Trust says: "CSIM was instrumental in the links it provided to several NGOs. I was also exposed to subjects like auditing, accounts, documentation, fund raising, etc. The exposure to other NGOs gave me an idea of how communities were developed and how programmes were organized."

As the need for credible and effective NGOs that can address the problems of society increases steadily there is no doubt that CSIM will continue to play an even more pivotal role in the years ahead.

—Sudha Umashanker

*CSIM is located at: 391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar,
Alapakkam, Chennai 600 116. Phone : (91-44) 42805365.
Email: chennai@csim.in. Website: www.csim.in*

IN LIFE, AS AFTER

Deepa Muthiaya, Founder and Managing Trustee, DEAN Foundation talks about quality of life, preparedness for ‘the final separation’, and careers in palliative care. Archanaa R. listens in.

It is a universal fact that most people do not want to die alone in sterile, impersonal surroundings, hooked up to tubes and machines, and cut off from their family and friends, and everything that’s familiar, nor do they want to die in pain. They would prefer, if possible, to spend their last days at home, alert, and free of pain, among the people and things they love. Dean Foundation is dedicated to making this possible.

The Dean Foundation (Dignify and Empower the Ailing and the Needy) began in 1998 with the following objectives:

- To offer free Palliative Care on an out-patient and home care basis to the poor and homeless
- To provide care to the children and the elderly keeping in mind their special needs



- To create an environment of caring, acceptance, peace, and unconditional love
- To extend information to those suffering from life threatening diseases about choices between or combining western, eastern, and alternative therapies; and thereby achieving the best end-of-life quality
- To support and comfort those experiencing grief, bereavement, loss, and those who require counseling or befriending thereby helping them to heal and grow
- To provide a database on allied health services in the city through networking and referrals

The service is provided on an out-patient basis and a Home based programme is run purely on donations. In April 2000, Dean Foundation along with the State Government, under the IAPC, amended the Narcotic Rules of Tamil Nadu in a record time of six months, with Tamil Nadu being the seventh State to carry out this amendment in India.

On 4th March 2010, under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), the first pilot project in Palliative Care was carried out for the State in a Government Primary Health Centre at Tiruppukuzhi, Kancheepuram District, Tamil Nadu.

As part of the service, the care for terminally ill children resulted in Dean Foundation being conferred the Elizabeth Kubler Ross award in 2003, by the Children’s Hospice International, USA. In continuation with this effort evolved the idea of a Pediatric Hospice. On the 15th of July 2010, the first Pediatric Palliative Care Ward in the Tamil Nadu Government Health Care System saw the light of day, in the Institute of Child Health and Hospital for Children in Egmore, Chennai. This valuable space in one of Asia’s

premier Institutes, run by Dean Foundation, enables easy access and consultation of specialists from other disciplines. Seamless care is facilitated with a multidisciplinary approach.

Advocacy being one of the core aims, efforts are also directed to promote and increase access to hospice and palliative care throughout the State. Dean Foundation is currently working with the State Government's Department of Health and Family Welfare and the NRHM, in developing a Policy and mobilizing support. On the State Government's directive, Dean Foundation's medical team has traveled to each government medical college hospital throughout the State, setting up a team and sensitizing them, as the first step in beginning Palliative care services.

Thus over the last 13 and a half years, the foundation has cared for 3,233 patients of whom 2,748 were suffering from cancer, and the rest from other terminally ill diseases like neurological disorders, geriatric related illness, AIDS, etc.

"Instead of seeing the rug being pulled from under us, we can learn to dance on the shifting carpet" - Thomas Crum

"We all die, but will I die soon of this disease?" is the question. Some do not want to voice their fears and do not want to hear that there is no hope. They simply are not ready to face the answer and do not want to know. Others know, but do not speak of it. Preparations can never be enough, complete, or finished in time.

The main inspiration behind beginning Dean Foundation was the Book titled 'Tibetan Book of Living and Dying' by Sogyal Rinpoche. I wondered how a good death could be brought into the lives of those who were dying of life threatening illnesses. I was led to the answer! 'Hospice and Palliative Care' is aimed at relief

of suffering and improving the quality of life for persons who are living with, or dying from advanced illness, or are bereaved.

Often, patients and families feel shunned, or are reluctant to ask for support because of fear of being treated like lepers. Most people stay away because they find it awkward to face them or make a polite conversation. There is a great need to provide an environment of caring and celebration; not distance and depression. All one needs to do is to be normal and talk about normal things that happen in our day to day lives. If the individual wishes to talk, then quietly listen. If he is silent, you can hold his hand and wait with him. Being there is what matters!

A career in Hospice and PalliativeCare

Careers in Palliative Care are very similar to the usual ones, but with Palliative intent or pathway. For example: Palliative Care Doctor, Palliative Care Nurse and Nurse Managers, Social Worker, Psychologist, Dietician, Spiritual Counselors, Palliative specialists in Rehabilitation Medicine, Hospice Manager, Hospice, Fund Raiser/Media Consultant/Brand Manager, Hospice Volunteer Co-Coordinator, Bereavement Befriender, Specialists Pediatric Palliative Care, Psycho-Oncologists and Clinical Psychologists. Careers in Complementary and Alternative Therapies include Aroma Therapist, Music Therapist and Art Therapist. In Palliative Care we also need Physiotherapists, Occupational Therapists and Speech Therapists. There is ample scope for research in Psychiatry, Sociology, Spiritualism, etc.

When life begins with an act of love, shouldn't it end that way also?

This is the premise on which Dean Foundation was set up. The palliative care movement is not about joining a new 'cause', but becoming part of a philosophy of living that reflects and role models

our commitment to other human beings through the palliative care philosophy of physical, emotional, spiritual, and information supports for people who are dying.

Our vision is to end all unnecessary suffering, improve end-of-life quality, and support the bereaved throughout Tamil Nadu, even to the most rural parts of this State. We are willing to achieve this in partnership with others, or in collaboration with any organization which has similar goals.

— Archanaa.R

*Dean Foundation Hospice and Palliative Care Centre is located at: Old No.73 / New No. 59 , 2nd Street, Aspiran Garden Colony Kilpauk, Chennai - 600 010. Phone: 044-2645494
Email: deanfoundation@gmail.com
Website: deanfoundation.org*

‘PLAY ... STUDY ... PLAY’

All the children in the street keep playing all day, listening to the petty quarrels in the neighborhood, and watching the drunk fathers and uncles trying to find their way back to their respective homes. This is a typical scene from Varadharajanpettai, Ariyalur District, Tamil Nadu. "They go to school, every day. But, when they are back home, this is the atmosphere in which they are nurtured. Schooling did not seem to make a difference in their outlook or attitude," says Jayaseela Baskal Rajan, founding member, Dear India Trust, a grass root initiative of Cognizant's Outreach Group.

Knowing that the children must not be affected by all of this, one would have expected the observer to counsel the kids to do their homework and prepare for their classes. But, for Rajan and his team, it was different. Their intention, firstly, was to provide the children with a conducive atmosphere to play, away from the boisterous crowd. Thus, the play centre was born. Kids came here to play chess, carom, and football adhering to one condition—no one would resort to abusive language or derogatory remarks against each other.



"It worked. Eventually, the kids themselves came up and asked if they could use this place for study as well. They made it a point to come here every day, play for an hour and then sit for study. Every evening, they spend two hours between 6 P.M. to 8 P.M. at Dear India Play cum Study Centre. There are no limits to the number of children that could come here," says Rajan.

As the need arose, local college students were appointed as teachers to assist the children in their studies. Dear India (Developing and Empowering All in Rural India) Trust now runs 18 study centres in 12 villages, in the districts of Ariyalur, Pudukottai, and Cuddalore. Having registered in December 2009, the thrust areas of the Trust include education, health and hygiene, and helping the aged and differently abled. Education remains the top most priority for the Trust as they believe that it is during the years of schooling that attitudes are created, enhancing the development of one's personality.

Funds have not been an obstacle at any stage as all these centres are run within the government school campus. When asked about the response of the school management while establishing these centres Rajan says, "In many cases we were invited to start a centre in their school. The reach of our activities has had a positive feedback. Change in the attitudes of these children will reflect in the sectors they get into. Therefore, education must be prioritized and supported by proper structures to bring about a change in our society".

"I have improved from 15th rank to 10th rank after joining the centre. Extra-curricular activities like music, dance, and painting are also encouraged," says Arokya Dayalan.

Holidays are more fun here with camps for about ten days, with different themes for each day— Music, dance, cooking, painting, and visit to places like planetarium, airport, and libraries. Every

child had some take-away from the camp for sure. Interestingly, summer camps for 2011 were organized completely by the teachers in these centres.

Besides education, Dear India team has been handling issues pertaining to health and hygiene, helping the aged and differently abled on a case to case basis. Recently, they enabled the villagers complete the construction of required number of classrooms in a Government High school by advocating with the concerned government authorities. The request from the community members themselves symbolizes the change in the attitude of the rural parents who ensure that their children are adequately equipped to study. But, for Rajan, infrastructure is secondary. "It is the attitude of the parents that is very crucial in educating the children in rural areas," he says.

A couple of years down the lane, the Head Masters of the schools call it a 'tremendous change'. Intrigued about the impact the activities have created, I asked him to enumerate. "Most apparent is the change in personal behavior", explains Rajan who adds, 'children bathe regularly, cut their nails and dress up neatly; earlier we had to wash the hall after the kids left!' With more than 40 children from different classes studying in a centre, handling complaints of lost stationeries was a tedious task. The attitude to steal has now been replaced by a sense of common property that has been inculcated in the children during the classes. Though it may seem simple, he opined that the aforesaid changes cannot be brought about by schools or by the parents alone.

It is in this context that he briefs us about the relevance of Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives. "Such projects help in adapting activities in the local context, thus enabling 'inclusive' education. To be precise, 'change in attitudes of these children will reflect in the sectors they get into.

Having set the target of higher secondary education for all by 2015 in these districts, tracking the progress of every child in these centres became essential.

"After coming to the centre, I finish my homework and study in the evening. This has become a habit for me which I was unable to do earlier, due to electrical problems at home," says Anbarasan.

The progress report also records comments from the teacher. The parent's signs a consent stating that in case of non-adherence to rules or if found disturbing other children, their child would be removed from the study centre.

This sense of responsibility from the rural parents is a mile stone for the Dear India team. They have finally been able to convey that 'education is something more than writing one's name'.

—Shanmuga Priya R

If you wish to contact Dear India Trust, please call 9962580044

AGELESS TOUCH

The Dignity foundation, founded in year 1995 in Mumbai by Dr Sheilu Sreenivasan and having a chapter in Bangalore addresses the very important societal need of the elderly (50 years or above) living their post-retirement life with peace and cheer in their lives. Over the course of their journey, the Dignity foundation has taken numerous initiatives towards addressing their needs.

These include:

1. Social Support Cell: Providing social support to seniors who have no one to care for them by accompanying them to hospital, lab, temple, etc.
2. Second Careers: Enabling post-retirement career opportunities for seniors who want to contribute to society but have no channels of doing so. This also provides them with earning opportunities.
3. Recreation: Organizing cultural activities like dramas, music festivals, etc. where senior citizens can participate as artistes or as audience.



4. Companionship: Dignity Foundation volunteers visiting the depressed or lonely elderly people house and spending time with them for a couple of hours on a need basis.
5. Counseling: Providing professional counseling in the areas of Legal, Financial, Health, Insurance, etc.

Emotional Compatibility

Companionship is a simple concept wherein anyone who has a few hours to spare can take part with minimal effort. Engaging in a meaningful conversation or empathizing with the person's perspective makes a huge difference in the life of a senior citizen, whose sole affliction is often an eerie loneliness throughout the day.

To make the companionship initiative more effective Dignity foundation has identified volunteers and senior citizens who live within the vicinity of each other and also people who share a mutual interest.

However, of late the Dignity Foundation has taken to address an even more fundamental requirement of people—'food'— the lack of which afflicts uncountable number of senior citizens primarily belonging to the lower economic background. This new initiative involves distribution of ration for needy senior citizens.

There are myriad reasons why many elders end up in such a situation. This includes a heart wrenching story of widows with a well-educated daughter, albeit a drug addict, or even worse a man with grown up sons, both having abandoned their father. There are yet others who have severe eyesight problems, and having exhausted their wealth in medical expenses can no longer afford their food expenses.

Irrespective of their background, Dignity Foundation has stepped in and embraced them with open arms. The first 25 beneficiaries have been identified from in and around Bangalore.

Corporates partner—May that tribe increase!

In this initiative, Tata Elxsi has stepped in and agreed to support 10 people on a regular basis.

Two large hearted volunteers at the Dignity foundation have gone one step further and have sponsored the PUC education of the daughter of one gentleman who is invalid.

Another JP

The fact that the Dignity Foundation has been able to progress this quickly in the newest of their various initiatives is largely due to the ingenuity, passion, and dedication of the Bangalore Chapter head Jayaprakash, affectionately known as JP. However he feels that 25 needy people is barely a drop in the ocean of needless suffering, and wants this initiative to expand further to reach a much wider audience.

A National revolution was led by one Jayaprakash Narayan during the 70's, and now in 2010— JP of Bangalore leads a new revolution.

"I would feel greatly honored if some of the readers could step in to expand this initiative in the way they can in their personal capacity," says JP.

It is not out of place to say, that JP is one of the proud alumni of CSIM!

—Avinandan Deenadayalan

Dignity Foundation is located at: BMC School building, Topiwala Lane, Mumbai - 400007. Phone: 6138 1100.

Email: responsedignity@gmail.com.

Website: www.dignityfoundation.com

DREAM CATCHERS

"We all have our own life to pursue, our own kind of dream to weave. And, we all have some power to make our wishes come true, as long as we believe."

In late 1999 Brinda Jacob started sharing her idea of the 'Power of One' amongst her friends to bring about positive change in our communities. In no time, 11 others got inspired by her idea and joined hands to start 'Dream A Dream' in Bangalore in November 1999. They huddled in a garage and started discussing ideas to change the world. The twelve founder dreamers were Arjun Dugal, Brinda Jacob, Neha Shah, Pramod Ramprasad, Rahul Mathur, Rashmi Bajaj, Sandeep Wadhwa, Shweta Kothari, Supreeta Sampath, Vipul Chhabria, Vishal Talreja, and Vishwa Prasad. Today, Vishal Talreja is spearheading their dream with active support from the others.

Dream A Dream is a 12-year old professional NGO that provides children from vulnerable backgrounds - from low-income communities and shelter homes in Bangalore—with opportunities



to have fun and learn concrete Life Skills that allow them the possibility of eventually becoming integrated into mainstream society. Consistent, intensive and long-term life skills programs using the experiential medium of Sports, Creative Arts, Computer Education, Outdoor Adventure, Mentoring and learning exposures and other opportunities offered by Dream A Dream yield visible results in the behavior and capabilities of participating children, many of whom otherwise have very limited chances for normal development. These children further develop Interpersonal skills including teamwork, communications, negotiation, and coping skills. Their cognitive skills such as decision-making, problem solving and critical thinking are also honed in the process resulting in creativity and increase in confidence levels besides passion for learning. Currently, Dream A Dream is enhancing the lives of over 3,000 children from Bangalore's disadvantaged communities. with a goal to take the program to 240,000 children in 3 years.

Vishal recalls his initial meeting with the team "We were all from diverse backgrounds who met through our common friends. It was a matter of meeting the right kind of people; the right minds gathering at the right time. We all had our day jobs and had to make time in the evenings and during weekends to pursue our goal. It was a struggle but it all pieced up together eventually. The name 'Dream A Dream' was a spontaneous thought from one of the members. When we coined it we did not know that it was pregnant with meaning. But yes, now when we look back we have made many a child realize his/her dream and it makes us feel happy."

The serendipity and spontaneity of the whole journey is very interesting indeed. Vishal says, "I finished college in 1999 and got a job in Xerox as a salesman. I had the opportunity to visit Finland as part of a cultural exchange program. It was during my tenure in

Finland that I started to think about what my dreams and aspirations were, and what I wanted to do in life. I made a lot of friends here. I observed that all of them were extremely proud of who and what they were, and were happy irrespective of what work they did—Security Guard or bartender. That got me thinking about how many security guards in India were proud about themselves, which further led me to think about human dignity."

"It is this deep meaningful introspection where my quest to do something began. Why can't I make a choice to be a security guard? Where did the idea that the poor could play only some roles in society originate? A lot of it comes from our upbringing. Caste and class differences get imbibed during childhood and adolescence, and this is perpetuated generation after generation which finally becomes a part of the Indian psychological DNA unfortunately. But, we have to shatter this slowly and surely. As a young adult even I had these notions because they were driven into me. And the Finnish experience changed that! Yes, I wanted to come back to India and do something about Dignity of Labour. That's when I got in touch with the Dream A Dream team. Within a month of my return Dream-A-Dream was born."

While the transformative effect on children's development is the end goal of this team, their innovative approach has been the key to their success. Volunteers were trained to encourage, initiate and implement effective projects to support vulnerable children and build strong partnerships. Today, over 1500 community volunteers from all walks of life contribute to changing children's lives every day. Over 14,000 volunteer hours are clocked every year helping us build an increasingly sensitive and engaged community. Besides, unique fundraising efforts to attract substantial aid from individuals and business houses have been their USP.

Mumbai was a learning ground for Vishal as he joined a startup Investment Bank in 2000. "There is not a day in Mumbai which passes without encountering poverty. After staying for a couple of weeks what struck me even more than poverty was how people were immune to poverty. So I asked myself, 'should I also learn to get immune, or try to do something about it?' I decided that I should to do something about it. During weekends, I volunteered with various NGOs that worked for children (Doorstep School, Pratham, Magic Bus, Voices for Children) in order to understand what the issues were, the kind of work they were doing, what has been the impact, and how to work with the Government. I wanted to understand the various facets involved in creating social change. I did not want to start an initiative without acquiring this knowledge, because that would just be like shooting in the dark."

"So, that particular year in Mumbai, where I volunteered with various NGOs was very crucial for me to decide what I wanted to do with my life. In January 2002, I moved full time into Dream A Dream picking up on these learning's."

"The journey thus began. We rented a small office and hired our first employees. We reached out to around 200 children who hailed from a poor background, and conducted weekend workshops, art workshops, educational programs, and medical support programs. We networked with various NGOs, supported them in raising funds, and spent time with their children. What we understood through these initiatives is that most shelters take care of the basic needs of children until the age of 17 or 18 years. They did not keep track of what happened to these children after they left the institution. It is suspected that most of them went back to the street, despite undergoing formal education. We realized that something critical

was missing which prevented their integration into the society to become Productive, contributing members in society."

"The missing element in the lives of these children was 'life skills'. An average person typically has family support, access to higher education, and access to learning opportunities which enables him to cope in the society. While we could not influence change in the first two aspects, we realized that we would be able to help in the third factor by imparting critical life skills to the children. We wanted to form a life-skills development program for children from vulnerable backgrounds. We realized that children would not learn in a conventional teacher-student model and that they can learn best if the module was engaging, fun to learn, and experiential in nature. We developed an after school life-skills program which would involve sports, games, computer education, creative arts, and adventure based programs acting as hooks for engagement."

"Life skills are very contextual. It is true that all of us possess certain life skills while we lack a few. However, whenever you or I face a crisis, say a medical emergency, we have a huge support system to bank upon and we know whom to approach; whereas a person from the street tends to panic and break down. They go through a lot of trauma and pain due to the lack of these life skills. One thing that everyone should understand is that there are appropriate ages where certain life skills have to be built in a human being, failing which there is a development collapse, i.e. the person finds it extremely difficult to acquire that particular skill later on and cannot adjust easily in the society. For example, children and toddlers can easily learn and master speaking, reading, and writing even ten languages with ease, but for a person who is in his 30's learning even a single new language is challenging. Therefore, we start our life skills programs with children who are six-years-old, an

age at which they are very receptive. If they go through our entire program they get a whole gamut of invaluable skills which prepares them for life's challenges."

As Dream A Dream completes its 12 years in service, it has received many accolades along the way. Runner-up at the India NGO Awards for 2 years, Runner-up at the Outstanding Annual Report Awards for 2 years and a Winner of the awards in 2011. Dream A Dream is recognized for its transparency, accountability and deep focus on creating a life-long impact through its work.

The dream is not complete yet :

There are 140 million children in our country who need access to life skills and Dream A Dream is currently prototyping a few models so that they could create an ecosystem of life skills Facilitators and Collaborators who will act as catalysts to take the Life Skills model to every child in the country.

When asked about his greatest moments in his journey, Vishal nostalgically replied, "When I heard that a young girl who had finished the life skills program negotiated with her parents and convinced them that she wanted to pursue her college education instead of getting married; when a 14-year-old boy said that he would not drop out of school in order to work, as he was aware that there would be better career opportunities if he completed his education—these instances have been memorable!"

"My request to the readers is to start looking at people as 'people'. Stop looking at labels and get to know people. Ask your domestic help about their children, whether they go to school. Get to know the name of the flower or vegetable vendor who delivers flowers to your house, or the person who serves tea or coffee at your office.

Get to know more about the invisible population who renders invaluable services, rather than merely being confined to your circle of family, friends, and colleagues. Your life will be greatly enriched by this," concludes Vishal.

—Avinandan Deenadayalan

*Dream A Dream is located at: No. 11/17, 3rd Cross, 1st Block,
Jayanagar, Bangalore 560 011. Phone: +91-80-6534 9980.
Email: info@dreamadream.org*

BEYOND CARE

Ekam Foundation, the brainchild of Dr Sai Lakshmi, works towards the health care of underprivileged children in the state of Tamil Nadu. Ekam was formally inaugurated on 1st July, 2007 as a Community Pediatric Project of Confederation of Indian Organisations for service and Advocacy (CIOSA) , and was spun off as an independent organization in August 2009.

Excerpts from an interview with Dr. Sai Lakshmi, Founder, Ekam Foundation.

Introduction

I am a pediatrician and graduated from a Government hospital. In private hospitals you would find one doctor managing one or two sick children, whereas in a Government hospital, when we were on duty, we used to manage 100 babies at a time.

Basically, four things are important—drugs, equipment, lab support, and manpower. There was a huge discrepancy in demand and supply at Government hospitals and children used to die due to lack of proper medical facilities. All the time I used to feel that there



should be a system that could fill in the gap, and wondered why money should play a role in healthcare.

Conception

Every child has a right to live. I wanted a system to complement this and hence launched Ekam Foundation with a vision—Right to Health for Every Child. I believe that no child should be refused healthcare for financial reasons. No father should feel guilty that he cannot treat his child neither should a doctor refuse to treat a child for this reason.

The First Step

In 2006, when I was working at Mehta Nursing Home in Chennai as a Neonatologist, I started the Mehta Community Pediatric health project. We networked with around 50 to 60 pediatricians (senior, junior, and colleagues) in Chennai. We matched them to orphanages which were near to their homes and requested them to take ownership and provide help to the children in their vicinity. Initially, everyone was enthusiastic; but repeated visits became difficult for the doctors due to their busy schedule. The pediatricians therefore offered to treat the children in their clinic which was fair enough. So, we started a nodal clinic model where children were provided treatment free of cost. Later on, we thought that it would be better to tie up with hospitals instead of networking with pediatricians. This idea was well received and we networked with Child Trust Hospital and 51 other hospitals in Chennai and formed nodal clinics with the support of 170 pediatricians.

Simultaneously, we conducted training programmes for caretakers in orphanages as we felt that unless they were trained in neonatal and pediatric care, they would not be able to take proper care of the children. A regular curriculum for a period of 12 weeks was derived

and training for orphanage caretakers, self-help group women, and anganwadi workers were provided free of cost.

The Leap

I owe a lot to Prasanna, Consultant CIOSA, and Latha Rajan of Mafai Foundation who helped me launch Ekam in 2009. They were also instrumental in establishing networks for Ekam within the NGO sector.

We worked with corporation schools and ICDS centers and learnt that most of the children from orphanages studied here. We started a school health programme and made it into a public-private partnership model so that we could network with the government health programs. While screening the anganwadi children, we noted that the government doctors who were supposed to go to schools and do the screening were not doing so because they did not have a vehicle or diesel made available. They had written this excuse in their books at least 20 times in a month. We requested Praveen Travels to donate two vehicles, and offered them to the government doctors.

We provided Anemia profile access treatment to children whereby each child was given iron tablets once a week for three weeks by the doctors. In two years of time we reached out to nearly 80,000 children to whom 5 lakh iron tablets were provided. The school teachers have given us a positive feedback stating that the students do not complain of body pain anymore; their mental alertness is good; and the absenteeism rate has reduced.

During the third year, we started working with the Government hospitals. We tied up with the drug suppliers who could provide medicines on credit and at a subsidized cost. We also networked with labs that offered us a 40 per cent subsidy and with a vendor who rented lifesaving equipment like ventilator, etc. Focus Infotech, a corporate house, supported the salary of four staff at children

cancer ward and today, the ward at a Government hospital provides care equal to a private hospital.

Expansion

We slowly extended our service to Chengelpet and Madurai and now operate through 41 nodal centers spread across Tamil Nadu. The government has assigned us with the responsibility to recruit nurses in the new born care unit across Tamil Nadu as there was an increase in infant mortality. It was a great opportunity for us as the government was paying the nurses' salary through our organisation and our role was to recruit and monitor them. I observed that the mortality rate has reduced to 50 per cent in the 21 units that I visited personally.

We then started the Bala Arokya Suraksha Project where we tied up with a NGO—Networking and Development Centre for Service Organisation (NDSO) – that has a network of 600 NGOs across Tamil Nadu. We formed district committees across the state comprising of an advocacy team and a service provider team.

Today, we have 21 district committees that are managed by volunteers. The local people are given a role in these committees in order to bring about community ownership. Few committees network with the drug suppliers directly and purchase the drugs required for their unit. The coordinators visit the hospital once a week, record the needs, prepares a monthly report, and then submits it to the District Health Society which is a government body convened by the District Collector. Our ultimate vision is to bring about a community run model and make them independent of Ekam after three years.

Future plans

We plan to approach the local companies to adopt the units in their district. At the moment Ekam has an outstanding due of 50 lakh

rupees to the drug suppliers. A beautiful bond has been created with our drug suppliers that they wait for us to repay the amount.

We believe in abundance. This whole project is working only out of pure love and abundance, but it is not sustainable at the moment. We appeal to the corporates to adopt at least one unit that costs Rs. 50,000 a month. This could save the lives of many children!

—As told to Marie Banu

*Ekam Foundation is located at New No. 16; No. 19,
Jayalakshmiipuram 1st Street , Nungambakkam , Chennai-
600034. Phone: 044 43582125. Email: mail2ekam@gmail.com.
Website: www.ekamoneness.org*

HUMANITY LOST AND FOUND

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So far, we have been able to intervene with at least 1000 people and reintegrated almost 300 homeless people with their families. We have been able to trace the homes of our clients across the country who had lost contact with their families, been missing for weeks or months or years, and were found wandering on streets due to mental illness or family discord. We interact and understand our client. Our team members make home visits, inform families of the law and sensitize them towards the client's condition and ensure family support by regularly following up with them," says Tarique.

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

A large number of clients who couldn't be taken back to their families are now living independently, are well settled in their jobs, and rebuilding their social life. On the whole, I attribute our successes to dedication, teamwork, and perseverance. But for my dedicated team, this project would be very difficult to run," adds Tarique.

Koshish has faced a lot of problems as their field setting itself is a challenge. The very experience of clients being in custody is traumatic for both the client and as well as the worker. "Staff dynamics in these types of institutions is another challenge that one faces regularly. To mobilize support for the client group, with so many wrong notions attached with them, hasn't been easy either. Building relations is the key to our work. Since we work so closely with the system, often our client group sees us as a part of beggar's home staff. We are seen as the very people who arrested them and all their anger and frustration for being arrested is wrongly taken out on us." quips Tarique.

Unfazed by all these challenges Tarique speaks about Koshish's future plans. He says: "We are focused on getting this punitive legislation repealed, and are confident of achieving it in the near future. However, even when this law will be repealed, the problem of destitution will still remain, and the rehabilitation process will continue to be a challenge. So, we are now channelizing our energies to build appropriate structures and systems through which vulnerable people will be protected and supported."

"We also aim to become a platform where youth could come and experiment with their ideas, thoughts and vision without any hindrances, restrictions, or fears. We feel today's youth is promising and willing to take up challenges. They need direction and motivation. We have been putting in our efforts to make the youth realize why it is important for them to get involved in the

issues of justice delivery and protection of rights of vulnerable groups, and why they must speak up for the weak. We want them to overcome the fears of consequences and fear of failure while doing so," says Tarique.

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

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

—Archanaa R

*Koshish is located at: Beggar's Home, Receiving cum Classification Centre, Sewa Kutir Department of Social Welfare, Near Kingsway Camp New Delhi -110 007.
Email: tarique.tiss@gmail.com.*

ITOO CAN!

"The thought of launching this organisation started with me having a son who is dyslexic," says Meenakshi Balasubramanian, Founder, Mutually Beneficial Activity (MBA) Foundation.

MBA Foundation is a charitable trust at Powai in Mumbai that works for the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities.

Meenakshi moved to Delhi with her family when her son Akhil was four years old. "We noticed that he had specific problems. He was not able to do simple things which other children of his age could do. I used to ask him why he can't write the alphabet 'c' which is very simple. I kept comparing him with my other son who is five years elder to him. Some of Akhil's milestones were delayed. He was not able to jump and lacked finer coordination. I never knew that he had a disability until he went to school. It was when his teacher complained about his inability to read and write like other children, did we realize that he was dyslexic," says Meenakshi.

"My husband who visited London on an official trip heard about the British Dyslexia Association. His colleague helped him get



some learning material, and I sought the help of a special educator to teach me to educate my son. Dyslexia was not much known 20 years ago and so I went from place to place trying to find out ways to help my son. Due to difficulty in reading, Akhil was given books of lower classes, although he was capable of understanding more. He felt frustrated and cursed himself saying, 'why can't I read like others, why can't I do things like others?' "Akhil had formal education until class 6 with a special examination paper which had only objective questions. He used to ask me, 'Why should I tick the answers, when my friends are all writing?' I could not answer!"

"When I visited Mumbai, I saw the new vocational training centre of the Spastics Society at Chembur, and totally fell in love with it. I said to myself—If not academics, let him at least be trained in vocational activities. I moved to Mumbai along with Akhil, who was 15 years old then, while my husband continued to live in Delhi with his parents and my elder son was in Coimbatore studying engineering." adds Meenakshi.

Dr. Mithu Alur, founder of Spastics Society observed Akhil for some time. She told Meenakshi that Akhil was not yet ready for vocational training, and that he needed more of education and school discipline. Akhil was enrolled in their school in Bandra where each class had only 6 to 8 children. It was here Akhil had a new lease of life.

"When he saw the other children who were more disabled, he started to say 'I can!' He helped his spastic friends to eat, helped his teacher to hang the map, and was very active in his class. When I visited his class, I was disturbed as I wasn't sure if Akhil who was an able bodied person would fit in here. I was concerned if the environment would affect him more. But instead, it had a very positive change in him," says Meenakshi with a smile.

Meenakshi pursued a course at NIIT while in Chennai and worked at Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) as a computer trainer in Delhi for a short while. When she moved to Mumbai, CII offered her a similar posting here. But, she opted to work at the computer lab in Spastics society. "Dr. Alur said to me that CII will get a hundred Meenakshis', but these children need me more. As a mother, I can understand these children. Therefore, I chose to work in Spastics Society," she adds.

Meenakshi trained Youngsters with different kinds of disabilities including hearing and speech impairment, taught them computer education, and coordinated placement through CII. In the year 2000, National Centre for Promotion of Employment of Disabled People awarded her with the Helen Keller award for her dedicated service in getting jobs for disabled persons in corporate houses. Recollecting the award, she says: "I would send the trained youngsters on internship to corporate houses like Essar, Mahindra and Mahindra, and many other companies with whom I have contacts. At first, they would be apprehensive to go, but after a week's time they return happy as they would have experienced better working conditions in these companies."

Meenakshi observed that most of the youngsters who were trained in tailoring, printing, and other areas of work were back in their homes doing nothing productive. She wanted to do something for them. She discussed her concerns with Dr Alur, and this set the beginning for a sheltered work shop for them. A number of items were produced in the workshop by the children with help from their teachers, and a stipend amount was offered to them. At the end of three years, on completion of training, there were seven girls who needed a regular working place.

In the meanwhile, Akhil was progressing well in his studies and had completed his 8th standard. As the Maharashtra board had Marathi

as a compulsory language to clear the SSC examination, Akhil found it difficult to learn a third language (he was already learning English and Hindi). Meenakshi introduced *National Institute of Open Schooling* (NIOS) which provides learner-centric quality school education in Spastics Society, and Akhil was the first student to enroll.

Meenakshi's family have been very supportive of her efforts to educate Akhil. Her husband Balasubramanian once said to her, "when Spastics Society provided an answer for our son to progress, why don't you think of doing something for these youngsters?"

Meenakshi coordinated a survey in Mumbai and learnt that there were three or four institutions in and around Chembur that offered vocational training the disabled adults, but after a period of time they did not have a regular occupation. This was the similar situation for her seven students who had completed the vocational training. It was then she decided to launch a long-term programme for them. With the support of the parents of her seven students, she launched the MBA Foundation, which was inaugurated by Dr. Mithu Alur, Chairperson of Spastics Society.

One of the parents offered her flat to set up the workshop and all the parents contributed towards the renovation costs. "We worked on the budget and decided to charge a nominal amount as fees to meet the running expenses. We wanted it to be like an office for the youngsters. They would come and make things that they have been trained in, or are capable of, and we would assist them to market their products. We also decided to pay the children a stipend for their service," says Meenakshi.

MBA Foundation was registered in December 2001, and is also registered under Society's Act, Persons with Disabilities Act, and National Trust Act. "We made a decision not to specify our organisation to work with a specific segment of the disabled; hence

we named it Mutually Beneficial Activities (MBA) Foundation with the mission— a life with self-esteem and dignity for the disabled. When we have such a diverse group, we find that each one is able to contribute, and together the team is able to produce more effectively." adds Meenakshi.

MBA has around 150 beneficiaries, networks with social organizations like Rotary club at Thane, and operates its programmes through four of its centres located at Powai, Chembur, Thane, and Gorai in Mumbai.

"The parents of the disabled persons did not know what their children would do after their lifetime. NGOs did not have an answer either. This made us think of a Life Care for such disabled persons who cannot be mainstreamed through employment, or who cannot live independently and lead a life with dignity and self-esteem. Early childhood intervention and life care is offered through the centres at Powai and Gorai; and vocational training and day care is provided through all our four centres. The centres at Powai and Gorai provide residential care along with other rehabilitation activities," says Meenakshi.

Adult education, training in communication and documentation, lamination, photocopying, telephone operation, and data entry are offered to the disabled youngsters in addition to making of products. CEDAT—Centre for Executive Development Training Programme, offers a 6 months course for the educated but unemployed persons with disabilities to prepare them for mainstream jobs. They are trained in English, computer operations, personality development, and executive caliber. Since 2007, CEDAT has offered training in association with NASSCOM Foundation for five batches that comprises of 15 to 20 trainees in each batch. Most of them have been placed in organizations like TCS, HDFC, ADFC, and Aurionpro.

"Unlike in the past, corporate houses are sensitive and support charities. One should not go to a corporate and demand them for a job just because he is disabled. Instead, we should train the disabled suitably and find a job that matches their skill set," says Meenakshi.

Recently, MBA Foundation has launched a section 25 company called 'Dignity Foundation for GODS (Groups of Disabled)' through which they market their own products as well as products made by similar NGOs and disabled persons who work from their homes. GODS make a variety of products like candles, snacks, gift items, chocolates, squashes, pickles, and household products like hand wash, phenyl, and incense sticks. Akhil has been trained to coordinate and market these products along with a few others.

"Being a parent I learnt a lot after dealing with my son. I had to be the occupational therapist, physiotherapist, counselor, and a special educator to be able to help my son. I never went to a special institution to learn, but underwent short term courses as a parent. I wish the parents' group was stronger. We need to make them learn to behave with their own children," concludes Meenakshi.

—Marie Banu

*MBA Foundation is located at: GODS'HEAVENS,
Crystal Palace Complex, Rambaug, Powai, Mumbai 400 076.
Phone: 2857 6972. Email: lifecare.disabled@gmail.com
Website: www.lifecare-disabled.org*

MAILING MARVELS

A room full of working people clad in orange T-shirts is what you find on entering the Mirakle Couriers office in Mumbai. Letters are sorted; put into bags; young boys and girls are smiling and moving around with great enthusiasm within the office. But, what is most weird and wonderful in the scene is the silence in which all this work is being carried out. Bewildering at first, it takes a while for a person to know that these youngsters are all hearing impaired. The happy silence that prevails in the office is a treat to one's eyes and ears.

Mirakle Couriers, the brainchild of Dhruv Lakra, is a business proposition with a difference. "We are not a charity, but a social business where the social element is embedded in the commercial operations," says Dhruv. An accident amongst his family member exposed Dhruv to various problems that the disabled face including unemployment. On analyzing the intensity of the problem, he found the statistics hard to digest. There are around 22 million disabled people in India out of which only around 30 % are employed. Further research done by Dhruv revealed that hearing impaired



was the most ignored of all disabilities and the most under-funded as well.

These numbers stirred the entrepreneurial spirit in him. He enrolled in the Post Graduate Programme in Social Enterprise Management offered by CSIM at the SIES college of Management at Nerul in Mumbai. Having been exposed to the concept of social entrepreneurship, Dhruv Lakra left his job as an investment banker in Mumbai and decided to specialize more in this field and understand what was happening around the world. Gaytri Vivek, coordinator of CSIM Mumbai, inspired him to enroll for an MBA in social entrepreneurship at Oxford as a Scholl scholar. On his return, he launched Mirakle couriers, a pioneering initiative that employs only the hearing impaired for both administrative work as well as to deliver the mails. His current workforce consists of 20 women who manage the office administration and 44 men who work as courier boys.

"I entered the courier business as it is manpower and volume driven. Futhermore, it can provide employment to the maximum number of deaf," he explains. He was prepared to take all the risks and wanted to make a difference in the courier service delivery mechanism. With 300 pounds that he had saved from his Oxford scholarship and with a lot of hope and enthusiasm, Dhruv Lakra started Mirakle couriers.

He further wanted to introduce the concept of supplier diversity amongst the Corporate Sector in India. In the West, large corporations provide opportunities to small vendors working with the marginalized sections of society like the disabled, minority, or women owned ventures. They would earmark a certain percentage of their purchases—either goods or services—to such social enterprises. For Instance, AT & T, a leader in telecommunication

services procures 15% of their products from Minority Business Enterprises, 5% from Women Business Enterprises, and 1.5% from Disabled Veteran Business Enterprises.

Dhruv now had a twofold mission to accomplish at Mirakle Couriers—providing employment for the deaf and sensitizing corporate sector to supplier diversity. He was overwhelmed with the support he received from the corporates whom he contacted initially. The first support he got was from Thermax India, which allowed Mirakle couriers to function out of their office space in Colaba for a while. Today, the Aditya Birla Group has provided Mirakle 250 square feet of office space at Churchgate free of cost. His client list includes Vodafone, the Aditya Birla Group, Victory Art Foundation, JSW Group, Indian Hotels Company, Godrej & Boyce, to name a few. They now have another branch office in Andheri. "Our corporate clients have shown trust in our business and cause by availing our services. The growing corporate list shows that our team members are doing their jobs well," says Dhruv.

Everything from pick-up to delivery is carefully planned at Mirakle through sign language. Their field agents receive instructions via sms of a client's address and a time for when documents need to be picked up. Upon arriving at the client's office the shipments are counted and a count confirmation sms is sent back to the branch supervisor.

Once the packages arrive at the branch they are sorted, processed, and prepared for delivery. The women staff sorts out the shipments based on pin codes. Further, sorting is carried out by each field agent who is responsible for a designated area of delivery whose narrow lanes and unmarked buildings he has mastered. Once sorted each document is given a tracking code and entered into the system. "This allows us to track and maintain transparency as to who is responsible for which shipment," says Dhruv.

Proof of Delivery (POD) or a digital delivery status report is then returned to the clients the day after delivery. For faulty or changed addresses, Mirakle employs one phone operator who will call the client or the consignee to confirm the new address who then explains the situation to the staff in sign language.

Due to the aural nature of Indian traffic, Mirkale's couriers' boys or field agents travel only via public transport. Relying on feet, bus, and rail has the added environmental benefit of keeping Mirakle on a low carbon footprint.

Communication between Mirakle field agents and branch staff during the day is done via sms. "Text messaging has been a wonderful technological advancement for the hearing impaired, allowing them the unprecedented ability to communicate over long distances. This also allows the management team members or the branch to broadcast information to all agents whether they are at home or on the field. This mode of communication has been very effective and essential to our productivity. We have maintained a zero defect record. No packet has been delivered to the wrong address so far," concludes Dhruv.

Dhruv plans to replicate this model in other metros and prove to the world that the disabled no longer need sympathy but only opportunities.

—Latha Suresh

If you wish to contact Dhruv Lakra at Mirakle Couriers, call +919820975600 or write to dhruv.lakra@miraklecouriers.com. For more information visit: www.miraklecouriers.com.

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

"I am blind since birth. When I was two months old, my mother realized that I had problems with my eye sight. When she consulted the doctor, he said that no medical treatment could restore my vision and advised her to educate me well," says Madhu Singhal.

Madhu Singhal is the Managing Trustee of Mitra Jyothi, a registered charitable trust formed in 1990 with the objective of integrating persons with disabilities into the mainstream of the society. Till date, Mitra Jyothi has provided support to around 7,000 disabled persons through its various programs.

"When I was six years old, I learnt Braille from a visually impaired teacher at my home in Rohtak, (Haryana). Forty years ago, there were no special schools for the visually impaired in my hometown, therefore, I studied from home and my brothers and sisters helped me. When I was in sixth standard, my mother went to my sister's school and requested them to allow me to sit in the classroom, where teacher assured that she would assist me in case I needed any help."



"This was when I started my regular schooling. Since then, I have been studying in schools and colleges like any other normal child. It was a good experience for me in those days. There were not much of Braille books available, and so I had to make my own notes in Braille. In the initial stage my fellow students did not realize my difficulties later on they understood and I got full cooperation," says Madhu.

"When I completed my post-graduation, there was a big turmoil in my family as my father passed away. I did not know what to do. I wanted to pursue my Ph.D., but had to re-locate to UP as my brother settled with his business here. In 1987, my sister and brother-in-law invited me for a holiday to Bangalore, where they lived. While at Bangalore, I tried to look out for job openings in the social sector, but did not find any. They felt that I was new to the place and did not know the local language," she adds.

"My brother-in-law gave the idea of launching our own Trust. He said to me: 'You do not need any financial support. Why don't you run a trust, and under this start different programmes based on the need?' I welcomed his idea, and thus Mitra Jyothi was founded in 1990," says Madhu cheerfully.

During the early days, Madhu did not know how to manage staff, maintain the books of accounts for Mitra Jyothi. "I got good people to help me. Mrs. N.S.Hema, Founder, Association of People with Disabilities showed me the way to manage staff, and do all NGO related work," she says.

Madhu conducted outreach programmes and organized surveys in urban slums. She decided to conduct specific programmes for the visually impaired and initiated the 'Talking Book Library'. She organized regular meetings with fellow NGO workers to identify

the need of the disabled in Karnataka, and also participated in advocacy campaigns related to disability.

"This gave me the opportunity to meet people who were affected with other disabilities like orthopedically handicapped and hearing impaired. I understood the problems they faced, and realized that my problem was nothing when compared to them. They always depend on others, but for a person like me it is not so. They need much more support. I have concern for people with all types of disabilities", adds Madhu.

Mitra Jyothi coordinates 'Braille Transcription'; 'Computer Education' especially for the visually impaired; 'Job Placement'; and 'Independent Living Skills' programme for rural and urban women who are visually impaired. "We have made a lot of improvement in 'The Talking Book Library' project. With the technology advancement, we now have CDs instead of cassettes. We want to provide training on Community Radio and Radio Jockey. On 20 March 2011, Mitra Jyothi will turn 21. I never envisaged our organisation to grow so big. But, it all just happened," says Madhu.

The 21 year journey was not easy for Madhu. She had to face a lot of challenges, like lack of financial aid for programmes, lack of qualified staff, and lack of infrastructure etc.

"We had to vacate the rented premises every two years and so wanted to construct our own building. This was the biggest challenge I have ever faced. I believe if there is a problem, there would be a solution. I get my strength when my mind thinks about doing something for the disabled in order to make their life more useful," she says.

Madhu has visited several countries and is a member of the World Blind Union. She also serves as a consultant to several

developmental organizations. She received many awards and recognitions personally and for Mitra Jyothi. She received the National Award in 2008 for her achievement in working for the cause of people with disabilities. She is also the recipient of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani National Award 2011, she also received IBN -7 Bajaj Allianz Award.

"I feel good when I receive awards. But I feel even happier when people recognize our work, as this gives me the strength to work further. Today, Mitra Jyoti has a good philosophy, good infrastructure, and a lot of goodwill. I am confident that we will be able to reach out to more people in the future," concludes Madhu.

—Marie Banu

Mitra Jyoti is located at: Shri Kusum Kumar Khaitan School and Rehabilitation Centre for Visually Impaired, C.A. Site No. P 22, 31 st Main, 18 th Cross, HSR Layout, Sector I, Bangalore 560102. Phone: 080-22587623/24. Email: madhu.singhal59@gmail.com. web: www.mitrajyothi.org.

WHERE THERE IS A LITTLE CARE...

The Multiple Sclerosis Society of India (MSSI) was founded in 1985 by the then CEO of Voltas India, Mr. A.H. Tobaccowalla, and one of the pioneering Multiple Sclerosis (MS) activists, Ms. Rehmata S. Fazalbhoy. This degenerating condition was then colloquially called the "Parsi's Disease" because of its relatively greater incidence among the members of the Parsi Community. Till date, epidemiologists have counted over 30 symptoms which may occur in any order and in any intensity to diagnose a person of having MS. While the condition is treatable, they are yet to find a cure.

Multiple Sclerosis is an auto-immune disease which affects the brain and the spinal cord (the central nervous system). When the myelin sheath, the protective covering around the nerve cells is damaged, nerve impulses are slowed down or stopped. The symptoms occur rather irregularly making it very difficult to diagnose the condition right away, and consequently making early interventions possible more by chance than through systematic investigations. There commonly occurs bladder incontinence and sometimes MS persons pass stools also involuntarily. Now, it is something to live with a



condition, going to bed every night knowing that a part of your body will never function as it should; but it is a whole different ballgame when you retire for the night not knowing whether another organ or limb will give way tomorrow. While the degeneration process does not necessarily involve pain as much as it does involve increasing numbness and fatigue, the blows that it can hurl upon one's self-confidence and buoyancy of spirit can probably not be imagined by those of us who have never met an MS person.

Mrs. Ann Gonsalvez of the Tamil Nadu Chapter of MSSSI says, "MS is a disease which requires expensive treatment. A weekly dose of intravenous medicine can cost anywhere ranging from Rs.9000 to Rs. 87000. Physiotherapy is a very important part of the treatment process. Our interventions include offering the therapy at a subsidized rate, and appointing nurses to regularly visit the patients at their homes to administer the medicine as well as to inform the MS persons of their progress. While the disease itself has been found to occur more among the relatively affluent sections of the society, it is these very people who appear to discontinue the treatment routines more often. Probably they are uncomfortable with being counseled every now and then. We ensure that we do not hamper their self-esteem in any way."

MSSSI conducts fund-raisers annually to collect funds for their operations in all of their nine chapters across the country and the two support groups in Indore and Puducherry respectively. Being the only organization in the country to exclusively work on MS, they have a brimming responsibility that they continue to toil on with perseverance.

"Creating awareness about MS is one of our major objectives," says Mrs. Ann Gonsalvez, adding that "We regularly organize conferences and seminars for students pursuing their post-graduate

degree in medicine or allied sciences. On the 25th of May 2011 which happens to be the World MS Day, one such seminar was organized at Apollo Hospital. In the rural areas we conduct simple awareness programs so that people may look out for symptoms of MS with greater caution. If you notice a sudden (even if slight) blurring of vision, slurred speech, tremors, numbness, extreme fatigue, problems with memory and concentration, paralysis or anything unusual with your bodily functions, you must immediately consult a neurologist. An MRI is currently the only test which helps diagnose MS."

Reassuringly she explains, "Most people with MS can lead normal lives with the help of the treatment presently available. MS is not contagious."

Looking at the larger issues that MS persons face, Mrs. Gonsalvez says that since the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995 does not classify MS individually, certification of MS persons has become a problem. Due to the irregularity in the frequency as well as the severity of symptoms, there is hardly any external evidence of having the condition, which makes it difficult for other people to acknowledge it. For instance, employers cannot empathize with their employees who happen to have MS, simply because the MS person does not look any different from a healthy person.

"At MSSSI we are actively participating in collaboration with the Disability Legislation Unit at Vidyasagar (Formerly Spastic Society of India), Chennai in the drafting of the bill of the new Persons with Disabilities Act," says Mrs. Gonsalvez. On the issue of involving academic institutions to impart knowledge about the disease among larger sections of the populations, she adds, "Sadly there is no lobby for making MS a part of the curriculum of any higher learning course. Presently only students of medicine have any knowledge

of it. Even for them it is just a line in their textbooks. Just as information on the different endemic diseases are being carried out by media so as to reach to the layman, so should the awareness about a condition as serious as this one be done."

Lately the MSSSI has found support from top TV channels like the NDTV and Kalaignar TV. However, according to Mrs. Gonsalvez the Tamil media has not been too forthcoming yet. "We take pride in recounting that our interventions have helped people lead their lives with dignity. One of our MSSSI members got a supportive employer who understands his condition and is willing to utilize his services. Another of our members got married to a Doctor, which is making a huge statement on the acceptance levels of people today." Getting a little reflective, she says "MS strikes doubly hard during a crisis situation. Stress can cause relapse which can lead to complications and an increase in the inflammation of the nerves. Therefore nurture and support are just as necessary as medication."

Having been with the MSSSI since its inception in 1985, Mrs. Ann Gonsalvez is a veteran in caring for MS persons. We salute her dedication and the organization's commitment towards bringing hope to those that need it the most.

—Archanaa R.

*MSSSI – Chennai Chapter is located at:
Bosch, Blossom Court, No.30, North Boag Road, T'Nagar,
Chennai - 600017. Phone: 044-28273891. Email: mssi@eth.net.
Website: www.mssocietyindia.org.*

FROM ANGST TO ARTS

Engaging in any form of art is a process, a journey of self-discovery. "Art is the only way to run away without leaving home," said the celebrated dancer-choreographer Twyla Tharp. In the eyes of Sriram Ayer whose world was a victim of systematic destruction, art seemed the surest antidote.

On a December day in 2003, Ayer quit his high flying corporate job in a multinational company to start Nalandaway Foundation, an organization that reaches out to children from troubled backgrounds through the channel of art. Starting with six mentors and six children, the foundation today caters to children from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and Kashmir. Theatre, music, dance, and painting—Nalandaway incorporates it all in a uniquely designed curriculum for these children. The curriculum is so structured as to impart holistic training not only in the routine subjects and art forms, but also in life-skills to help children cope with everyday anxieties and emerge as winners.

It was the infamous 2002 Gujarat riots that propelled this corporate man to shift focus to the society around him. "The Gujarat riots left



a deep angst in me. I constantly questioned myself, 'Why do people behave the way they do?' The next question was, 'What can I do about it?' This mooted a spiritual quest in me. Finding the answer to the inane question through reading, interacting and understanding more about violence led me to conclude that all people by nature are bad. They act to be good. They need policing," says Sriram Ayer.

Of the victims, he presumably found that the most affected were women and children. "If only one could find mentors to guide and assist children while growing up, and if they were given that emotional anchoring, we would have considerably less violence in this world" he muses.

With 17 full-time staff and a strong base of 600-700 volunteers, Nalandaway Foundation's work can be broadly divided into Projects, Resource Mobilization, and Support Services. Continuous research, curriculum development, training of mentors, and keen monitoring are the chief elements of this organization. "We have established partnerships with the 21 homes of Tamil Nadu government, ranging from remand homes to orphanages. Our objective is to expose the children to the world of art and enable them to be constructively occupied. Art should help them see the larger canvas of things" he says.

But, this form of intervention throws up unexpected challenges, like the one Nalandaway faced in Ongole, Andhra Pradesh. "We were working with children of sex workers, teaching them percussion instruments and theatre. The mothers' vehemently opposed the move saying that anything remotely connected with putting up a performance in front of a crowd would pull their children forcibly into the flesh trade—the very fate that they wanted their children to escape from," he reminisces.

The annual event for art appreciation named 'Art, Arattai, Aarpaattam' is organized in over 2,000 locations in Tamil Nadu. It seems to have gained instant popularity. In Chennai alone, the participation last year was close to 200,000 children from varied societal backgrounds. This year the 15-day event will be flagged-off on 17th July 2011.

Talking of planning and implementing the ideas, a bedeviled Sriram laughs, "Conducting this one mega event is a nightmare in itself!" However, the next instant he passionately says, "It simply wakes us up to the reality that there is still much to be done. We believe that there is no point in scaling up or expanding our activities just for the sake of it. Instead, we try and delve into the greater depths of the present conditions that we are working on and find newer solutions."

Mere passion cannot sustain an event of this scale that requires organizing thousands of children from some of the most remote pockets of our country to participate in artistic activities. The event also demands a high financial back up. 70 per cent of Nalandaway's funds flow in from different foundations. Individual donations and proceeds from the sale of home productions (films/documentaries) make up for the rest of their needs. "We are looking at a possibility when our children take to art as more than a mere therapy. We recently identified about 50 of our most talented children in the age-group of 15-18 years to be professionally trained in different art forms. We hope that a few of them make a career out of their art," he quips.

For someone who was raised in a musically-inclined family and with a keen interest in design, Sriram is excited at the prospects of enabling a whole generation to look to the arts with more sincerity and importance than it is presently accorded. Of course, there

are challenges every step of the way. Sriram feels that while the organization strives to hold its reins within controllable limits, it sometimes has to trade-off certain interesting opportunities, consciously. Partnerships with different organizations are difficult to make, and even more so to maintain. On the personal front too, there are a few recurring challenges. The fortitude of the sailor is determined not in the smooth seas, but when the ebbs and flows are violent. We wish this sailor a long journey in his chosen path!

—Archanaa R

*Nalandaway is located at: AH-129, 1st Floor, 4th Street,
Annanagar, Chennai 600040. Phone: 91-44-43500127.*

Email: sriram@nalandaway.org. Website: www.nalandaway.org

THE CULTURE OF FARMING

*"Agriculture is a culture in itself, which should be respected
by each individual involved in farming."*

—Nammalvar

Nammalvar, a pioneer who re-introduced the concept of organic farming in Tamil Nadu was born in a farmer's family at Elangadu near Thanjavur. He pursued his graduation in Agriculture, and as an Agricultural Scientist was involved in numerous experiments regarding seeds, soil, and farming techniques. He was bestowed with an honorary doctorate in 2007 by the Gandhigram Rural University for his expertise in the field of natural and organic farming.

Recently, he conducted a three-day training Programme on organic farming in which CSIM students participated. A visit to his farm at Vanagam, in Karur district, revealed the reason why he is a role model for thousands of farmers today.



Nammalvar was cycling his way back to his cottage transporting a bag full of coir compost. The heat did not seem to deter him from his work. He greeted us with his warm smile and led us to his farm. "This coir is used as mulch for the plants. Let's keep talking as we get ourselves trained," he quips.

The trainees and I followed him diligently. He gave some stem cuttings and told us to plant them in the nursery bags that were kept ready. At first, it seemed to be a simple exercise. But, very soon we realized that farming is not easy as it appears to be.

After planting the stem cuttings and adding mulch to the nursery bags, he took us around his farm which was spread over 55 acres, in which 6 acres was cultivated. "This land was barren and was not cultivated for over twenty years. It is only for the past ten months, I am working on converting this into a model farm," he proudly says.

It was a pleasant sight to see greenery and mountains surrounding us. Having adopted mixed cropping pattern, a variety of vegetables and trees were planted in the farm. The ladies finger seemed to be larger than usual, and likewise did the tomatoes and gourds. "All these crops are grown the organic way. You will find these vegetables to taste better than the ones you would find in the city," he adds.

"Why are the neighboring lands not cultivated?" I ask impulsively while looking at the large stretch of waste lands that hit a contrast just besides his farm. "These lands were given by the government to the villagers on a 20 year lease. But, they have not been able to cultivate due to lack of water sources. This is now being used to graze cattle," he replies.

Nammalvar uses different mulching techniques to retain the soil moisture and make optimum use of water. He follows a mixed cropping system, which results in daily harvesting, and hence the labourers are engaged on a permanent basis.

Retreating back to his cottage, he continues the dialogue. Sensing my curiosity to know more about his journey in organic farming, he shares tit bits of his youth and the challenges he faced.

"While working in an Oxfam funded project during the 80's, I was inspired by articles written by Paulo Freire on conscientization and extension. Paulo Freire has said: 'education is a two-way communication process. If you want to do development for the people, you should also participate in the process.' Vinoba Bhave, who also wrote an article in this magazine said: 'Pure theoretical education is not education at all. This set the beginning for me to launch the organic farming movement," says Nammalvar.

Distracted by few trainees who were not attentive, he says brushing his long white furry beard, "I had the opportunity to attend a five-day training programme titled 'Paulo Freire on communicative behavior'. In this, I realized that I lacked the quality of active listening, an important trait for a learner. In these five days of training, I did not have time to shave my beard. I said to myself, 'I did not lose any friends, because I did not shave my beard. So why do it anymore?'"

He continued saying, "While developing my farm at Pudukottai, my father had given me three acres of land. At that point of time, my father-in-law was about to sell his land due to non-repayment of debts. I sold my land, relieved his debts, and transferred his land in the name of my wife, so that she could be independent. She still cultivates this land, but does not follow organic farming methods.

When I asked her to give me a portion of it to prove that organic farming is more productive, she refused. What more do you need to learn? It is a challenge to convince farmers to change their farming practices."

"People need to see in order to believe. It does not suffice for them to hear alone. Hence, I formed a trust along with few of my friends called 'Nammalvar Ecological Foundation for Farm Research and Global Food Security Trust', and started creating model farms. Agriculture is location specific. Crops and farming methods should be changed based on the availability of natural resources."

"The model farm launched in 1990 at Keeranur in Pudukottai is now a training centre. We implemented organic farming practices using locally available materials. Our intention was to increase the knowledge amongst the farmers and encourage them to make optimum use of locally available materials. This concept was well received by the farmers, and we now have more than 75 model farms spread all over Tamil Nadu," he says enthusiastically.

Nammalvar explained how nature provided Nitrogen (N), Phosphorous (P) and Potassium (K) to the plants which were the three main ingredients in Chemical fertilizers. He showed samples of nodules in leguminous plants and explained how a groundnut sapling could fix nitrogen in the soil, which is more effective than the chemical fertilizers. This was the basis of Permaculture—a sustainable farming practice which enhance the soil fertility and provides all the nutrients necessary for the growth of plants. This is the method of farming that he prescribes!

Questioning the trainees, on the reason why a farmer should engage in agriculture, and not convinced with any of their responses, he

says, "I believe that the objective of farming should be happiness. Agriculture is a culture in itself, which should be respected by each individual involved in farming. It should not be viewed as a commercial or business activity. That's why we call it 'Agriculture'. Just like other cultural forms, a person involved in agriculture should be creative and in tune with nature."

Taking a break from the dialogue, we were all served lunch. The *sambhar* tasted extraordinary and so was the broad beans curry. "These are all made from vegetables grown in our farm," he says tasting the drumstick.

While speaking about his childhood, he nostalgically says, "When I was ten years old, my mother died after a prolonged illness. My father too died when I was young. My elder sister was very influential. She used to tell me not to believe in everything what others say. My brothers wanted me to study science. I wanted to be helpful to the farming community, and so I pursued my graduation in Agricultural Science at Annamalai University."

Nammalvar's family lives at Thanjavur. Both his grand-daughters are computer engineers, one of them recently married. "My life revolves around this farm. We have another farm which is spread over 10 acres nearby. My daughter, sisters and brothers are proud of my achievement in organic farming. But, my wife is still not convinced about my approach. I did not let this bother me, and I started working with people who believed in sustainable agriculture. To learn to live a life without grief is happiness. This is the life I am leading!" concludes Nammalvar.

Nammalvar plans to organize short-term courses on organic farming. He wants to create model farms along the outskirts of Chennai that would produce organic vegetables. Through his organization, he is

willing to offer technical support in managing the farm and also market the produce in Chennai.

—Marie Banu

Individuals who own over an acre of land and are interested in this sustainable movement, please contact Nammalvar at +919442531699 or write to sadhguru@gmail.com.

FROM BEAD MAKER TO CHANGE MAKER

*"While in first standard, I studied in 35 schools in a year's time."
—Shankar, Founder, Tribal Society.*

Hailing from the Vaghirivel (commonly known as Narikuravar or Indian Gypsy) community, Shankar spent his childhood as a nomad, moving along with his parents. "My mother insisted that I should study. Being a bead maker, she moved from place to place with the family. When she found a school, she would meet the teacher, gift her with a bead chain, and request her to teach me alphabets. While in first standard, I studied in 35 schools in a year's time. It is because of my mother's effort, I am educated today," says Shankar.

Shankar is the founder of 'Narikuravar Tribal Society', and manages a residential school in Cuddalore. He says: "I do not regret for having spent my childhood in several schools. If one would gift a mountain, and ask me to sacrifice my mother's affection for even an hour, I would not compromise. We give a lot of importance for mother's affection in our community."



"My parents Arukani and Manickam along with my siblings Selvam and Vijaya used to camp under a tree that was near my school. This is a common practice in our community, as we feel that education should not be a reason for parents to stay away from their children. They remain closer to their children until such time they feel secure, and realize the value of education," he adds.

At the age of 16, Shankar formed the 'All India Narikuravar Sangam' (sangam means society) in 1980, and enrolled his relatives as board members. After completing his higher secondary school education, he visited the society during the summer vacation. He noticed irregularities and mismanagement in the society, and observed that only few members were reaping benefits from the government. He re-nominated members, and became an active member of the association.

Shankar is the first graduate in his community. "I enrolled in Loyola College in 1987, and pursued my graduation in sociology. Fr. Leo Kurian was kind enough to offer me a seat. As I did not score high marks in my 12th examination, he struggled hard to convince his committee members to provide me admission. Gnananasundari, Secretary, Narikuravar Student home, Saidapet was my mentor and she supported me until I completed my graduation," he says.

After completing his Bachelor's Degree, Shankar pursued his Master's Degree at Annamalai University, and then did his LLB at Balaji Law School at Pondicherry. "My parents camped near my college as well. I used to visit them during the interval and joined them for lunch every day. Most of my friends understood and respected my family culture, but few used to mock at me," says Shankar.

After completing his post-graduation, Shankar got associated with social activists—Geetha Ramakrishan, advisor to the All India

Construction Workers Association in Chennai, Nalini Nair of Kerala, and Medha Patkar of West Bengal. He learnt from them how to campaign for one's rights. In 2003, he organized a *padayatra* along with Geetha Ramakrishnan from Kanyakumari to Chennai for the unorganized workers federation. While he campaigned for the rights of the Narikuravar community, Geetha Ramakrishnan campaigned for the rights of the construction workers. "In the 53 days of *padayatra*, I learnt a lot from Geetha Ramakrishnan. Immediately on return, I registered a trade union 'Tamil Nadu Pazhangudi Vaghirivel Thozhilalar Sangam' (TAPVATS), as this would create more awareness amongst the members and further prevent corruption," he adds.

Through the trade union, Shankar campaigned for a uniform policy at the national level to recognize the Narikuravar community as Scheduled tribes in all the States of India.

Through trade union membership, Shankar offered the tribal people a common identity, and an assured place in government classification and censuses. This provided the communities a common platform to fight for their rights, to be listed as scheduled tribes, and for social welfare benefits. Their trade union membership cards gave them an identity when they travelled to other states, and provided them with access to trade unions in those states. Till date, Shankar has enlisted over 1,000 members in four districts in Tamil Nadu.

It was during this time Ashoka Foundation recognized his efforts and awarded him a fellowship.

"MSDS extended further support to my organisation by providing educational support to five of our community children who were struggling to pursue their college education. Now, Rajasekaran is pursuing MBA, Murali is doing his Bachelors in History, and

Jayachithra and Annapoorani are undergoing teacher training course. I am thankful to Mr. P.N. Devarajan for providing education aid of Rs. 1 lakh.

In 2003, Shankar married Anuradha, a Narikuravar, who has done her post-graduation in social work. Shankar's mother supervises the kitchen at the residential school and continues to make bead-chains during her free time. His younger sister Vijaya is educated up to the tenth standard and is now managing a residential school at Perumbanur, Cuddalore. His brother Selvam is also educated up to tenth standard and assists him in his day-to-day work.

"My food habits have changed as I mingle even with people outside my community. But, when I visit my community people and during festive occasions I eat whatever is being served to me. I value my culture and respect my tradition. This is what an ideal social worker should do," says Shankar.

The Narikuravar community is spread across several districts in Tamil Nadu. Most of them live at Devarayaneri at Trichy, Thiruvannamalai, Kancheepuram, and Villupuram. They have a traditional way of clothing and they live in harmony with nature. People speak loudly, as they are used to living in open spaces. "We eat food that is available in nature—honey, tuber, birds, and animals. The strongest value that we have is the joint family system. In a joint family all family members—grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren— share only one plate to have a meal. They do not share any differences amongst them, and they tolerate each other. But, this value is slowly decreasing," says Shankar.

Shankar proudly says that his community does not have people with major diseases nor anyone is affected with HIV/Aids. Likewise, there are no cases of suicides or dowry deaths, and there is no one suffering from mental illness or stress. "All this is due to the strong

family culture and strict norms we follow in our community. Within the Narikuravar community, there are three sub clans—Mevado, Gujarat, and Selio. The community members marry within these clans. We are led by a Panchayat leader called 'Navio' who resolves domestic issues in the community," adds Shankar.

Working directly in 12 districts, Shankar's work has spread to almost 30 districts, and he hopes to cover the entire state in two years, with a network of state federations connected to a national level federation.

"I am just an ordinary citizen. The reason people feel that I am different from them is because I am striving towards obtaining equal rights and equal status for my community. I have just started my journey and have a long way to go," concludes Shankar.

Shankar was elected to the Ashoka Fellowship in 2006. He is also one of the recipients of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani Awards 2011.

—Marie Banu

If you wish to contact Shankar, please call +91978155009.

CREATING NEW HORIZONS

A group of children were playing in one of the by lanes at Bawana, a resettlement colony 20 kilometers away from main city of Delhi. Although the lanes were bordered with open drains, the stench did not seem to deter these children from play. While Nisha stood in the middle singing a song, the others went around her in a circular form. When she paused from singing, the rest formed groups of two or three based on her instructions. "This is how they learn mathematics," says Sunny, coordinator, Navjyoti India Foundation.

Navjyoti India Foundation, formerly known as Navjyoti Delhi Police Foundation, is a voluntary organisation formed under the leadership of Dr. Kiran Bedi IPS. Navjyoti has been running several interventions in the area of education, women empowerment, health care, vocational training, rural development, environment, and counseling besides others.



"There are around 70,000 families who live in Bawana and 3,000 children study in 102 Gali schools (by lane schools) and remedial education centres coordinated by Navjyoti. Most of these families have been relocated from Yamuna Pushta slums during 2004. The government having provided each family with only a barren piece of land measuring 18 square meters, the family had to construct their own tenement. As this community lacked access to basic services, Navjyoti started its work here," adds Sunny.

Gali Schools were started by Navjyoti to impart education at the child's doorstep. These supplementary centres apart from offering regular tuitions also help in identifying the hidden talents of the children through its various skill building programs.. While some families offered their tenements to conduct the Gali School in the evenings, few schools are run in open terraces as well. There are 47 full-time teachers who teach in these schools. Besides education, children are also taught music and dance.

Noor Syed, a past student of Gali School is now employed as a teacher here. She says: "I studied in Gali school for ten years and started working here after completing my tenth standard. I will be appearing for the 12 standard examinations next year and would like to continue working here."

The children are prompt in attendance as the teachers ensure that there are zero drop-out rates in their class. Play way method is used for teaching and besides education, children and also taught extra-curricular activities like music and dance.

"I am proud of my teacher. He is the best teacher I have ever had and I wish he teaches me every year. I have been studying in the Gali school for the past three years. My teacher encourages me a lot. I aspire to become a doctor and would like to say 'thanks' to all my teachers at Navjyoti," says Neetu a student.

At Bawana, Navjyoti also coordinates a health programme that is managed by two Allopathy and two Homeopathy doctors. It is learnt that the common ailment amongst the children is worm infection. Every child undergoes a health checkup once in three months and they are sensitized on health and hygiene practices. Baseline and endline tests are conducted for each child and their hemoglobin levels are assessed. Iron fortified biscuits are provided by Britannia to over 2200 children who benefit from this programme and vaccination is provided through Max India foundation for all these children.

Mobile health camps are also organized to reach out to people living at Bawana industrial area. Monthly health camps are also conducted in Sir Gangaram hospital at Delhi. Besides, Navjyoti coordinates a family counseling centre to address issues such as domestic violence and family disputes.

For over 22 years Navjyoti has been bringing children into the 'school-fold' through acceptable and need based programmes such as 'Gali Schools', 'Primary Schools', mainstreaming them into municipal schools, and identifying the talented children for scholarships. Presently, Navjyoti coordinates 102 Gali schools and remedial education centres in 13 blocks of Bawana resettlement colony benefiting 3000 children. "We now dream to move on from by lanes to buildings, to bring all scattered education programmes under one roof, called Navjyoti Gurukul and let the model become replicable for those in similar situations," says Dr. Kiran Bedi.

Navjyoti has launched a community college registered with IGNOU in June 2010 which offers certificate as well as diploma courses to the youth of the community around Bawana and Karala village. Amongst their vocational training programmes, computer training and spoken English have the highest enrollment rate. The college

is equipped with computer labs and each class room is connected with multi media. "Navjyoti Community College (NJCC) aims to encourage the learners to reinforce their dreams in their heart and soul by providing a lifetime of learning to the diverse community it serves. We teach our students to be courageous, to overcome the impediments and barriers with integrity, and to rise above the challenges. Our education methodology focuses not only to produce competent students but also compassionate and conscientious change-makers," says Chandni, Principal Secretary, NJCC.

Navjyoti also focuses in the area of women empowerment. Till date they have formed 100 Self-help groups that consist of 1200 women belonging to 40 villages in Sohna block. Recently, they registered themselves as a federation under the Societies Act and have an elected President, Treasurer, and Secretary. "Women who were once illiterate are now empowered. The government schools are now approaching the federation to advocate with the government for providing infrastructure like tube wells and roads," says Ujala, Head –Operations, Rural Development Programme.

All women self-help group members have a savings account with the Grameen bank and their defaulter rate is zero. Hailing from the farming community they have utilized the loans to purchase buffaloes or to set up some enterprises like cosmetic shops, and grocery shops. Some earn around Rs. 10,000 rupees a month as they have started to supplying goods in wholesale.

"We are fortunate to have had the adulation and support of people all along. What keeps Navjyoti going is the genuine intention to make a meaningful change in the lives of those we serve and the zeal and enthusiasm to learn new things and implement them. The

enduring support and belief of a lot of people, donors and friends has kept us going. It's taken us a long time to reach where we are today, but I feel that this is just the beginning, 'concludes Dr. Kiran Bedi.

—Marie Banu

*Navjyoti India Foundation Is located at:
Khasra No. 99, Majri Karala, Main Kanjhawala Road,
Near Rohini Sector- 22, Delhi- 110081.
Phone: 011-25953095. E-mail: admin@navjyoti.org.in.
Website: www.navjyoti.org.in*

A FAMILY OF CHILDREN AND GRAND PARENTS

New Life Charitable Trust began its home for the aged and helpless children, in a thatched hut with just two inmates. As is the case with every social entrepreneur, there is a critical incident behind this beginning.

Lalitha, Founder Trustee, and Swamy, President, used to visit government hospitals in the Tambaram locality to help those patients who had none to turn to. From occasional visits on birthdays and others, they turned out to be weekend visits, where they spent more time with these patients, primarily senior citizens. Slowly, the patients began to look forward to their visits. 'The patients were eager to see us, because we spend time with them,' says Lalitha.

In 1991, two patients were discharged from Tambaram Sanatorium Hospital, one of whom was blind and the other was totally lame. They had nowhere to go and so Lalitha and Swamy decided to put them in a home. It was a time when homes did not have corpus funds or nursing facilities. Therefore, it was up to them to decide



on the further course of action and so they built a small thatched hut in Eraiyoor, Swamy's native, to house them.

While all their attention were on these two members, came Manoharan, with 10 kilograms of hydrosyl! On approaching the Multi Speciality Lifeline, Dr J S Rajkumar came forward to operate Manoharan free of charge. By 1996, there were 16 members in the home, and in 1997 Lalitha and Swamy registered it as 'New Life Charitable Trust'.

As time passed by they felt the need to support children who were orphans, or lived with young widows, or were HIV positive, or mentally retarded, and also children of commercial sex workers. With the belief that basic education must not be hampered due to lack of resources they offered financial assistance to the needy children.

By 1995, there were 20 children in the New Life family. One of them is Jayalakshmi from Bangalore. Her mother had committed suicide on learning that her father had married another woman. Since then, she lived with her aunt and uncle in Bangalore who abused and harassed her. "It was my neighbor who rescued and brought me to New Life," says Jayalakshmi.

Life at 'New Life' would remind us of any usual family scene. It does not feel like a home which usually has a schedule tabled and pasted on the walls and corridors. "Members of New Life can eat when they want and the children can study when they wish. The elders too can take a walk within the campus when they want. Each child is taken care by a grandpa or a grandma. The grandparents who are diabetic give their sweets to the children who assist them in their daily routine. Such is the bond created here. Only then will they feel at home. All that they need is love and some time with

their dear ones. The way they converse with their family members who visit them conversations shows how happy and loved they feel here,' says Ms. Lalitha.

Counseling the children of senior citizens and mothers of the children was taking concrete shape as they increasingly realized that no child or a senior citizen can be happy living in a home—each one of them longs for a family. Therefore, homes such as these must show a plummeting trend. But, on the contrary, they are growing multifold. The trust gradually supported families to take care of their senior family members and the mothers were counseled to live with their in-laws, with the promise of support for their child's education. They have been able to successfully play the role of a 'bridge' between the needy children and the willing sponsors.

Education is not forced on the children here. Although they are advised to finish schooling till class X, children who are interested to pursue different vocations are allowed to decide. Those who declined to continue studies and showed interest in cattle rearing were also supported. Jaya, studying in class XII, a class topper says, 'I want to become a bank manager'.

Today, New Life Charitable Trust has 60 senior citizens and 64 children. To look at their accolades, the trust was awarded the 'Sadguru Gnanananda Award for 2006' for providing medical assistance to a village which has a population of 1200. Recently, it was awarded the 'Imayam Award' by Makkal Santhippu, a monthly magazine recognized by the United Nations Organisation.

With more such recognition coming in, one would be intrigued to know about the future plans, which I did ask. "We have no future plans", was the instant reply from Lalitha. The trust is sustained by public donations and contribution from friends. She affirmatively

said that every donor has come back to help them in some form or the other regularly. Only three fundraising programmes in the last 20 years has been organized and this stands as testimony to the aforesaid.

The trustees have been working on proposing New Life Charitable Trust as a CSR programme of KAAR Technologies, with new members on the board. For now, all their interest is to see active youngsters playing key roles in the board. Let's wish them all success!

—Shanmuga Priya

*The New Life Charitable Trust is located at:
No. 31/50, "Sai Park", Perialwar Street, Sundaram Colony,
East Tambaram, Chennai – 600 059.
Phone : 044-22399551. Email: office@newlifecharitabletrust.org.
Website: www.newlifecharitabletrust.org*

BREAKING THE SILENCE OVER DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

"I felt I was wrong in hitting my wife. At the end of the day, I gave a call to the crisis line number." This is one of the testimonies on the website: www.pcvconline.org .

Remarkable as it seems, it is still just one of those rare instances when the perpetrator of violence himself has taken the onus to put an end to it. There are several others who have not been so lucky. "Each of us can play a role in stopping violence—starting from our homes, to touching the lives of others. Do not blame the victims or ask them to put up with it. One might as well reach out for help; it is as easy as that," says Dr. Prasanna Poornachandra, Founder Trustee and CEO of the International Foundation for Crime Prevention and Victim Care (PCVC), Chennai.

PCVC started in 2001, by three like-minded individuals who had a strong background and considerable experience working in the field of Criminology and Victim Assistance. Prasanna Poornachandra, Hema Ramachandran, and Usha made a beginning with a helpline



and counseling center that was dedicated to the cause of rebuilding the lives of victims of domestic violence (DV) and of abusive relationships.

Domestic violence is one of the most under reported crimes even today. "When we were about to begin, our main objective was to set up a victim assistance centre, which would provide help related to any kind of violence or crime. After a year of running the organization and studying the responses of the people who approached us, we realized that more than 90% of them were middle class women, suffering from DV. We also realized that the cruelty meted out in the middle and upper classes tend to be more manipulative in nature, more discreet, and therefore very complicated," says Prasanna. "Although there are many organizations that provide assistance for women in distress, there are only few that deal with DV. A woman who has suffered any form of violence would consider going to the police station only as a last resort; after all other support mechanisms have failed her. In that case, there was an urgent need to set up a facility which would be of use to these victims in their hour of need," she says.

Ten years since inception, PCVC's services have expanded to include: a safe home—a temporary shelter for women and children who have decided to leave their homes, employment assistance, a funding programme that helps children from abusive or broken families to continue their education, a relief programme in collaboration with Kilpauk Medical College that helps burn victims with essential amenities during their stay at the hospital, an awareness programmes on sexual harassment and DV, partnerships with corporate houses to prevent harassment at workplace, referrals for medical aid, therapy and legal aid, community workshops, and educational programmes that are aimed at preventing gender based violence, to name a few.

Working with Women Police Stations', several sensitization workshops and training programmes were conducted by PCVC for the police-women, as also monthly meetings with Inspectors and Sub-Inspectors. PCVC is also the state coordinator of the 'We Can' campaign supported by Oxfam. Through this campaign they have reached out to 15 districts in Tamil Nadu, networked with around 300 organizations, and mobilized over 100,000 change makers within the state alone.

"Our target is fourfold. (a) Stopping the violence; (b) Establishing safety; (c) Empowerment, and (d) Healing. We work based upon the victim-empowerment model, wherein the victim makes the decision at every step. The problems that our clients faces are not as simple as, say, chain snatching. It is about relationships which are quite complex. The counselor merely shares information on those areas which the victim may not be aware of. Also, our counselors work only based on the time-table of our clients, and not the other way around," says Prasanna, adding that "we do not place too many security measures unnecessarily. Yes, rescuing a victim of DV sometimes involves risk, but we believe that a sense of safety and protection should come from within. If we overprotect our clients, then they might become dependent."

PCVC works not only with the individual, but with their consent, with their families as well, especially their children. "Restructuring the lives of these families is the most difficult task, but it is the one task to which we also dedicate our time and energy. When a woman is undergoing a strained relationship with her husband, usually, she is wont to leave her house in disarray, her children untended, and her routine gone haywire. In the time she and her children spend at our center, we try and bring back a state of normalcy and regularity to their day to day routine. Care and assistance to the children is a

huge factor that draws women out of their closed environment and to approach us."

Besides the round the clock helpline and counseling services, PCVC website is also skillfully designed so as to provide adequate information on issues such as sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. Guidance on how and when to seek support, safety mechanisms, facts about the implications of DV on the lives of the sufferers and their children, a call to those who wish to help, and also motivational pages on reviving the spirit of survival among potential victims are available here.

As the organization ushers in its tenth year, there are a number of tasks lined up. "We would like to replicate our service model at a few other places. A public hotline is another addition that will be brought to effect from 2011. We are planning to extend our work in the hospitals by placing permanent referral booths. We will be working towards introducing modules on healthy relationships and prevention of DV that can be taught in all the schools," beams Prasanna.

Violence is attitudinal. The perpetration of violence is caused by two things: the apathy of the offender, and in equal measure the submissiveness and silence observed by the victim. As much as it is important to uphold traditional beliefs of keeping the family together, it is also important to establish a non-violent environment for each member to live in. Organizations like PCVC help realize that independence and empowerment are powerful tools which can break the silence once and for all.

—Archanaa R.

*For more information write to
pcvc2000@yahoo.com or visit www.pcvconline.org*

HOME OF HOPE

Music, dance and theatre have come together to help positive children 'live' their lives. Mellow Circle Prathyasha – Home of Hope' is a home for the children affected by the pernicious Human Immuno Deficiency Virus (HIV). Mellow Circle Prathyasha Trust was established in 2007 and the Home became operational from 2009. It is a project undertaken by Mellow Circle—a registered society of like-minded professionals, businessmen, and senior executives who pool their talent to work for the less privileged brethren of the society. The donation of half an acre of land near Avadi in Chennai during 2007 by Mr. K.N.Oommen, a friend of Mellow Circle, in memory of his wife, marked the early steps. The Home of Hope was inaugurated on 19th May, 2009 commemorating with the World AIDS Orphaned Children's Day and International Candle Light Memorial organized in memory of all those who had died due to AIDS.

Children here are also referred by the Thiruvallur Positive Network, a unit of the Indian Network of Positive People. Beginning with four children, the Home now houses 15 children, of whom 12



are infected and 3 are affected. The 2400 square feet building hosts a dormitory with attached toilets, dining hall, kitchen, and a dispensary. The Home has also indoor and outdoor games facilities.

The Home is supported by close friends, donors and few corporate bodies. But, it is this group of businessmen, doctors, architects, teachers, and other volunteers who come together to put up annual Christmas plays and music programs to raise funds for sustaining the services of the Home. "All of us sing, dance, act, seek sponsors, and sell tickets. You can catch us live on 26th and 27th November at 6.30 P.M. at Museum Theatre in Chennai to witness our 12th production titled 'The Rented Christmas'. It is a Dramatic Musical with a cast of over 75 actors," says Mr. Mohan Daniel, Managing Trustee, Prathyasha Trust.

Prathyasha aims at providing health, education, and emotional support for the children. Their nutrition intake and timely medicines are strictly adhered to in order to maintain the CD4 count. "Monthly health checkups at Thiruvallur Hospital, periodic blood tests to monitor the CD4 count are a regular feature here," explains Mohan Daniel.

"Our children did not like the mid-day meals that were provided in the schools and so we even pack lunch for them. During admission the CD4 count was below 300 and 200, but now it has improved to the level of any normal person," says Mohan Daniel who recalls that Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) medication needs to be taken at the right time regularly, and is a non-negotiable to check the replication of the virus.

What bothers Mohan Daniel is the absence of a proper framework or a diet plan for positive children from national as well as

international bodies. "The diet we follow was prescribed by our friend Mrs. Suja Isaac, Director of Soukya, Holistic Healing Center, Bangalore", he points out.

Did we think getting positive children admitted in schools is a difficult task? Mohan Daniel declines stating that every school cannot decline the rights of education to any positive child as per government regulations.

"By providing all these facilities we are not trying to foster institutionalization. Most of them have a single parent. A child was taken back to the family by the mother, but was brought back the very next week as the mother could not take care of her. Caring for positive children calls for attention to every facet of their routine," justifies Mohan Daniel.

At Prathyasha, recreation also has its share! Playground and play equipment keep the children engaged during leisure, besides classes on basic computing. As part of Rotary Club of T-Nagar and Interact Club initiative, painting and English speaking classes were conducted for the children here.

"Teachers and students from Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan School and Balalok School spent a day with our children. We take the children to the beach, or for a movie, visit museum, and other places once a month," quips Mohan Daniel, taking pride about the children being invited to put up a national integration play during the Green Day and Krishna Jayanthi celebrations of Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan School.

Prathyasha Home also welcomes mothers of the positive children to work here. "Not many of the mothers' turn up or stay longer due to their health condition. Some parents visit their children once a while and some don't. We also have some children who do not wish

to go back to their families at all," adds Mohan Daniel heaving a sigh.

The Home is quintessential in handling the emotional needs of the children. "Being positive cannot stop one from yearning for care and affection. When a child's grandmother died in Coonoor, the child was sent along with our Project Coordinator to attend the ceremonies and brought back," he says. "We would like our visitors to come and play with our children and spend time with them, thereby making them feel that they are normal and usual as others," expresses Mohan Daniel.

This reiterates that lop sided emphasis on prevention than on support and care is a worrisome trend. Children at Prathyasha celebrate every festival—Onam; Diwali; Christmas; or Pongal—irrespective of diversities. It means for them another occasion to be happy and together. The Trust is now tasked with raising the second floor of the building to provide for separate dormitories for boys and girls, study, and recreation rooms. The simple plans and steps towards caring for these children, the energy that goes into executing the plays and music programs to sustain these plans, and the level of comfort that the children experience here—all clearly convey that Prathyasha is indeed a Home of Hope!

—Shanmuga Priya. R

Mellow Circle Prathyasha – Home of Hope for Children is located at: Prathyasha Street, Off Prathyasha Road, St. Antony Nagar, Vellanoor Village, Avadi, Chennai 600062 (Near Vel Tech Engineering College).

Phone: 044 2903 6976. Email: mohandaniels@gmail.com.

Website: www.prathyasha.in

ADDING LIFE TO EVERY MINUTE

Palliative Care is a relatively new medical specialty, especially in India. It involves providing clinical, physical, social, spiritual, and even emotional support to those who are living with the advanced stages of a disease. In these last stages, curative medicine or treatment has no effect. A patient may reach this non-curative stage either through old age, late reportage of symptoms, degeneration of organs, or poor bodily response to treatment. At this point in time when disease is beyond cure and distressing symptoms prevail, it is highly important to put in place support systems to assist in the peaceful and dignified transition of the person in question.

We take the help of Dr. Republica Sridhar, a pioneer in her own right in the field of Palliative Care, to understand the subject in layman's terms. "In India, until recently, palliative care was thought of as being necessary only for cancer-patients whereas there is a whole gamut of other conditions such as geriatrics, oncology, renal and cardiac failure which also necessitate this kind of care" she says. Dr. Republica founded RMD Pain and Palliative Care Trust



in Chennai which has been providing in-patient, out-patient, home, and hospice care services to the most deserving of candidates for the last six years.

"In my years of practice as a commercial doctor I have come across people from most poor economic backgrounds and was deeply moved by their plight when it came to seeking medical help for their loved ones. So, I decided that I would start a Trust that would take care of all the medicinal expenses and provide them treatment at a cost they could afford."

"India is lagging far behind in palliative care," says Dr. Republica as she substantiates her point by saying, "Singapore based Lien Foundation's Economist Intelligence Forum commissioned the first ever Quality of Death index among the nations of the world in 2010. In this index, India ranked 40th among the 40 nations that were considered for ranking."

"It is disheartening to say that we have to sometimes turn down some patients because of our limited admission capacity, but if we were to go by WHO statistics our country needs about 80,000 beds for the terminally ill. In our centre we currently have the capacity to cater to 80 patients, including 25 beds in our hospice. We are also into training students in Palliative Care so that more manpower is added to this branch of medical practice," says Dr. Republica with determination.

When asked to elaborate upon the psyche of a terminally ill person, Dr. Republica states, "Everybody wants a painless death," adding that, "there is no difference in the way a rich person feels from that of a relatively poor person. As for the families of the rich, it becomes highly ironic that even though they are willing to spend heaps of money, their loved ones cannot be prevented from dying. For the poor, there is mounting pressure for them to cope with the fact that they cannot afford fancy treatments which in anyway

would not guarantee a cure. The truth in both cases is that the disease is advancing and life is limited and we can do nothing about it, except maybe try and keep the patient as peaceful and comfortable as possible, which is a daunting task in itself."

When thinking about the immense trauma of the patient, the conversation naturally veers towards the ever debatable topic of Euthanasia. She goes on to cite examples wherein patients have pleaded to her to relieve them of the pain by merely cutting off their life-saving supplies. "They promise not to talk about it to anybody else. It is not only illegal in our country, but it also takes a toll of us who are in this profession to cope with the pressure of their suffering. What's more, over 90 percent of our patients have asked to be killed at some point in time or another," she says earnestly.

"While we may not be able to come to terms with Euthanasia just yet, we must recognize that it is a basic human need to die pain-free and with dignity. The future of such patients may be even more peaceful who have the right to ask not to be resuscitated, in case of an extreme emergency. At RMD, we will soon have an End of Life Care Room. This project, called Moksha was started with the realization that when a person has reached the end stage of disease, others living in the hospice feel traumatized. Also, there isn't much privacy for the patient in question and for his/her family members who want to be beside the patient at that crucial moment."

With conditions as terrible as these, this is definitely among the most difficult of professions to be in. Dr. Republica says how her team of doctors, paramedics, and assistants cope with it. "Yes, our job is an extremely demanding one. Therefore we place a very high emphasis on communication skills while hiring our staff. We have monthly meetings to discuss issues with transparency, and have mutual understanding across our board. I see to it that at least once in every two months each staff gets a holiday to visit their family.

Even when I am nursing some distress, I tell my colleagues that I won't be able to take a peer group session or anything that is stressful. We all have to accept the sad reality that although life-expectancy is increasing every passing year, the quality of life, and the quality of relationships and social support systems which our society enjoyed about 30 years ago is no longer prevalent. In fact, people are losing sight of the immense healing power of touch. We are all becoming islands unto ourselves. We will need to face dire consequences if we do not mend our social skills right now."

One cannot help, but agree with her insight. Talking about the future plans of her centre, she resumes her zeal and says, "My vision is to set up a hospital with 50 exclusive beds for Hospice care alone. We are already working towards realizing this dream. We have acquired about three grounds in Amarambedu village near Gunrathur in Sriperambudur for this project. We are also waiting to see many more hospitals across the country opening up hospices and palliative care units in their premises." As our conversation draws to a close we thank Dr. Republica Sridhar for sharing her remarkable journey with us and in the process of making palliative care a part of our everyday vocabulary from now on. We join her in envisioning an India which will boast of a high quality of dignity and pain-free life as well as death for all.

—Archanaa R.

*RMD Pain and Palliative Care Trust is located at:
13, Ragaviah Road, T. Nagar, Chennai – 600017,
Phone: 044-28157373. Website: rmdpainpalliative.com*

MIRACLE MOTHER

"God cannot be everywhere and that is why he created mothers"

- a Jewish proverb

One and a half-year-old Sania was fast asleep in her cozy mattress. Pooja stood close to her and enjoyed tucking her into the blanket now and then. She seemed like waiting for her to wake up, so that they can play. Taarika (1½) and Maanshi (4) were playing at the backyard. They were pushing their toy car while Pinky, their caretaker, was carrying Aryan (8months) and supervising the household work.

The cloth lines were filled with clothes, and Chotu was rinsing another set of them in the wash room. Loppa was preparing dough for dinner while Poonam was cutting vegetables. The home was spic and span, and everybody was busy with their own work.

Anjina welcomed us with her warm smile. "This is where my 46 children live" she says.



The children on hearing Anjina's voice came running towards her, and she spontaneously cuddled them. "Most of the children have come into our homes as infants. We only admit children who are below ten years of age. Our youngest child is Aryan who is eight months old. Children who are abandoned by their parents, and those who have lost their way home are brought to us by the Police. We try our best to trace their families and reunite them," says Anjina.

Anjina hails from a well-to-do family in Bellary. She had a passion for children since she was 10 years old. She was deeply touched by the sight of children beating drums and carrying notebooks, walking down the streets, knocking at every door, collecting donations for the orphanage they lived in. Her family moved to Sandur and later to Delhi in 1976 to get over a personal tragedy. She took up a job, and in 1983 moved to Noida.

She was deeply disturbed by the sight of children being exploited, and on reading the reports in newspapers and magazines about exploitation of children. Images of Bellary came back to mind, which was how the dream was born—a dream of providing a home for these children, where they would not only get food, shelter, clothing, and education but also feel as secure and confident as their more privileged peers.

It took a decade for Anjina to turn her dream into reality. In 1988, PRADAN, a voluntary organization, offered her a fellowship for a period of three months. She visited various homes all over India and made an in-depth study. She also spent 20 days in the Antar Bharati Balgram at Lonavla. By this time, she identified friends who were willing to help her. Thus, the Society SAIKRIPA was formed in March 1989.

She established Bal Kutir—a home for abandoned and destitute children—in 1990 at Sector 20 in Noida. "I wanted to give these

children their lost home and provide them with emotional as well as physical security. Local people also identify abandoned children and bring them to us. That is how Sania was brought here. Pooja came when she was five years old. We take care of them until they are able to take care of themselves," says Anjina.

Pooja (21) aspires to become a doctor and is presently preparing for the medical entrance examination. She says: "I have seen doctors who demand a lot of money from their patients for treatment. There are poor people in our country who need doctors to provide them treatment at low cost. This is what I want to do. I will continue to remain here as my family is here."

"I remember that I belong to Kanpur and had visited Noida along with a relative to spend my vacation. A localite found me stranded and handed me to the police who brought me here. I now have a good and a happy family. There are many children who do not get proper love and affection from their own families, but everyone gets unconditional love and affection here. I feel good when I see children brought into our home as I will be having one more family member. I love to take care of them. It feels good to do something for our younger ones," adds Pooja.

Sai Kripa also runs three schools— Sai Shiksha Sansthan, Sai Bal Sansar, and Sai Vatsalya Vatika.

Sai Shiksha Sansthan is an English medium school with classes up to 10th standard that was started in April 1991 at Vazidpur, a village 16 kilometers away from Noida. Besides children from Bal Kutir, around 300 students from four surrounding villages belonging to the economically weaker section study here. The school charges a monthly fee of Rs.150 per month, and students appear for their Higher Secondary Board Examinations through National Institute of Open Schooling.

Sai Bal Sansar is an informal education centre that was started in November 1999 for the benefit of the slum/street children of Noida. It provides free education and mid-day meal to the under privileged children. The purpose of this centre was to encourage these children to spend their time more fruitfully instead of engaging in beggary.

Sai Vatsalya Vatika which means 'Sai's Garden of Love and Affection' was started in October 2009 for children with special needs. It endeavors to identify the innate talent and potential of each child separately, and nurture them in an appropriate manner through early intervention.

"Whenever I see an abandoned child, I say to myself: God has sent this child to me. It is my duty to take care of her. My oldest child Rajath is now 30 years old. He is a special child who was brought to our home when he was 9 years old. He studied in Sai Vatsalya Vatika school, and we still take care of him," says Anjina.

Since April 2010, Sai Kripa has been offering vocational training for the underprivileged children in the neighbourhood. Computer training, Tailoring, and beautician course is offered to interested candidates and the training period varies from person to person. A nominal amount of Rs. 100 is charged from each participant. Till date, 12 students have undergone the tailoring course, 10 students have completed the beautician course, and 6 have learnt basic Computer programming. In a month's time from now, Sai Kripa will launch its own bakery unit.

Sai Kripa also houses a Goshala. "We have seven cows and so we do not have any shortage of milk. The excess milk we sell to the

poor people at a nominal cost, and we use the dung for biogas," says Anjina.

Anjina is the recipient of the CNN-IBN Real Heroes award 2010, and the Sadguru Gnanananda Award for Social Work in 2000.

—Marie Banu

Sai Kripa is located at : Z-133-134, Sector-12, Noida - 201301, Uttar Pradesh. Phone: (0120) 2536416/2531521.

Email: saikripa1989@yahoo.com.

For more information please visit saikripa.org

VOICES THAT HEAL

Suicide is the third major cause of death in India. A fact, not many of us are aware of. SNEHA, an NGO dealing in the field suicide intervention for the last 24 years is solely dedicated to this noble cause. Dr. Lakshmi Vijayakumar, the founder of SNEHA, after attending a conference in Vienna on suicide prevention felt the strong urge to start an NGO on the same lines in India. Facing resentment from friends and family, she surged on, and SNEHA was founded in 1986.

"I had just finished my course in psychiatry and post conference I had the opportunity of visiting similar centres in Europe and England. Medications for such problems were few and I felt the need of a similar facility in India," says Dr. Lakshmi Vijayakumar, who has a doctorate in Suicidology.

"Initially this concept faced resentment as people felt that the idea would not be accepted by the society, and the public would not be willing to discuss their problems. But, here we are 15 years later,



having received over 150,000 calls, and our success speaks for itself," she adds.

Confidentiality, anonymity and non-judgemental attitude of the volunteers are the three strongholds that are behind SNEHA's success. With over 50 trained volunteers belonging to varying age groups, SNEHA attends to calls, personal visits, e-mails and letters 24x7.

A strong policy followed by SNEHA is that of not giving advice! Strange as it sounds, its volunteers are trained to listen more than anything else. "A person facing a certain hardship is certain to have been dwelling on it for a long time and would have thought of possible solutions. Advising someone is the easiest option, but reality is different and most persons just need to vent out their emotions and need a listening ear," explains Shanti, a volunteer.

Having had a humble beginning, SNEHA started off in a rented premise that was funded by a well-wisher, and the phone bills were paid by a volunteer. Expenses were kept at a bare minimum and they shifted to their new premises in R.A.Puram at Chennai in 2005. Till date, all expenses are borne by volunteers and donors. The information that is shared by the callers is held in strict confidence and the identity of each caller is carefully protected within the four walls of SNEHA.

"We started off small, and I have seen a lot more changed in the attitude of people. They are more open and communicable. As stress levels have increased, so have suicide related issues. E-mails have replaced letters, and people prefer remaining anonymous and speaking over the phone. The number of personal visits has decreased," says Dr. Vijayakumar.

A member of the International Association for Suicide Prevention, SNEHA is one of the founding members of Befrienders India, the

National Association that has more than ten centres in India. The centres work within the framework of the Charter of Befrienders International, the world body, with its headquarters in the United Kingdom. However, SNEHA is the only centre that caters to the public 24x7. They receive not only national calls, but international calls as well.

"A phenomenon we have noticed is a large call flow from the US, Europe, and Arab countries especially during night. People call in and say they want to hear an Indian voice. It's very touching to speak to such individuals and many volunteers are left with tears in their eyes," says Shanti who has been associated with SNEHA since its inception.

Resting on the belief that suicide prevention is every individual's responsibility, SNEHA conducts interactive programmes in schools, colleges, corporate houses, and self-help groups. "Most students dislike the word 'suicide' and we come up with alternative seminars that gradually lead to the topic and get students talking on this issue, thus spreading awareness among the student community," she points out.

SNEHA also adopted Srinivasapuram, a hamlet along the coast of Marina in Chennai, post tsunami. Within a year and a half, the NGO had accomplished quite a feat. Narrating the incident Shanti says: "When we put up our tent at the Tsunami Rehabilitation site, we were laughed at by other NGOs who found our presence there amusing. Minutes later, there was a huge line of people queuing outside our tent as they wanted to share their grief and were looking for someone to talk to"

Another project that SNEHA is involved is related to farmers and pesticide suicides in the Kattumanna village, near Cuddalore. A WHO sponsored project, each farmer is given a locker to store

their pesticides; thus preventing them to store it at home. A strategy adopted to check if it impacts suicide rates in the region. "A technique adapted for the first time in India, it is to be implemented across other states as well. A similar technique was practiced in Sri Lanka, but farmers were given boxes to lock up pesticides after use, but the boxes were still kept in their houses," narrates Shanti.

A humble beginning and a gradual step up the success ladder, SNEHA has come a long way. Reaching out to individuals across boundaries, SNEHA has touched many human lives and helped individuals face life; overcoming their crisis in ways more than one.

—Nidhi Adlakha

*For more information write to help@snehaindia.org
or visit www.snehaindia.org*

VICTIMS, VOLUNTEERS AND VOLUNTARY-VICTIMS

Neeta (name changes) lived the typical life of an average village woman in the Kadiri mandal of Anantapur. Her poverty-stricken parents married her off at an early age. She endured two difficult pregnancies and an abusive, alcoholic husband. One day, after brutally beating her up, her husband, pushed her out of the house. Her parents offered neither solace nor shelter. As far as they were concerned, she now "belonged to her husband". Alone, frightened and with nowhere to go, she travelled to the Tirupati temple. Her prayers were answered perhaps a bit too soon. At the temple, she met a man who brought her back to her parents' house and married her. A few weeks after the wedding, she found herself abandoned by him at a brothel in Bhiwandi, near Mumbai.

Anantapur is one of the 17 districts identified as centres of human trafficking in Andhra Pradesh by the state. Extreme poverty, disempowerment of women, lack of education, heavy migration



and unemployment contribute to the steady trafficking of women. Mrs. S. Shanu, Program Coordinator – Society to Help Rural Empowerment and Education (STHREE), a commendable anti-trafficking NGO working in Anantapur says, "People in this district are extremely poor. When times are particularly bad, young girls often come forward and volunteer to work as domestic labourers or factory workers. In most cases, these girls are duped and taken to brothels in Delhi, Mumbai, and Pune. But, in some cases, the girls knowingly enter the sex-trade."

Promises of jobs or marriages in middle-eastern countries lure several young women from Kadiri. Their "agents" take them to Mumbai or Delhi for a Visa and sometimes dump them at one of the brothels in the city. There are times when they are sent to the promised country to work in the sex-trade there. Alarmed at the increasing rate of international human trafficking, the state government established a Passport Office at Kadiri, last year. "Here, every woman applying for a passport is counseled and informed about the possible consequences of going abroad," says Assistant Sub-Inspector of Police, Ramramanjaneyul. But many women are still adamant. "They make up stories about relatives living abroad," he sighs.

"It's a very lucrative business," says Ms. Hema Bedi, Director, STHREE. "Law enforcement agencies, politicians and local *goondas*—all are making money out of it. Initially, the local police was also involved to a certain extent. Now, their level of corruption has come down considerably, especially on this issue," she adds as an afterthought.

Amongst the more backward classes of Anantapur, although women too work, the finances are controlled by the men. The absence of satisfactory work or income results in high frustration levels. A lot of these men are alcoholics and fritter away their daily wages

on alcohol. So, in actuality, it is the woman who has to manage the house on her meager income. Mrs. M. Krishnaveni, Director, Uravakonda region, Rural Development Trust (RDT), an NGO working towards village rehabilitation in Anantapur says, "These men come back home at night, stone-drunk and demand non-vegetarian food for dinner. On being served a simple meal instead, they beat their wives mercilessly." Sometimes, they sell their wives; more often, unable to cope with the domestic violence, the women themselves run away. Several agents and middle-men, all over the district, lure these exceedingly unhappy women into brothels.

For the first two years in a brothel, these women are locked up; they aren't allowed to visit their families and are made to learn Hindi. The "tricks of the trade" are beaten into them. Occasionally, a peeved customer would complain about her impertinence to her *sethani* (brothel keeper). Every complaint had one result for her: Physical abuse. But, that was only in the beginning. After two-three years, a bond of trust develops between the women and the brothel-keepers, and the women are allowed a considerable amount of freedom and mobility.

This is when some of them, usually with the help of a compassionate customer, contact their families and are rescued through combined efforts of the NGO and the Police. However, several of them fall into the rhythm of the work. Compared to the miserable lives they led back home, the pathetic conditions of a brothel seem like luxuries. They begin to feel like mistresses of their own domain and find it splendid. The clothes that once looked vulgar begin to appear fashionable. "They eat fancy food, start drinking alcohol and chewing *gutka*. Once they return to their villages, they aren't able to adjust. They miss their freedom and

lifestyle. They don't want to work here. A lot of them go back to the brothels, taking other troubled women from the villages along with them," says Mrs. Shanu.

The government provides a relief of Rs. 10,000 to every rescued woman. This money is used for rehabilitation. It takes a few months for the money to come through. "Until then, the local police hands over the rescued women to shelters through the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) or Swadhar homes—shelters provided by the government," says Police Constable H. Obulesh.

Neeta was rescued last year. She's living at STHREE's rehabilitation centre for now. As soon as the relief money is processed, the NGO will shift her to a suitable accommodation. "I want to go back to my village," she firmly states. She cannot go back home, her family refuses to accept her. "I'll do some *coolie* work," she says uncertainly. But there is a dearth of employment opportunities in the district. Neeta can only hope for the best.

The treatment meted out to the women who have returned depends on the community to which they belong. The *Sugalis* are a backward, semi-nomadic tribe in the region. Large numbers of *Sugali* women are trafficked. Mrs. Shanu explains, "It's a part of their cultural tradition. The *Sugalis* are a sexually violent community. Since there is a lot of money involved in sex-trade, they have no qualms about getting into it. Once the women return, they are married off within the community. There is little or no stigma attached."

But, most other communities aren't so accommodating. Very few families accept the girls when they return. Most women are isolated but not expelled from the villages. In poorer communities where the families were involved in the trafficking process, the women are accepted but disrespected. Food becomes a major issue; they are

given meager portions and are asked to fend for themselves. The need for money draws them back in the loop of sex-trade.

"It's not about the money. Freedom governs the principle of not coming back to the villages," says Ms. Bedi. "It's the level of freedom, good times – the chicken, mutton, *daaru*, *gutka*, *tambaku* – a seemingly easy living that these girls get used to," she adds disdainfully. "The moment they are caught, they are in a system and they feel restricted." As far as the limited employment opportunities are concerned, she feels that many facilities and opportunities are available. "It's just that they don't want to work hard. It takes a level of thinking and effort to take an NIFD course, a beautician's course or to undergo factory training. They have no concentration, no discipline," she firmly states with the authority of someone who has been attempting to mitigate trafficking in this area for nearly a decade.

"Overall, human trafficking from Anantapur has decreased considerably", explains Ms. Bedi. Part of the reason was HIV. "It scared the living daylight out of everybody. Some families are too scared to send their daughters to cities now," she adds. "This in turn, affected the legitimate employment opportunities available in the cities," says Mrs. Shanu, "nobody knows where the girls will be working when they go to the cities. So, in some communities, people now avoid sending their daughters and wives for work." Mr. B. Sirappa, Director Health, RDT has a slightly different take. He believes that although HIV has reduced human trafficking, it isn't a considerable difference. "A lot of parents and husbands are still selling their daughters. But, awareness is increasing and sex-workers are using condoms."

—Saudamini Jain
Asian College of Journalism

DRIVEN BY COMPASSION

There is an old saying, "When you receive a good turn, do pass it on. It will surely come back to you someday!" Going with this tenet, Mrs. Rama, Social Worker, decided to start Vishvodayaa Trust, an organization that works for the empowerment of women and children's education. As she puts it, it was her way of reciprocating all the support (physical and moral) that her family had got during their days of troubles in the past. "My husband, an IT professional, consultant and educationist met with an accident. While we were coping with the trauma, a lot of people helped us. Leave alone support, they even donated blood. It was then that I decided to give back to the society in some way or the other," says an emotional Rama.

Moving to Madipakkam in 2000, Rama started volunteering with the local residents' welfare association. "I would write to the Municipal Corporation representing the residents of my locality and ensured that our under-developed locality has access to roads, rain water drains, street lights and other basic amenities. Later, I



also started volunteering with the Municipal Corporation for their Polio Vaccination camps and eradication of Encephalitis Camps," she adds.

In 2002 Vishvodayaa Trust was registered with three members on its board, and Rama as its Managing Trustee. A nursery school, "Baalyaa" was started in Keezhkattalai shortly thereafter, which according to Rama is the first nursery school in the neighborhood that catered to early childhood education. "It was here that I started working with Learning Disabilities (LD) first. The school was registered in 2002 shortly after the Kumbakonam fire accident. I am proud to say that our school is equipped with the right people and the right facilities. We follow the Montessori system of education which includes children with LD. Impressed with our work the officers even granted recognition and license to run a primary school!" recounts Rama.

By 2005, Baalyaa Nursery and Primary school was functioning on an Integrated Education framework. Presently, 77 children study in Baalyaa. In this, 25 percent have LD and 40 percent are from lower income groups, most of them being first generation school-goers who study along with children from affluent families. "Many a times, parents of children with differential learning capabilities are themselves insensitive and uninformed of the issue. Other parents fear that their children might start aping a disabled child. At Vishvodayaa, we try to sensitize the parents about the need for every child to grow up in an equal opportunities environment. We firmly believe that the society, parents and teachers should work together to provide a holistic childhood for every child, regardless of class barriers or any other disabilities," says a resolute Rama.

Recounting her challenging experiences with educating children with learning disabilities, she states: "One of our students had both

of his parents with high flying careers. The child had a gait problem, but his IQ levels and other bodily functions were normal. After a few months of studying in our school, his therapists observed that his problem had significantly reduced. Encouraged by the results, we hired speech and occupational therapists to cater to more such children. Our operational costs were on increase, and our school was starting to get labeled as a special school due to the model we followed. Therefore, we had to discontinue that routine. Now, our focus is to gain the full attention and support of parents on the issue of learning disabilities and their role in overcoming this problem.

The school functions on the nominal fee paid by the parents and also on private donations. "We do not give anything for free as its value will die down," says Rama. The school presently operates out of a two and a half ground campus in Keezhkattalai. Vishvodayaa Trust is on the lookout for funders for their upcoming mega project—expansion of the school up to 12th standard.

Vishvodayaa also runs several programs aimed at making women more financially as well as socially independent. Their Teacher-training program has been successful for many years now, with three of their trainees now having set up their independent educational centres. Counseling and vocational courses and workshops are also organized regularly.

"Women are often misguided and underrated. I experienced it first hand during the Trust's registration process. In order to help women understand their potential, our Trust is involved in several activities. We organize a yearly Mela (Fair) for women and our participants keep coming back every year. I am very happy to say that we have been quite successful in keeping our aim to produce quality teachers."

"I am saying this from the experience of having worked with several teachers in my school who have shown deep sensitivity and insight in their work with children. I am elated to know that I have contributed in some way to their blossoming into such fine teachers. In general, I believe that women should not be dependent, even on their husbands. The woman of the house is an important contributor. Unless women themselves realize it, they are never going to get away from the vicious cycle of oppression," Says Rama.

"I believe that every one of us is disabled in one way or another. While some of us can overcome the disability because of the close support systems of families; others also need such support to do so. Everything in life can teach us a lesson. For me, even my dog has taught me many vital lessons. For instance, dogs or pets seldom show their frustration or anger towards us. They show love and loyalty for the tiniest act of feeding and keeping them. I try and help as many people as possible and in as many ways as I can. It gives me immense satisfaction," concludes Rama.

In a world mauled by conflict and hate, here's a welcome draught of compassion!

—Archanaa R.

*Vishvodayaa Trust is located at:13/15, Prashanthi,
Bharathnagar, I Cross street, Madipakkam, Chennai 600 091.
Ph: 22474756. Email: vishvodayaatrust@rediffmail.com.
Website: www.vishvodayaatrust.org*

WATER GANDHI

If you don't link and mess with our rivers, India will have water surplus in 2050!

Ayyappa Masagi is a living Gandhi "on Rain Water Harvesting and Conservation". He blends indigenous ingenuity and modern science, and vehemently disagrees with Irrigation 'experts' and water gurus on large dams and check dams. He does not hesitate to repudiate some of Shri Abdul Kalam's views on water, poverty and inter-linking of rivers. He feels that Mother Nature and the clouds are doing their duty year after year, and we are the ones who are creating obstacles in their path.

Ayyappa Masagi works on sustainable, surface, subsurface, and ground water recharging, and his 'Sand Box' project in dry tracts of Northern Karnataka has proved him to be right. He achieved this by working with the soil and restoring the hydrological cycle. "If this is done, you don't need to dig new bore wells. We have recharged old bore wells in eight states and over 80,000 wells have benefited from this process," says Ayyappa Masagi.



Workman to wonder man

Ayyappa Masagi was born in a joint family at Sudi village, near Gadag in Karnataka. He suffered from poverty during childhood. He studied without the help of lights, under an uncovered lamp, as his family could not afford to buy kerosene. After completing tenth standard, although he wanted to pursue science, he chose to study commerce as his mother could not afford to pay Rs. 450 as fees. He scored first class and entered Industrial Training Institute in 1974. Despite being qualified for the electrician course, due to administrative lapse he was offered a 'Fitter course' that was meant for school drop outs.

Gold Sold – and Goodbye to gold from then on

He sold the 8 grams of gold that his mother had for Rs. 80 Rupees to pay the ITI fee. As a tribute to his mother's efforts, Ayyappa does not wear gold even now. He stood outstanding in academics, and today this Gadag born young boy stands tall as an Engineer.

Poverty turned into prosperity for Ayyappa when he was offered an apprenticeship by BEML for Rs.750 per month. He moved to Larsen and Toubro during the early 80s where he started earning Rs. 1150 per month. He excelled in his blue-collar stint, completed his eight hours job in just four hours, and spent the rest of his time studying inside the factory toilet. Thus he passed Diploma, Mechanical Engineering, and also did the SQC course where his fellow classmates were his own managers. While his white collared classmates struggled to complete the course, he qualified with distinction and got promoted with a role in Quality Control. He accomplished with distinction, and in Quality he saved Rs. 2 crore by reusing the scrap material.

Wife a Critique and a supporter

His passion to excel also earned him a good bride in 1983 amidst family rift. His family is now champions in rainwater harvesting. 1994, a year of drought, was when Ayyappa Masagi began to experiment water conservation techniques in his own fields at his native village Veerapura at Gadag District, Karnataka. He chose to focus on agriculture, as he hailed from that background and from a drought prone area. Without the knowledge of his family, he quit his job after two decades of service, as he could not focus on agriculture and work at the same time. His wife was furious when she heard about his decision and called him 'Thanda Pindam' (meaning useless fellow in Kannada).

He earned the prestigious Ashoka Fellowship and L&T management persuaded him to withdraw his resignation. But, Ayyappa Masagi chose to answer his inner call. His first tryst with agriculture was in his native village and it was a failure. He realized that the reason was not drought, but poor water management. His father, known for his stinginess, would spend only one third of what his neighbors would spend on agriculture. But, the produce would be three or four fold as he had the ability to communicate and motivate plants. Inheriting native intelligence from his father, he embarked on 'Rain Water Harvesting', 'Non irrigational agriculture', and 'Introspective irrigation'. His father insisted that nature's call should be answered only in the field as urea and manure through human excreta is nutritive to fields than fertilizers.

Ashoka Recognizes him

His pursuit on rainwater harvesting resulted in Ashoka foundation supporting him to establish WLF - 'Water Literacy foundation' with an initial fund of Rs. 30,000 per month. This amount was more than

the salary he earned at L&T, and the societal impact that he created through this was invaluable. Slowly, NGOs, students, and others joined in his efforts.

Water Efficient Nation

The goal of WLF was to change the water usage pattern in houses, apartments, factories, corporate houses, community wells, rivers, tanks, and in agricultural activities as well. Ayyappa Masagi's concern and care for water changed a small section of people, and his journey to reach a larger audience seems to be untiring. He is optimistic and wants every HR manager to make his working family, neighborhood sensitive to meaningful water harvest and conservation systems.

WLF is concentrating to build a sensitive, caring, and responsible farming community for easy implementation of cost effective, eco-friendly innovative water conservation techniques for sustainable agricultural growth. This helps to not only enhance farm productivity, but also bails the farmers from suicides.

Corprates are becoming richer

Widia, or SKF or Kenna Metals or Chowgules in Goa are saving crores of liters of water every year as well as on their water tax— thanks to his innovation in water harvesting. Ayyappa Masagi remains to be a charitable person, Gandhian, and Mother Earth lover and not a businessman wishing to leverage his brand across nations.

Akshya Patra- in Karnataka is Unique

1.8 lakh children studying in government schools across several districts of Karnataka benefit from 'Akshya Patra', the mid-day meal scheme that was launched by Late Sri K. Kamaraj. The mega kitchen required a minimum of one crore liters of water per annum, and thus

water was being purchased by paying an exorbitant price as the main feeder bore wells in the premises ran dry.

With technical support from WLF, a small lake (100 Feet diameter and 12 Feet depth) was constructed to collect all the run offs for easier infiltration into a dried up bore well using reverse osmosis technique. This arrested suspended sediments ensuring zero turbidity, purity, hygiene, and sustainability of the system. The entire project costed Rs. 8 lakhs, and 'Akshya Patra' true to its literal meaning is now self-sufficient for the present future. The money saved will now feed many more children and enable them to attend school.

The promise of 'Every Day Rain '

Ayyappa Masagi's 102-year-old father Madavappa, waters the banana plants once in ten days against the conventional practice of daily watering, and the productivity has been twofold. He does not use hybrids nor fertilizers, but uses plastic to ensure water retention around the banana plants. Ayyappa Masagi termed this concept as 'every day rain' and following his father's footsteps scaled up this thought for 'Stream Water Harvesting' in large areas.

In order to force the hidden water in a streambed to disperse through the banks instead of escaping downstream, a sub-surface polypropylene check dam is constructed. Through this simple and cost-effective technique 500 acres of land is covered for water replenishment. Hence, farmers who made 400 to 600 kgs of Jowar per acre are able to now make double their harvest, and some up to 14 quintals.

His next campaign is against usage of tanker water. "If each household, be it an apartment or independent house, implements innovative rain water harvesting techniques, then water tankers will be seen only in the museum and environment will be more green.

Recycling of bathing water helps one to bathe many times and the soap residue, which is phosphate, serves as good manure.

Appeal to CSR custodians in the corporate world.

This water Gandhi has an appeal to all corporate houses that have a CSR budget. He says: "if you are adopting a village, don't merely build a concrete school building, but ensure one-time support for rainwater harvesting. Fit and forget model ensures continuous recharge of water for decades as against the annual cost involved in check dam maintenance. If there is water, greenery will appear and this will spread prosperity and enhance education." WLF has developed 100+ innovative technologies to capture and utilize every last drop of water and has adapted these different techniques based on the need and requirements.

Ayyappa's Vision

Just as Gandhiji preached non-violence, Ayyappa Masagi considered rainwater harvesting and conservation as a movement—not merely for farmers, but for all citizens. He uses street theatre, folk songs, storytelling and media to propagate and has reached to a limited section of people in Karnataka as well as few NGOs across the globe.

Reward and recognitions

Mr. Ayyappa was awarded the prestigious award by Ashoka foundation for his contribution to the society. Several organizations, Rotary clubs, Professional forums have honored him, but he wants each one of them to move from talk to walk. His other hobbies include raising pet budgerigars (incidentally an evolutionarily unique and under-appreciated bird originally of the Australian desert and an efficient water user) and write poems in his Kannada.

Jamal Bajaj Institute has chosen him as an innovative Social Entrepreneur for year 2009.

—S Deenadayalan and Arun Nayak

*Ayyappa Masagi can be contacted at: No. 347, Parvathi Nilaya,
Kallappa Layout, Amruthahlli, Shakarnagar Post, Bangalore—
560 092. Email: to info@waterliteracy.org.
Website: www.rainwaterconcepts.co.in.*

HAVE WINGS, WILL FLY

Youthful and energetic + Environment conscious + Adventure loving = Anybody's guess. The math is simple. However, the more difficult one to get, the match, has also been made. Cognizant's grass roots team, the Wild Wing Society, a wildlife conservation group is teeming with fervent volunteers. Hearing from Saravanan, a founding member, it appears that sensitivity towards nature is a part of the very lifestyle of those associated with this group.

In the year 2009, right after Saravanan and his friends graduated from Bannari Institute of Technology and joined Cognizant, they were initiated into the work of Cognizant's twin social responsibility initiatives—Go Green and Outreach. Having established a proactive wild-life conservation society back in college, Saravanan discussed the idea of setting up one of Cognizant's own with his senior colleagues, and thus Wild Wing Society was born.

The Sathyamangalam forest is a well-known tourist spot in Erode District. "Many people, especially tourists, go to these forested areas



for booze and throw the bottles there. Elephants stamp on these bottles, get hurt, and die. So we started with cleaning campaigns along the highway," says Saravanan. The Forest Department has joined hands with Wild Wing Society by providing them with the necessary permissions to enter deep pockets of the Sathyamangalam Forest and the Annamalai Tiger Reserve.

The society has adopted a tribal hamlet called Malliamman Durgam, in the Sathyamangalam forest where 100 families reside. As a part of Cognizant's 'Green Books' program, education is promoted in the school for tribal children in Top Slip, which was originally set up and run by the Forest Department. "With increase in tribal population, there is increased dependence on the forests, resulting in mounting pressure on nature itself. For their own sake, the current and following generation of tribals must look out for opportunities to move out of the forest area so as to conserve these forests," says Saravanan.

"Development should not be at the cost of environment and wildlife. We are not asking the people to completely desert the forests, nor are we asking the government to lay in-roads and make these heartlands motorable. No, that will only increase tourist footprint, further destroying what little of nature we have. Instead, we are helping these families relocate outside the forests and engage in work that they can easily get trained in, like agriculture. Through intervening with the tribal education system, we are trying to equalize the opportunities available to students regardless of their place of origin," he adds.

Five solar street lamps have been set up in Malliamman Durgam. To eliminate the chances of infection due to high fluoride content in the water, three reverse osmosis plants have been set up in Top Slip Tribal School. A group of volunteers travel from Chennai to Pollachi every weekend to teach the children at the school on

Saturday. These volunteers attend a two-day intensive training workshop before they set off to teach the children. As an incentive, a trek is arranged for these volunteers every Sunday. Further, they also help the forest rangers in conducting a wildlife census every year.

Talking about the issues that the Wild Wing Society helps to resolve, Saravanan says: "The people of Malliamman Durgam have been labeled under a casteist category—Malai Vellala Gounder, instead of being given tribal status, thereby resulting in serious political implications. The tribals primarily grow ragi (finger millet), and pick gooseberries and jackfruit from the forests which are organically produced and are of high market value. Due to their remote location, they are dependent on middlemen who take the lion's share in the revenue generated."

"Whenever we visit the village, people come flocking to us for help on relatively minor issues like obtaining birth certificates. Many a times, a stray tiger kills a few villagers for which we offer compensation. We lobby with the government on behalf of these villagers and engage in continuous dialogue. We also plan to set up a store in the city to promote the sale of organic produce coming from Malliamman Durgam," adds Saravanan.

Cognizant's Outreach program is a beehive of grass root groups which are interlinked and inter-dependent. "Without the company's support, it would be difficult to manage the magnitude of the projects that we have undertaken. We align ourselves with other grass root groups and share the expertise. Mr. Shankara Mahadevan of 'Dreams Alive' and Mr. Kartheeban of 'Team Everest' are a source of inspiration for us. They come with great expertise and are accessible anytime we require their guidance," he says.

Wild Wing Society and Bannari Amman Institute of Technology are also inextricably linked. With 400 students joining Cognizant this

year, Saravanan looks forward to the expansion of his grass roots group's work beyond the Annamalai Hills and Sathyamangalam forest. The group has already formed a panel of scientists, organic farmers, and other important stakeholders.

"Our immediate plans are to set up a playground for the children at the school in Top Slip within the next month. We have also started the 'Light Up, Life Up'(LULU) project where we intend to distribute 100 solar lamps to the villagers. Recently, one family has been shifted from their forest home to the edge of the forest near Pollachi, with the parents engaging in agriculture and their children attending school nearby. Having successfully relocated the first of the hundred tribal families, we are convinced of our resolve to reduce their dependency on forests and to help more families maintain a dignified, sustainable source of livelihood" quips Saravanan.

The work of the Wild Wing Society jolts us back to the grave reality—that tomorrow we may wake up to find mere foot-prints, bones, and feathers, and none of the animals and birds that we see today. With its timely response to nature's cry, the Wild Wing Society is steadily working to bring back in teeming numbers those animals, birds, and plants that are being endangered today. Want to hold paws, anybody?

—Archanaa R.

Wild wing society can be contacted at +919003099166

WINNERS FROM THE KITCHEN

The idea of providing employment opportunities to school dropouts between the age of 16 to and 25 belonging to economically backward communities is not new to us. Mr. Mahadevan of Chennai Mission walked an extra mile to initiate steps in this direction by approaching the Chennai Corporation and the Rotary Club of Madras East. And so, the 'Foundation for Vocational Training' was formed, leading to the birth of Winners Bakery in 2006, cashing in on the need for good bakers in the country.

The training is an everyday feature, happening throughout the year. The course spans over six months with a monthly stipend of Rs. 2500, and provides free food, accommodation or bus fare, uniform, and laundry to the trainees. The uniqueness of the programme lies in the fact that the trainees here are trained in bakery, confectionery, and impart skills pertaining to the entire chain of activities in the process.



"Bread is no longer a patient's food," quips Mr. Balu, Manager of Winners Bakery. "The children who had no purpose or guidance are shown a direction here and they have made the best use of the vocation to make a living and move ahead in life. The trainees are proficient in making bread rolls, croissants, cookies, tarts, doughnuts, muffins, and cakes. The unit also offers training in basic computing and spoken English for the trainees which makes them employable at the end of the course," he adds.

"Life at Winners Bakery has evolved a sense of time discipline in its inmates, along with a food culture. The trainees have grown to make their characteristic mark on each of the products sold here", explains Balu, while boasting about a 19-year-old boy from the kitchen who is capable of making delicious fillings.

The Rotary Club of Madras East plays the role of identifying the beneficiaries. The secret behind the success of Winners Bakery is the thrust on quality at reasonable prices. "Good things do not spread fast while bad things do. Therefore, we are extremely conscious of the quality of products that is served here. Interestingly, at affordable prices, the bakery has grown to make a good turn over, the surplus of which are pooled in for other educational and community initiatives," says Balu.

The Foundation was approached by the Police Department to set up CCTVs in the slums of Kannagi Nagar in Thuraiyakkam to assist the observation of the individuals and children involved in nefarious activities. Recently, they had provided cots for the Chennai Corporation Medical Mission and also sports equipment for the residents of Kannagi Nagar in Thuraiyakkam. In essence, Winners Bakery makes multiple activities possible—all of them converging at the purpose of community development.

On the response of trainees to pursue a career in this vocation, Balu explained that most of those who joined the courses were willing

to pursue a career in baking and confectionery. Some of them have joined Winners Bakery to begin with and the products made by them are being supplied to many star hotels and private concerns.

In collaboration with the Department of Social Defense of Tamil Nadu, Winners Bakery has opened a production cum sale outlet to train the children of the Juvenile Home at Purasawalkam. An outlet of the bakery has also been opened on Santhome High Road at Chennai.

Consistency and credibility of Winners Bakery was duly recognized from all quarters. Mr. R. Nataraj, IPS, former Director General of Police, Puzhal Prison had approached Mr. Mahadevan to train the prisoners in bread making and the bread making unit was set up within the prison campus with the raw materials coming from Winners Bakery.

The bread produced is distributed to a number of orphanages in and around Chennai, including Little Angels, Aruvi, and Arunodayam, on a regular basis. Besides initiating such programmes, the unit also supports the efforts of other organizations such as Sri Annapoorani Women's Self Help Group that is being supported by the TVS Group. The food products made by the group members are sold at the bakery without additional profit margins. Market access to this group has helped them have a larger reach for their products.

All the aforesaid instances stand proof to assert that Winners Bakery has and will continue to be in the good books of different sections of the society.

—Shanmuga Priya R

If you wish to know more Winners bakery or would like to recommend a candidate for training, contact 044- 24982423.

Corporate Social Responsibility Programmes

A glance through a few Corporate Social Responsibility Programmes across India

A RESPONSIBILITY TO GIVE

‘Companies should not only focus on business but also simultaneously work to give back to the society’, believes the team at Forbes Marshall. Falling in line with this belief are the core values of their CSR policy—innovation, integrity, family spirit, and entrepreneurship.

Adopting activities in resonance with the needs of the community has been the key to their sustenance right from the beginning. In the early 70s, the thrust areas included housing, electricity, and roads. With the local municipal corporation yet to be established, the nearest hospital was too far to be accessed by the community members. To address this issue, the team set up ‘Shehernaz Medicare centre’ which transformed from being a dispensary to a fully equipped 30 bedded hospital. During the late 90s, a more focused approach was adopted to deal with needs pertaining to health and education. Soon, women empowerment as well garnered attention and became a priority.



"Working with women was initiated through vocational training programmes. Women felt comfortable and secure in being associated with us. Influenced by the wide range and scope of activities undertaken, the women proposed to contribute their bit to the community. This led to the birth of pre-schools and self-help groups," says Bina Joshi, (add designation).

Today, Forbes Marshall supports Gammatwadis or fun preschools that introduce children to formal schooling, and train balwadi teachers in collaboration with the municipal corporation. When asked about the need to work with government bodies, Bina Joshi says, "It is important to add value to what the government institutions are doing because it is they who cater to the poorest of the poor."

Micro credit was seen as an effective tool to women empowerment, because the women in the community had no access to money, except that from private money lenders who claimed exorbitant interest rates pushing them into a debt trap. Forbes Marshall therefore focused on organizing 150 self-help groups, 3 federations and 1 women credit cooperative in Kasarwadi, Bopkhel, and Morwadi communities.

Enumerating on the multifaceted influences that 'access to credit' has created, Bina Joshi states: "More girls get into higher education and the number of child marriages have plummeted visibly. With increased awareness of health, hygiene, and legal rights these women are able to come together, approach the government structures, and make sure that their civil rights are protected. Remarkably, they have grown to be potential sources of credit for the men in their families!"

An inspiring narration is that of Swapnil Bagve who wanted to pursue engineering amidst financial difficulties. He says, "Contribution from the Forbes Marshall team, and availing loan

from the SHG in which my mother is a member enabled me to live my dream. Today, I am an engineer only because of my parent's support and Forbes Marshall's help. I am grateful to their support and I would like to help someone like me to study once I have income of my own."

Support classes and motivational centres for students from the municipal corporation schools have proved to be effective in their academic performances. Added to this is the access to a wide range of books through the School Library Project in the municipal schools and life skills training programmes.

A special project—TARANG (Training for Adolescents on Reproductive Health and Gender) provides training programmes on personality development, communication skills, and other related topics for adolescents. Education on gender issues, health, and HIV/AIDS has been an integral part of this project. In effect, the rightly named 'Social Initiative Department' of Forbes Marshall has created avenues for the benefit of those who are yet to be born. All these programmes are done in consultation with the community during the planning, implementing, and monitoring stages.

"Interestingly, other corporates have approached the Social Initiative Department to emulate and replicate such initiatives with long lasting impact. As part of advisory committees in other corporates, members from the department train the staff on education, HIV/AIDS, communication skills, team building and personality development," adds Bina Joshi.

Networking with different civil society organizations has also added value to the education of the local children. The introduction of Livelihood Advanced Business School (LABS) program of Dr Reddy's Foundation in Pune has enabled a stable income for the youngsters in the hospitality and service sectors.

"It is not all awareness and skill development centric. Recreation has been crucial in building relationships with other organizations in the locality. One such occasion was the Children's Film Festival organized in November 2010 to commemorate with the National Children's Day. The response from the underprivileged children from the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation area, for whom it was organized, was overwhelming. It is now decided to make this an annual event," says Meghna.

On measuring success, Bina and Meghna speak on one tone. They say, "The good rapport built with the local people, corporation board, and the school board explains our influence in the field. The real social change that we envisage will be seen in the next generation. Appreciably, the involvement of the staff has helped us sustain the efforts over the years."

This explains the ranking of Forbes Marshall as the 2nd best company in employee participation in CSR activities. The company is also the recipient of BG Deshmukh Award instituted by former Union cabinet secretary BG Deshmukh for Corporate Social Responsibility. With more than two decades of work with the communities, the team has inculcated 'the responsibility to give' in its staff, the local population, and we—the readers!

—Shanmuga Priya R

SOFTWARE MEETS CARE

Especially for those in the software industry and also for those whose business it is to study business leadership, if the name Suresh Kamath does not strike a familiar chord in you, you might want to know him. CEO of Laser Soft Infosystems Ltd. (now a part of the Polaris group of companies), Mr. Kamath is an entrepreneur who has been making a difference in ways more than one. Looking up on him on the internet one can find that all the articles that have featured him at various points of time in his career so far have one common sketch of his personality—that of humaneness, humility, and of being unconventional. Upon speaking to him, one cannot help but feel a certain reverence for the way he exhibits these qualities.

Suresh Kamath is one grateful man. The company that he founded, Laser Soft Infosystems Ltd. a leader in creating software solutions in the banking and healthcare sectors has recently struck a much coveted deal with the Reserve Bank of India. With that, his team of over 550 software professionals is gaining in on realizing its



collective dream of creating core banking solutions for all Central Banks.

What makes Suresh Kamath and his team different from any other company? "We have employees who are highly motivated and whose motivation inspires everybody else in the firm. The firm has benefitted richly because of having these people" he says.

Laser Soft Infosystems Ltd.'s employee base comprise of a large number of persons with disability who occupy positions at various levels in the corporate hierarchy. Presently, their numbers account for 15 per cent of the total employees of the company. Kamath's dream is to create 10,000 jobs out of which at least 40 per cent will be filled in by persons with disability. According to him, while the firm is open to employing people based solely on their skills, the search for these individuals is a difficult one. In colleges there are barely two or three students with disability. Though the population of persons with disability in our country is a large number, these people are usually shunned by their own families, largely kept indoors, and deprived of education and employment.

"Persons with disability are among the most committed professionals that I have known. Not only are they very creative but they are also consistent in their performance. Software development suits them as it does not necessitate hard physical labour and our employees are willing to learn" says Kamath.

Kamath started the company in 1986, when quite young and with a meager sum of Rs. 200 at hand. The 80's as one can recollect was the period when the software industry was little known and the sector was just about emerging. The company started with five employees working out of a portion of a rented house, and every member earned a salary of Rs. 1,000 initially, including Kamath himself.

Kamath and his team chose the Banking and Healthcare sectors as their target clientele as both had large bases and thus had great potential for improving their services through computerization. "I noticed that software companies focused on providing services rather than developing products. I saw that as an opportunity. That is exactly what our company does these days—developing products to enhance the efficiency of our client-organizations," says Kamath. The software industry is exhaustive in the present times and the competition is reaching impossible levels. How does one strategize one's moves? "When people buy software, it is usually priced several times higher than the cost price and often customers are left with few choices when it comes to the right mix of quality of product and its pricing. Keeping our quotes low without compromising on quality and running our business in a straightforward fashion has been a big part of our conviction to stick to business ethics," says a triumphant Kamath.

Speaking of business ethics, he says that with the ever-increasing government policies on reservations, it is difficult to maintain the ratio of persons with disability employed in his company. However he tries as best as possible to keep his company's policies unperturbed. "I believe that each one of us has a responsibility towards the society. For all the privileges that I have had, I need to give back to the society. Starting this company and following the policy that we do is my way of repaying my social debt. Even today, anybody can approach us for employment and they will be valued solely based on their merit, and not on the basis of their appearance, health, or any other discriminatory factors," Kamath adds.

In these many years of its successful running, Laser Soft Infosystems Ltd. has received several awards such as the National Award for Welfare of Persons with Disabilities in 2005, from the Union Ministry Of Social Justice and Empowerment, the

Helen Keller Award from the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People, and was also conferred the title of Best Private Employer by the Government of Tamil Nadu in 2005.

"Laser Soft has been acquired by Polaris Software Labs Limited in October 2009. However, they are also keen to take forward our initiative of providing jobs to physically challenged," concludes Kamath.

Here is a company that has quite literally married the ideals of Corporate Social Responsibility with the rigours and ambition of business, thus creating a futuristic model of sustainable and progressive enterprise. For that, we take our hats off!

—Archanaa R.

ALL MY (OUR) CHILDREN

Ten-year-old Raji clutches Sheetal's hand and asks, "Will you stay longer?"

"Yes, for some more time. You still remember me?" replies Sheetal.

"Yes, of course I remember you. You took me to watch the IPL match and how can I ever forget my meeting with Sachin Tendulkar," says Raji with a twinkle in her eye.

Their conversation sought the attention of many children around, and each of them eagerly await for their turn to speak with Sheetal.

Sheetal is the Executive Director and Trustee of the K C Mahindra Education Trust which is based in Mumbai. She started her career at Mahindra and Mahindra Ltd. as a Management Trainee in 1982. After a stint in marketing, she served as a Product Manager of flagship products such as the Armada and Bolero in the marketing



department of the Auto Sector. She was also deputed to Mahindra Ford Ltd. and helped launch Ford Escort in India.

"With Sundays being my only free days I didn't find time to volunteer and give back to the community. I always longed to work with children, and when I heard of an opening at the K C Mahindra Education Trust, I instantly applied for the position. It was a fantastic opportunity as I could continue to work for the Mahindra group, and at the same time help underprivileged girls and other underserved communities!" she quips.

Nanhi Kali is a sponsorship program that supports the education of underprivileged girl children in India. Anand Mahindra, Vice Chairman & Managing Director of Mahindra & Mahindra, who is the Founder of Nanhi Kali, believed that educated women form the foundation of a modern secular society. He felt that there was a strong correlation between the existing societal ills in India—growing population, dowry deaths, caste system—and lack of education of the girl child. He believed that by empowering the girl child with education there would be huge benefits for the nation in the long term. Therefore, with the dual objectives of impacting the nation's development through education of the girl child and encouraging Indians to contribute to the society in a focused manner, he launched Nanhi Kali in 1996. Currently, the Nanhi Kali project is jointly managed by K C Mahindra Education Trust and Naandi Foundation.

Nanhi Kali identifies girl children based on their enrollment in government schools, family income, parents' educational background, social background, and the child's aptitude. Sponsorships from individuals and corporate houses are sourced to take care of the educational requirements of these children.

Working together with Naandi Foundation, Sheetal managed to garner sufficient support to reach out to over 70,000 girls. These Nanhi Kalis live in urban, rural, tribal and conflict affected communities across 9 states of the country.

The sponsorship cost of a Nanhi kali is Rs. 2,400 a year (for a girl child studying in Std. 1 to 5) and Rs. 3,600 a year (for a girl child studying in standard 6 to10). Each donor receives a detailed profile of the girl they sponsor along with her photograph and two progress reports on how she is faring both in academic as well as in extra-curricular activities. Apart from academic support, girls are provided with a material kit which consists of a school bag, uniforms, shoes, socks, stationery, notebooks and hygiene material for the older girls.

"Which child would not be happy to receive these items? Especially the girls who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those who are from rural and tribal areas where parents find it difficult to provide their children with 2 meals a day? The Nanhi Kali material support takes care of the incidental costs involved in sending girls to government schools and serves as an incentive for parents to support their girls education ." states Sheetal.

Speaking about the method of teaching, she says: "Children receive academic support through the Academic Support Centre that functions 1 to 2 hours before or after school hours. Concepts of Mathematics and Language are taught with an objective that the girls attain grade specific competency levels. We use innovative teaching tools and activities such as storytelling, group games, etc. which make learning not only meaningful but also fun. Our team also works with the parents and community to sensitize them on gender equity."

Sheetal took a break to speak with the children who were waiting for her. She asks Dharshinee if the Academic Support Classes were

of help to her and she gets a spontaneously reply: "The classes at Nanhi Kali gives me time to do my homework and revise for my lessons which makes me understand better".

"Some of our students participated in the National Level Talent Search Competitions and won scholarships. Although the cash award is only Rs. 750, this motivation is tremendous," says Sheetal.

Sheetal is optimistic of supporting 500,000 girls over the next 3 years. Speaking of CSR projects in general, she says: "For the Mahindra group CSR is not just making cheque donations to NGOs. Need assessments are carried out and focus areas and goals are set. Projects are then selected keeping in mind where we can achieve maximum impact as well where employees can participate. Partnerships with NGOs are entered into strategically keeping in mind common values and goals."

Like Sheetal, there are many socially committed individuals in the corporate world who have dedicated their skills and time to serve the society. Conversations wishes each one of them success in their endeavors!

—Marie Banu

THE COMMUNITY GARDENER

Orchid Chemicals and Pharmaceuticals Ltd. is a name to reckon with, not just in the pharma sector, but as it happens, in the community welfare sector as well. The company tries to bring employee participation in its community development work as well. The fact that best illustrates this is that every new employee has to plant a sapling on their very first day at work. Mr. Deepan Bharathi, Senior Manager CSR, talks about the evolution of the Orchid Trust. He also introduces us to Mr. S. Mani who wears many hats in the organization, all in the upper echelons, but for whom the CSR initiative remains his first love.

The company set up its manufacturing unit in SIDCO Industrial Estate, Alathur, Tirupporur Block of Kancheepuram District in 1994. "In 1996, floods destroyed several households in the neighboring settlements and the company went about arranging relief in the form of food supply and temporary shelters. This spontaneous response to address the local needs led to the formation of Orchid Trust in 1998, a full-fledged CSR wing of the company that reaches



out to 26 villages in the area surrounding their plant. The Trust was from the beginning equipped with experienced social workers who systematized its activities and spread its arms over five thrust areas: Health; Education; Women and Child Development; Youth; and Infrastructure Development. Since 2010, Tribal Development was added as a new focus area to this list," says Deepan.

Health

A mobile health clinic visits Pattipulam on every Monday and Alathur on every Wednesday for free general health checkup, and transportation is offered to those who are referred to bigger hospitals. An emergency vehicle has been kept at the ready right outside the factory which any local can gain access to in times of need. Awareness camps on gynecology, diabetes, dental, eye care, and HIV/AIDS are regularly conducted, and so are annual health checkups for school children. Financial aid up to Rs. 25,000 is also provided to those who need to undergo major operations.

Education

Tuition centres have been set up in six villages and sponsorships for higher education are also offered to deserving students. The Parent-Teacher Associations of each of the 18 schools are encouraged to identify the best teaching talent in their community to join as teachers in the schools whose salaries are borne by the trust. Personal counseling for adolescents, an exclusive English language trainer, special classes for girls, and overnight stay for boys in the school just before the Board Exams are added features of this program. "Our schools have taken a tremendous leap in delivering results in the last few years. From a measly 40 per cent of students passing their board exams, today the pass percentage is between 87 to 98 per cent. Credit for this massive change goes to the teachers. Therefore, along with rewarding the highest scoring students every

year we also recognize the best teacher and felicitate them in our 'Best Student-Teacher Award Ceremony'" says an enthusiastic Deepan.

Women and Child Welfare

"We needed to keep this as a composite group as the wellbeing of one is directly proportional to that of the other" says Mani. Aside of the medical facilities mentioned above, the trust encourages women to form self-help groups (SHG) and pursue income-generation activities. The trust provides them with training, assists them to identify the product line, and in some cases also helps them find a market. However, this is tedious work and there have been several ups and downs.

"Hand holding is very much necessary in the case of these ventures. One of our groups ran a mobile canteen in a popular tourist spot near Mahabalipuram successfully for about six months. However, after that the group developed a discord and subsequently dissolved. We once secured a deal with a famous hotel chain at whose nearby resort our SHGs would sell their vegetables for a whole year. However, the deal included a fixed price for the vegetables regardless of the subsequent changes in the market price. This led to the group suffering a huge loss at the end of the year. We learnt the lesson the hard way," says Deepan.

"However a tailoring unit has been installed and has been successfully running in the last few years now. Also a paper recycling unit for the community is there in the pipeline which will soon be producing enough for the company's gifting purposes," he adds.

Youth

Deepan recollects the time when a group of youngsters knocked at the gates of Orchid Pharma for work. He says, "They said that they wanted to be employed only by Orchid, but their collegiate

degrees were from streams other than Chemistry and other physical sciences. We provided them with career counseling, worked on their profiles, and presented them to various organizations where their services could be utilized. We also trained them, administered mock tests and interviews to prepare them for the job competition outside. Our employability-enhancement initiatives still draw a major crowd".

"We are happy to be giving them the much needed exposure and the encouragement to explore," adds Mani.

Tribal Development

There is a small and scattered tribal community called Irulas in Thiruporur block in Tamil Nadu. The Trust presently extends its educational and health related services to the people of this community as well. The children are provided with free tuition, uniforms, books, and other paraphernalia to meet their scholastic needs.

Infrastructure

Orchid Trust works hand in hand with the government to bring water and electricity to their villages. Good relations with the community and the government are its biggest strengths. The Trust's current ongoing project is in bringing energy security to these villages. Of late, the trust has been lobbying with the newly elected government to collaborate with them and provide bio-gas plants along with the latter's promise of distributing free cattle.

"What we are doing is to merely convert the free cattle scheme into something that will be sustainable and also profitable for the villagers. Just watching people uncover their hidden capability to resolve their own problems is fascinating. We watched it first hand when an entire village came together to de-silt a canal. All they needed was a spark of curiosity," says a visibly excited Mani.

"We also pride in the fact that unlike in urban areas, rural folk have tremendous zeal for applauding the efforts of others. We see that in every child who claps louder and louder each year as they cheer their award-winning class mate. The general ethos is very healthy and innocent. We want to build on that" concludes Mani.

The trust has thus been able to gain many inroads into the community by not being prescriptive but by merely following the needs of the community as expressed by them.

"As a pharmaceutical company, we strive to strengthen the health needs of the human mass and at the same time we envision the overall development of the community, which is the part and parcel of our growth. Germinating from the concept of corporate social responsibility, Orchid has adapted the concept of trans-personal expansion and growth of the community as a whole. The company therefore contributes its best to the community for its multi-dimensional development through Orchid Trust. We trust the potentials of our staff and strive to build the society as a whole," concludes Deepan.

Take off your urban lenses periodically and explore rural India; there is limitless scope for exciting work!

—Archanaa R.

THE RAINBOW EFFECT

In a free enterprise, the community is not just another stakeholder in our businesses, but is in fact the very purpose of its existence."
Jamsetji N Tata, Founder, TATA Group

The time was the early 1990s and the occasion was gathering of industrialists called by India's Prime Minister, Sri P.V. Narasimha Rao. Representing the Tata group were Chairman Ratan Tata and Dr. J.J Irani, Managing director of Tata Steel. "The Prime Minister proposed that we business people set aside one per cent of our net profit for community development projects totally unconnected to the workers and industry any of us was involved with," recalls Dr. Irani. "Mr. Tata and I looked at each other; we didn't make any comment. Later, we drew up a chart that quantified Tata Steel's contribution on Sri Rao's scale. We discovered that, over a ten year period, the company had been dedicating between 3 and 20 per cent of its profits to social development causes. In the years since, depending on profit margins, the figure has continued to vacillate within this band."



The Tata Steel example is not an anomaly for a Tata company. If there is one attribute common to every Tata enterprise, it has to be the time, effort, and resources each of them devotes to the wide spectrum of initiatives that come under the canopy of community development. The money numbers are staggering: by a rough estimate the Tata group as a whole, through its trusts and its companies, spends about 30 per cent of its profits after tax (PAT) on social-upliftment programmes.

The Tata culture in this critical segment of the overall corporate sustainability matrix—inclusive of working for the benefit of the communities in which they operate, building India's capabilities in science and technology, supporting art and sport—springs from an ingrained sense of giving back to society. "This is a matter of principle for us, it is in our bloodstream," says Dr. Irani "and it isn't something we like to shout about. Some people consider social responsibility as an additional cost; we don't. We see it as part of an essential cost of business, as much as land, power, raw materials, and employees." The Tata tradition in community development has since the earliest days of the group's history, been defined by its core values. It never was charity for its own sake, or as the group founder Jamsetji Tata puts it, "patchwork philanthropy".

Reinforcing the implicit beliefs the group brings to its mission of sustainable development is an explicit set of structures, embodied most notably by the Tata Council for Community Initiatives (TCCI). The TCCI lends structure to the Tata group's approach of sustainable development while driving its community engagement and improvement programmes.

"Sustainability is of fundamental importance", says Kishor Chaukar, the Chairman of the TCCI. "I don't believe charity

makes a substantial impact on society. All that you are doing is satisfying the mendicant mentality. The real contribution comes when communities are enabled in a manner that has a sustained developmental impact. That way you empower people, educate them, give them instruments of income, a feeling of self-respect and dignity, a reason to live," he explains.

Established in 1994, the TCCI brings together good practices within the Tata group in the sphere of corporate sustainability. Its charter is extensive, embracing a wide spectrum ranging from building communities and promoting inclusive growth, creating a sustainable environment, promoting human development to co-creating sustainable value. The TCCI is a nodal agency of the group and operates through a participatory network which includes chief executive officers of all Tata companies.

The TCCI agenda is largely driven by employees. Tata executives, facilitators and volunteers provide impetus to the TCCI network through their conviction, dedication and involvement in the work that is undertaken. "The TCCI encourages a bottom-up form of engagement and assists companies to help evolve their own direction and opportunities to foster this work more systematically, there is no formal mandate of any kind – hoping it would also largely be driven by the employees who think responsibly, initiate, and do this work," says Anant G Nadkarni, Vice President, Group Corporate Sustainability.

The TCCI has, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (India), crafted the Tata Index for Sustainable Human Development - a pioneering effort aimed at directing, measuring and enhancing the community work that Tata enterprises undertake. The Index provides guidelines for Tata companies looking to fulfill their social responsibilities.

"Commitment to the welfare of the communities our companies serve has been a key tenet of the Tata Group. It was recognition of the need to optimize the combined power of Tata companies to serve the communities in which they operate, that led to the creation of the TCCI over a decade ago. The intention was that TCCI would institutionalize the community development work of Tata companies, and catalyse the development of thrust areas to give a greater focus to the social work of the companies, so that the impact of their community work is larger than what individual companies could accomplish.", says Ratan. N. Tata. Chairman, Tata Sons.

The panoply of community development endeavours undertaken by Tata companies has touched, and changed, many lives. May the rainbow effect spread to many more companies across the globe!

— Sourced by Marie Banu
from TCCI and other Tata Publications

**Powerful stories of entrepreneurs for whom
humanity matters**

PIONEERS

ACHALA – AMBASSADOR OF INDIAN DOGS

Achala Pani is a youth with a difference. She graduated in Advertising from Chitrakala Parishath and lives with her family in Bangalore. Her family includes three Dogs—Gundu (5), Shali (11), and Browna (5) who are the heroines of this story.

Her Father, Late Sri. M. Baladhanda Pani, a Business Man; mother, Dr. B. Vijaya Kumari B, an Ayurvedic doctor; and her sister, Poornima, an Art teacher—all of them adored animals. Her mother is her pillar of support who encouraged her to work towards the cause of Indian Dogs (Achala opines that the term ‘Stray Dogs is derogatory and therefore the correct term to indicate them would be ‘Indian Dogs’).

"There are many animal lovers, but there are hardly any who support the cause of animals with passion," says Achala.

Animal work interested Achala right from her school days. She volunteered for many NGOs who were associated with animal



welfare. It was during her first year of Pre-University that "Empathy for Indian Dogs" became her possessive passion. Thanks to the puppy that got injured in her college campus, that she nursed herself. It dawned upon her that if she could help one dog, she could help the entire Dog kind. This incident inspired her to become an activist with dogged vigor and today, Achala runs an independent lifeline for homeless Indian dogs.

Achala serves as a foster parent for homeless Indian dogs until she finds an appropriate home for each of them. Till date she has managed to get 1200 puppies a good home and provide them a better life.

Achala did not stop here. She convinced her educational institute to allow her do a project on Awareness and Adoption of Indian dogs during her final year of graduation.

In April 2009, Achala registered her office ‘Let’s Live Together’ to impart awareness on adoption of Indian Dogs. Her motto was to restore the image of Indian Dogs which make a brilliant companion to mankind. She also established a helpline to connect the foster parents of Indian Dogs with their prospective wards.

As charity begins at home, Achala wanted to see people in and around her house accept her work towards this cause. While the neighborhood had largely turned more compassionate, the occasional obstacle did keep turning up in the form of insensitive people continuing to hold on to their unfounded fears and biases against dogs. However, Achala was convinced that this stigma will be overcome and that she will drive her passion with the precision of six sigma. She believed that every societal road block will be overcome through better social citizenry and she was relentless in her mission.

There are still large areas of the country where parents teach their children to stone Indian Dogs to keep them away. Achala opines that anger cannot be an answer and that agitated mood and any aggressive sermonizing will only worsen the situation.

"If people were genuine animal lovers, why would they prefer only exotic breeds? It defies rationale!" asks Achala.

Breaking the silence she responds saying, "When pedigree pups require more space, more maintenance cost and many of them are unsuited to the Indian environment, Indian dogs are a better option. Since dogs are meant to be man's best friend, it is ironic that people can think of buying them. A true friend or companions can never be bought with money."

"It is for the reason of hunger, or fear of being run over by a vehicle, or longing for its partners that prompts few Indian dogs to bite people. If the society wants to be freed from the scourge of dog bite, then it is the people who need to take an initiative. If dogs are cared for, they will reciprocate the affection and will not attack people. If vaccinated, they are free from diseases, and their aggression level is reduced when sterilized. All this would happen only when people show consideration on them. To solve a problem people have to take the first step to form a solution", aptly surmises Achala.

Achala's journey has been far from smooth. In a world where there is a shortage of people who speak for their fellow men and women, it takes a special kind of courage to speak out for animals, particularly a 'reviled' one like the Indian dog. Achala, with her perseverance has taken the challenge head on, and is not bothered about the societal bites as she is saving them from the so called dog bites.

From one single foster parent, a few years ago, she has revolutionized the whole adoption movement and created an army of foster parents.

She attributes her successful journey largely to her Mother, and Mr. N.G Jayasimha, a fellow animal activist who mentored her patiently in this difficult transition.

Her Passion is not centered around rewards, but it comes sans her asking. She is the recipient of the 'Young Achiever 2010' awarded by Brigade group and has gained one-year fellowship by Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) to further and farther the espousal of Indian Dogs.

Let us pride our INDIAN DOGS and forget the mindless pedigreeing which has spoiled not only our pet keeping habits but also our education system. Let's hope for many more people like Achala so that we may attain harmony with our animal brothers and sisters.

—Vijaya Madhavi. M

AND THEN THERE ARE SOME...

Visual artist and activist Anjali Chandrashekar speaks to her canvas. Her work is inspired by different schools of art ranging from surrealist to martial and she also loves to experiment with different mediums such as coal, shattered mirrors, LP records, etc. She converses with her art and from that dialogue brings out an essay of colours incorporating details which mere words cannot do justice to. "Art gives me a lot of joy," she says. She took up her first painting brush at the age of four and started to seriously take up painting at the age of ten.

Of her childhood she says, "My grandmother Smt. K. Santhanalakshmi runs an NGO in Bangalore for children with multiple disabilities. Growing up amidst these children, I would often teach them art, mostly wondering how lucky I am to be blessed with good health and the right opportunities to do what I wanted. Thus my initiation into using my art for a greater purpose began."



As Anjali grew up, her interests branched out to diverse social issues and she decided to create awareness and generate funds through art. She made visual campaigns for UNDP, UNICEF, WWF, UNESCO, FAO, and many other organizations at the global level. She also worked with Edward Lachman, Director-Cinematographer of the Erin Brockovich fame on a campaign for the International Diabetes Foundation. Meanwhile, on a parallel front she auctioned some of her art work to mobilize funds for different causes. Recently a painting of hers has brought in USD 5000, all of which will help in procuring insulin for children suffering from juvenile diabetes in 17 countries.

"I do not take money from these auctions for myself. The money generated is strictly used to fund the cause for which my work was intended for," says a resolute Anjali who deems the issue of environmental consciousness as being closest to her heart.

Looking at her body of work, one would have great difficulty in suppressing the disbelief at how young this powerhouse of talent is. Having just finished her schooling at Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan, Anjali is only about to start her graduation in Art at the Pratt Institute of Art and Design, New York. Already, some of the most coveted opportunities and honors have been bestowed upon her. Anjali was recently awarded the Zonta International Women's Award. She was the youngest Indian, and one of the youngest participants in the 'British Council Global Change Makers' Youth Summit held in August 2010 at London. Subsequently, she was among the youngest five members to attend the 'World Economic Forum' held at Davos, Switzerland, in January this year. Visibly excited about it, as if it all were happening right now, she says, "I could not believe my ears when I was told that I'd been selected to go to Davos! It is easily the most amazing time I've had, being in the company of world leaders, doing simulation exercises, working

on an 'Ideas-Lab', listening to brilliant talks, and being a part of a cross-country documentary along with like-minded people."

For a week before the World Economic Forum, Anjali and her friends from the Global Changemaker Program were trained to suit themselves to the rigour of the event. "We even had a session that went on the lines of 'What do you do when you meet Obama in the loo'!" she chuckles. True to the promise, luminaries such as Premiers of nations, Christine Lagarde, Chief of the International Monetary Fund, and A.R.Rahman were present. Anjali says that she and her friends felt transported in their intellectually stimulating company.

"I always knew that my daughter Anjali would make it to Davos" says a proud Anuradha Chandrashekar. She and her husband have never tried to force their children into doing anything against their interests. Says Anjali, "Although my father is an IIT alumnus and I also happen to have a flair for Science, there was never any pressure for me to follow suit. My parents are a huge support!"

In true mother's spirit, Anuradha keeps out a hawk's eye for every little detail in her daughter's life. "I am always behind her, reminding her of her deadlines, getting her to organize her time better and to take care of herself" she says. Nurturing two children who are both equally talented and accomplished, Anuradha faces the challenges of striking a balance and not letting fame or fortune dictate her children's lives. Her son, who is the elder of her two children, is a prodigal scientist now studying Engineering at the prestigious University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Both her children are national awardees and comparisons abound. However, the family maintains a careful understated normalcy in its lifestyle.

"We are very simple middle class people. We cannot easily afford the kind of education that our children deserve and face challenges at every stage. However, I do believe I have been blessed with these two wonderful children with a purpose. I want them to be the best that they can be, but more importantly I want them to be good human beings. Only then can I look into God's eyes with confidence of having done justice to His trust in me," says Anuradha. With one child already pursuing his dreams and the next one to follow hers, this mother has every reason to be proud—her children and her family which serves as an example for all those who want to turn the seemingly ordinary into the extraordinary.

As for Anjali Chandrashekar, her ability to transform lives will yet be strengthened as the world will witness soon enough, the tremendous potential about to be unleashed by a truly well informed and enlightened global intellectual.

—Archanaa R.

A DIFFERENT ENTREPRENEUR

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

MBB and Not MBA

He is an MBB and not MBA and those who have read "Rich Dad-Poor Dad" by Robert Kiyosaki will understand the meaning of this. He can hire 1000's of MBAs and also nurture MBA students – but he himself on paper is – not educated but in reality far better educated than many. His MBB (Marwadi by Birth) DNA is what we need to emulate as a role model and rightly he says "I don't want my students to run for job, rather I want them to be entrepreneurs and create jobs". He may come from a family where Education was not important. And to him Sports preceded academics and hence did not go beyond eighth standard.

Unconventional salesman

Yes Mr. Chenraj Jain Chairman of Jain Group of Institutions (JGI) believes success lies in conviction, positive energies and attitude



and that alone guarantees accelerated success. In Basavangudi, he started as a salesman in Bombay Dyeing with paltry salary of Rs 50 per month and he excelled his experienced seniors who were drawing Rs 600 per month. Delighting the first customer was his greatest self-actualization. Later he worked in his uncle's textile shop and Mr. Devaraj Ranka spotted him and that resulted in his meeting Mr. Dhirubhai Ambani of Reliance Industries.

That resulted in his getting the distributorship at a very young age with a credit of 3 lakh rupees. Mr. Jain could liquidate two years of unsold inventories and the initial success did not continue. Disaster followed and he lost a lakh of rupees. But his selling approach pleased Mr. Dhirubhai Ambani and instead of reprimand – more businesses happened with Reliance Textiles network.

Capitalist communist

He did a roaring business for ten years and was responsible for 1300 counters in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. This networking created more dealers for Reliance across South India and handled unsold goods like damaged goods, raw and uncut material not by weight but by the market price. Jain's strategies were simple. He covered more small customers than one big customer. If one reads the book "Parable of the Pipe Line" by Burke Hedges and when one walks through the life of Mr. Chenraj Jain, then one will realize, it is not a parable but a true living legend. Out of 100 contacts, Mr. Jain believed that 10 will give business. Hence spread and small customers was his winning formula. At the age of 25, Mr. Jain had contacts with more than 5 lakh people and he created network of 1000 entrepreneurs without any capital. These entrepreneurs were also ordinary people. That pipe line resulted in faster and better profits not only to him but to his networked friends who otherwise would have been monthly salary earners. He is definitely a capitalistic communist who spreads wealth and health equally.

No rosy report cards and academic vomiting

Mr. Jain's inner motivation came from impossible targets, his own lack of formal education, his lower self-esteem, societal humiliation and his own community not having an image in Bangalore. His discomfort zones resulted in meaningful demonstration to the world a new success story. Yes Mr. Jain exploded the art of possibility by sheer will, drill and skill. Failure is definitely a stepping stone to success and most of us should understand this risk taking skill. Students and Parents today focus on academic vomiting for Gold medals and ranks which unfortunately has less application value.

Influenced by Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi

Swami Vivekananda's books gave him the inspiration to trigger people to stand on their own legs. He realized that the future is in the knowledge eras. Also absence of education among his community members pained him. His father taught him freedom of space and Mahatma Gandhi's life taught him to work against any odds. The very idea of building a holistic system of education came to his mind when he traveled in villages and saw hundreds of students begging. He realized that there is no dearth of talent in India but are neither tapped nor energies converged.

These factors are the foundation seeds of the Jain Group of Institutions in Bangalore. At the heart of the curriculum at Jain's schools are values imbibed from such people as Swami Vivekananda, Dhirubhai Ambani and N R Narayana Murthy - all of whom have shaped Mr. Jain. His own personal life, his risk taking capabilities, networking necessities and win-win approaches added newer insights for the educational curriculum. It is not surprising that Jain group of Institutions provide application focused quality education.

He thus builds an educational institute which provides holistic education and creates individual who have an attitude to success.

Holistic Human Being - Sports, professional forum and connect to Indian culture.

As Mr. Jain believes that Students are the main stakeholders his Institutions are committed to bring out their best potential by providing them exposure not only in academics but also non academics like self-development, soft skills, extra-curricular activities and sports. Mr. Jain himself has a strong affinity in sports like high jump and badminton. He believes that students should begin their school days with sports as their first period. The institute has had sports champions like Shikha Tandon, Pankaj Advani and aspires to have more such winners who have potential to reach Olympics.

He did not want his students to miss what he missed as a student including fun and freedom of space. All JGI Institutions have the state of art technology, library, IT support systems and an environment for studying. Students at JGI go through practical labs of life, work in agricultural fields, encouraged to cook food at home and are made to interact with economically deprived peers. JGI is a *gurukula* for experiential learning. This *gurukula* also focuses on yoga, pranayama and coaching sessions on Sanskrit language.

In Education too he adopted his success business recipe of networking, motivation and hard work. His teachers are social entrepreneurs. Students are exposed to varied professional forums like HRD Network or National Institute of Personnel Management or Bangalore Management The rub of students get by meeting eminent speakers in these forums are equally important like the class room academics

Teachers who could not teach laid the foundation

Interestingly Mr. Jain owes the success of his Institutions to six teachers who could not speak fluently. He triggered confidence in them, gave opportunity and brought their innate talent and potential. Yes not only in business he created entrepreneurs but in academics too he created better teachers. A real Dhronacharya and Bhismacharya – and Mr. Jain did not go to a *gurukula* but has demonstrated that his group of Institutions is a better *gurukula*.

Mr. Jain believes that a genuine institute must focus on building the right attitude among its students and not rosy report cards.

Teething troubles

The institute faced challenges in being accepted as a genuine institution for imparting quality education. It was seen as a communal Institution for the Jain Community. His actions as true Indian spoke. Equal opportunity is provided to all students irrespective of their caste, creed or wealth and that resulted in creditable credibility. The institute also provides education to economically deprived students free of cost.

Empowerment practiced in spirit

Every member of the JGI is empowered - be it teacher or member of the shared services team. Every stroke from every member is critical for excellence and Mr. Jain has realized the value of different strokes from different folks for the growth of his Institution. Many a time, he felt his institutions gets better visibility from the invisible people. Hence empowerment is not English here – but a way of life. Mr. Jain believes he has transcended from the doer, manager, director to an obedient servant. He believes that it is the teachers and not him who know their students and their needs. At JGI students, teachers and shared services teams work together

beyond the working hours and progress together by working in self-managed teams. It is very simple. If you are complicated, have a lot of do's and don'ts and you think you are brilliant, it's wrong. According to Mr. Jain, nobody is an employee and the teachers are all participants and contributors and he allows them to them to play multifaceted roles.

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

JGI: Contributor in country's progress

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

Started with three schools, Mr. Jain has plans to replicate 100 schools in Karnataka in the next 5 years for one and a half lakh rural children. Today there 28 institutions and 50% of wealth goes to charity.

University of Excellence by a School drop out

The Jain group of Institutions have become a deemed university as "Jain University", and an eighth standard passed student has done wonders what many an educated are struggling. If there is a will there is a way. He educated should star the unlearning journey while Mr. Jain is setting new bench marks wanting to promote business and social entrepreneurs and looking for unconventional youths. Ms.

Sonal no doubt has a better role as she authored this article while I took inputs from people like Mr. Krishnan , Director of MATS Business School , Ms. Uma Warriar, Faculty at JGI and also from the varied members of NHRD and NIPM.

—S Deenadayalan and Sonal Dhawale

PROGRESS IS A JOURNEY

For those wanting to experience their holiday, and not just have a holiday experience, there is Travel Another India. Simple and clear! No extravagant adjectives, yet pregnant with meaning, the name of this community based tourism organization says it all. "The India that most tourists see is the one with ancient architecture, busy bazaars and the picturesque beaches. But, there is another India, simpler, but the more beautiful, where the traveller actually meets and sometimes lives with the real charm of India—its people," says Gouthami, founder and CEO of Travel Another India and 2010 Asia Laureate of the Cartier Women's Initiative Awards.

Listening to Gouthami it is evident that the enterprise was born out of a passion to make a difference, combined with a relentless love for travel.

"I graduated from the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) in 1991 and worked for fifteen years in with organizations that fund NGOs. I travelled across India as part of the job and enjoyed the



hospitality of different people in different parts of the country. In 2005, I joined Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan. One of the projects we worked on was a rural tourism project supported by the Ministry of Tourism and UNDP in Hodka village. The idea of using tourism as a means of bringing about development perhaps came from my own travel experience mixed with the Hodka experience. Thus, I co-founded Travel Another India 2009," says Gouthami.

‘A nation’s culture resides in the hearts and souls of its people’—a popular saying. Travel Another India’s travel packages allow the traveler to step into the shoes of the local people, experience their traditions and learn the local crafts. Furthermore, the traveler gets to witness first hand, the day to day lives of the locals as they stay in a guest house in the village itself.

"All our destinations are owned and managed by local communities," says Gouthami. Guest houses are built at each destination and the local community is responsible to manage them. Travel Another India provides management support for the first three years after which it becomes completely self-reliant. At present, Travel Another India offers action-packed tourist packages at eight destinations: Ladakh and Spiti in the Himalayas; Hodka in Gujarat; Pranpur in Madhya Pradesh; Curtorim in Goa; Khanapur, Kundapura; and Mysore in Karnataka.

"Our work is guided by the triple bottom line of People, Profit, and Planet. We do make a profit in our business. However we ensure community involvement in which there are direct and indirect positive consequences. First, jobs are created in these places, traditional local arts and crafts are given a face lift, and decision making is largely held by the community. By creating or increasing an external interface for the villages, we are subtly bringing about

different perspectives to the villages themselves. The interaction of the tourists with the locals has led to many an interesting turnabout in these communities," says Gouthami, going on to relate the story of how a single question raised by several tourists prodded the community to think differently.

"There is this particular community which refrained from sending their girls to school because they did not want their girls to leave the house. When one tourist after another inquired about the obvious lack of opportunity for the girls, the community decided to take a strong stand on this issue and hired a teacher to exclusively to teach the girls in the school. When a community hits a eureka moment and say ‘Let’s find a way!’—that is the milestone that validates our cause" says Gouthami passionately.

Travel Another India propagates responsible tourism through its simple and appealing guidelines for travelers. Another interesting aspect is that of accessible travel. "We have made a start with Ladakh where we have ensured that the package is designed for guests using wheelchairs, although we are happy to host non-disabled people also to these places. Accessibility is a natural corollary to our plea for responsible tourism. After all a place is only as beautiful as it is accessible," adds Gouthami.

With increasing numbers of government Tourism Boards in different states engaging in some very trendy publicity for both well-known and little known destinations, not to forget the slow but steady improvement in the public transport system, the tourism industry is on a boom. Tourism being one of the free sectors, there is ample scope for improvisation and customization of travel. "I derive a lot of pleasure in showing off the place and in enabling people to enjoy it in all its glory," says Gouthami, adding that "my team shares my enthusiasm for hosting guests. They are all well-traveled people

themselves, therefore their inputs come with keen research and prior experience. We have no office anywhere and our team is based in Delhi, Bangalore, and in Chennai as there is a lot of travel involved. " says a cheerful Gouthami.

For all the aspiring and budding entrepreneurs out there, Gouthami says, "In the midst of all the pressure to work and earn success amongst other things, there comes a time when one must take the plunge for what one wants to do more than anything else. Stop thinking about all the constraints! Just go for it!"

In saying so, she recollects about her own beginnings as an entrepreneur, "In these three years I have had to change so many business partners and face other dynamic shifts. What keeps me going is my passion to be a host. I started Travel Another India because I thought it was fun to start a travel based firm. That's about it! In three years from now if we expanded to 35 destinations, with each destination directly supporting at least 20 families, then I will have lived up to my goals," signs off Gouthami with a smile.

Did we just hear a couple of bags getting zipped up already?

—Archanaa R.

THE NEVER-SAY-DIE WOMAN

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

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

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

Guliya Bai started her journey in quest of justice when she was barely 20. The newly married bride was the dark horse in her



family, and her in-laws disapproved of a woman raising her voice. She remembers how a tribal woman's house in Sukhtawa was completely destroyed by '*jangal ke thanedar*'. The forest officers complained that the woman had "stolen" wood from the forest, a forbidden act. In spite of being warned that her husband would leave her if she stepped out of her house, she went ahead and rescued her 'tribal sister'. While she narrates this episode of her bravery, her hands move enthusiastically and her orange bangles jingle against one another. There seems to be no fear in her eyes. Guliya Bai took some twenty more women with her, and entered the thanedar's house, and questioned him vehemently about his action. She became the voice of the 'voiceless tribals'.

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

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

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

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

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

Guliya Bai protested to the government against the insufficient pension sanctioned for old women, and almost no pension for widows. While we wait for things to happen on their own, she will probably sit in another 'dharna' in the near future to bring justice. In spite of being discouraged time and again by the government, or sometimes even by the men in her own village, the never-say-die attitude keeps the Kesala lady going.

—Adrija Bose
Asian School of Journalism

YOUNG AND TRUE DISCIPLE OF GANDHIJI

Famous Tamil Poet Avvaiyar who lived several thousand years ago, gave a two word synonym for the Country's prosperity through agriculture and the slogan she told was, '*Varappu oyara*', meaning let the bunds raise. Yes, if the bunds raise, crops will be nurtured, people will benefit, and in the process the king will rule will. With such a powerful focus, Senthil in Payir attempts to raise not only the Bunds but also the Buds.

Young Gandhian at work

The first thought which flashes through our mind the moment we think of software professional is, they are young, brash, well dressed, having an air of arrogance along with display of their materialistic possession. Probably this is stereotyping a software professional. But, what a contrast! Senthil, a young software professional, was inspired by the Gandhian thoughts since childhood and has tried to internalize it as a process within self. He has today successfully translated it to his work at Thenur village at Perambalur district in Tamil Nadu.



Senthil had a definitive stint at US, and had come back to translate his dream of making a meaning at his homeland, than chase big money and the comforts it brings. He has not only overcome the demons in his own mind, but also the words from his parents, friends, and relatives who sure would have advised against this. He invested all his earnings into his dream project Payir and started a NGO named Payir in 2005. Payir means sapling, symbolically reflecting "the growing up of youth". With 6 acres of land donated by his uncle and with the help of his friends he launched his organisation at Thenur Village in Tamil Nadu.

Payir promoted by Senthil envisages the transformation of Indian villages into a socially stimulating, self-reliant, growth oriented community rooted in the principles of Truth—a society where people practice and interact with the highest moral values.

A Model village in the making

It is a village which is willing to accept an experiment, an experiment which will lead to betterment in their quality of life. Well any such experiment has its own challenges. Some of them were:

- lack of primary health care facilities and sanitation high level of school drop-out rates non-viable farming, agricultural practices, and animal husbandry inadequate employment opportunities mainly during the non-agricultural seasons
- inefficient water management systems

Health is wealth

A person who had done his homework well before he stepped into his dream project, also dreamt of how his health centre, learning centre, and other infra-structure facilities should look like and the materials to be used for this. It sure looks like a hermitage from where he executes his dream and it is something for one to believe, experience, and cherish. The design and plans were drawn

in consultation with Gandhigram University and with the help of volunteer civil engineers and architects which reflects rural life—simple, but practical and appealing.

Most material used in the construction was locally sourced, low cost, and environment friendly like earthen bricks, earthen tiles and thatch. An all-women's unit was engaged in brick making and they used hand press machines during the course of construction. Further, most of the labour was sourced from the village.

An two-bed outpatient health center with a laboratory and dispensary was born out of the hard labour of commitment and love. This center provides first aid, primary health care, low cost medicines, and laboratory services.

This software professional did not stop with this. A person, who had utilized technology to further his commitment and overcome obstacles, did not let go of this with regard to his health centre also. To reach out to a larger population he added outreach, health education, referral network for secondary and tertiary problems, and tele-medicine to his kitty of medical services. Sure, he used 'Intel outside' and 'mental outside' —a true differentiator from the Intellectual "ITIntellians" of India.

Envisaging Abdul Kalam's dream

Senthil truly believes that education is every child's birth right and it is one weapon that would go a long way in making a difference. He also adapts an innovative non-conventional learning methodology to teach children. The major objective of the learning centre is to provide a non-formal education to village children belonging to the age group of 4–14 years. He emphasized on imparting useful real life education which the children can relate to and put to quick use. For the children between 4–9 years, Tamil and mathematics were

the main subjects that were taught. Senthil is also convincing the education department about the usefulness of such non-conventional method of teaching, and requesting them to recognize the same.

The learning centre also serves as a library—providing newspapers, magazines, and books. Technology is not spared here too. Senthil has used e-learning to proactively handle the issue of non-availability of teachers. Children use this facility to enhance their educational and improvement needs in subjects like English, Mathematics, Accounts, and Computers. Excellent support from e-tutors Sujatha, Angaraj, Sathish, and Venkat is offered for Payir staff. In addition to helping the tutors, Payir has also setup a dedicated e-learning centre for tutors at Mambalam in Chennai with the support of Action2020 group.

Agriculture, the backbone of the nation

Food and fertilizer free agricultural produce are becoming a scarce and costly commodity. There is also a slow and invisible revolution happening towards organic farming. Senthil contributes in his own responsible way towards this crusade as well.

Payir runs an organic farm in the donated land. The main goal of the farm is learn, develop, and train villagers on new/traditional environmentally sustainable agricultural techniques. Payir has started producing coconut compost within the farm, which is being used to fertilize the grove and garden. Payir shares its expertise to villagers for their livelihood development.

On the employment generation front Payir has ventured into producing Neem based organic fertilizer. This year they produced over 5 tons of fertilizer that was supplied to IIT Chennai, thereby providing employment opportunities to three persons for two months. Payir plans to introduce this programme as an annual supplementary source of income.

Self-help towards betterment

Self-help is the best help any individual or group can dream of. Interaction between Payir and the local villagers was instrumental in the formation of self-help groups by the villagers. This group has come together to finance and manage a diary project. The group consists of both men and women considering that the village women are not part of any initiative outside their homes. Also notable is the fact that the idea was conceptualized and brought to fruition by the villagers themselves, with Payir merely playing an advisory role.

Payir believes that this is a milestone in its efforts towards self-sufficiency. Payir hopes that this would fuel the development of more such self-help groups, which would take Payir further in the stated objective of empowering the villagers.

Dreams for the future

Payir is in the process of finalizing a plan to generate electricity (1.5 KW) for electrifying the whole project using solar panels. Payir also intends to provide meaningful vocational training to village youth that can be used as a source of income. One of Payir's efforts is to develop local leadership. Payir is hopeful of putting together a program on basics of Law, Panchayati Raj and general leadership skills.

The Journey

The journey had been long and unwinding springing up surprises and challenges. But, it had been a journey of learning, connecting with people of same ideologies, garnering energy and faith from all those who pass by in this journey. It is happy to note that there are a few people who want to do, but have their own restraints. Come, join and pitch in to make Payir wholesome and the experience of being with Payir meaningful to them.

—Ambuja Easwaran and S.Deenadayalan

TEENAGE TECHNOLOGIST

"I need to be afraid of you, as you have aspirations to be like me." This is what Bill Gates said to Suhas Gopinath, a young Indian entrepreneur, now aged 23.

Founder, CEO, and Chairman of Globals Inc, an IT multinational company launched by him at the age of 14 at California, USA, Suhas was recognized as the world's youngest certified professional web-developer through his project 'www.coolhindustan.com'.

Net Mania(c)

His is a story of a pastime turning into obsession. Being a naturally inquisitive personality, he dabbled with various websites, and internet applications. His other passion was animals, largely inspired by his pet dog. Initially torn between becoming a veterinarian or to plunge into the mysterious software world, he eventually decided upon the latter. This dilemma occurred to him when he was just thirteen years old. By 2000, Suhas became an internet addict.

His father, an Air Force employee, could not afford to buy him a computer. By 2000 Suhas became a net addict. He used his daily



pocket money of fifteen rupees to access internet for ten minutes in a cyber café each day.

Obstacles are Opportunities

As Shakespeare says, ‘sweet are the uses of adversity’, Suhas capitalized on this obstacle and converted it into an asset. He noticed that the owner closed the cyber café from 1 P.M to 4 P.M and so volunteered to keep the shop open during these hours in return for free internet access. The owner readily agreed to this win-win proposition.

This laid the foundation for a phenomenal success story.

Suhas studied in a military school which operated on a shift system. The luxury of the noon helped him to fulfill his cause. This learning earner saved his pocket money and procured his first personal computer.

Suhas hails from a totally non-business family, and academic excellence was the family’s priority. Like most parents and teachers he was also the victim of academic censure, and his failure in mathematics in the ninth standard compounded it further. But, these censures did not reduce his creativity nor set aside his entrepreneurial spirit. He took a temporary break from his passion, and passed out with flying colors in his 10th standard board examinations.

Negotiating Across Countries

While his peers might have been wondering what game to play in the evening, Suhas was busy creating new websites, and negotiating deals with acquaintances who were sitting thousands of miles away. He kept reminding his parents that his role model was Bill Gates, another expert teenage programmer.

Suhas slowly started building websites and positioned himself as a freelancer.

On one occasion, a company felt insecure to provide him with a job when they learnt his age and academic qualification. Suhas then made up his mind to start his own organization. He decided to employ individuals who have the right skills sets, and not enquire about their age or academic qualifications.

His parent’s supported Suhas’s decision.

Despite all success and the media attention he received, there has not been any significant change in his lifestyle. Network Solutions, a software company based at United States, was impressed with Suhas’s skills. They invited him to US in 2000 and sponsored all his expenses. This was Suhas’s first trip abroad. He was offered a scholarship to pursue his studies, but he rejected it. Instead, he requested the company to outsource their website building work to him.

"I have learned to live modestly. In fact, when, as a company, we hit our first US\$500,000 revenue, I was still taking pocket money from my dad. Success can go to your head, hence it’s important to stay humble and grounded," says Suhas.

Suhas is the youngest entrepreneur in the world to launch a company at an age of 13. He started a company called ‘Globals’ with the aid offered by an online acquaintance from the USA. He registered the firm in his friend’s name as he was not an adult and therefore was not eligible to sign a legal contract.

He viewed these obstacles as opportunities. At times, his new employees, who were twice his age or more, could not trust someone so young to lead them. Suhas did not get demoralized. Despite being a busy traveler, attending conferences in top companies in Europe, and delivering lectures in Ivy League universities like Harvard, the passionate programmer moved on.

Global's Vision

Globals offers cost effective world class quality solutions in web designing, software, mobile, and multimedia services and will soon graduate to be a product oriented organization. Suhas has launched an innovative product called educationERP.net which helps in streamlining the processes at schools like maintaining student's records from the time of admission till he leaves school. Suhas wants to be the market leader in ICT in education. Today, Global's software is being used in more than 100 schools all over India , Singapore and the Middle East He plans to launch a huge gamut of IT based products spreading in 11 countries in 11 years' time

"I have always believed that IT is not just technology but a tool that can solve the problems of people. That is what I want to do in my company", says Suhas.

He is the only Indian in the Board of the World Bank and is helping them set policies on ICT in university education so that employability can be enhanced. His aim is to reduce the number of unemployed eligible youth in the world. He dreams that his company would become a market leader in software solutions concentrating on education.

Having served more than 200 clients in 9 years, it is expected that in few years from now, we would know Globals as one of the leading provider of product based IT services.

Accolades for the young CEO

Suhas at the age of 16 was recognized as the world's youngest entrepreneur by CNBC and ebusiness, Canada. At 17, he was recognized as the World's Youngest CEO by leading media including BBC, Washington Times, The Age, and Limca Book of Records. He

is a resource person for Entrepreneurship at IIM Ahmedabad, and an Advisory Board Member at IIT Bombay Entrepreneurship Cell. In 2005 he became the youngest recipient of Rajyotsava Award conferred by the State Government of Karnataka.

Socially spirited entrepreneur

Suhas has also volunteered as the Brand ambassador of PETA and the Youth Ambassador for Indo-Pak Leadership Program organized by School of Leadership, Pakistan. In December 2007, The European Parliament and International Association for Human Values conferred "Young Achiever Award" to him at the EU Parliament, Brussels. He was one of the "Young Global Leaders" for 2008-2009 by the prestigious World Economic Forum, Davos and he became the youngest member ever in the World Economic Forum's history. In June 2009, Suhas Gopinath bagged the Make a Difference Award conferred on him by the Incredible Europe at Vienna, Austria and in October 2009, Suhas Gopinath bagged the SIP Fellow Award at the Global Social Innovators Forum 2009 at Singapore.

Suhas's mission has been to establish a platform for youth where they find encouragement in their chosen career in the field of IT and also to build up their entrepreneurial skills. Today, he has proved that the age is no constraint for an individual to be successful by his/her dedication and hard work.

"My parents have been a great support to my dreams. The values they have instilled in me have helped me in my business as well. It's very important for parents to encourage their children especially if they have the entrepreneurial spirit in them. Though I have made many sacrifices to reach this point, the joy of providing employment to hundreds of talented youth has made it a worthwhile journey for me so far," says Suhas.

Unsung Beacons — Volume II

He has become the source of inspiration for the youth of the country to believe in the power of sheer determination to accomplish their goals in life, howsoever difficult they might be. For, this 23-year-old believes that academic skill sets are not the end. “We need more of personal skill sets to achieve goals,” he quips.

—Sonal Dhawale and D. Avinandan
