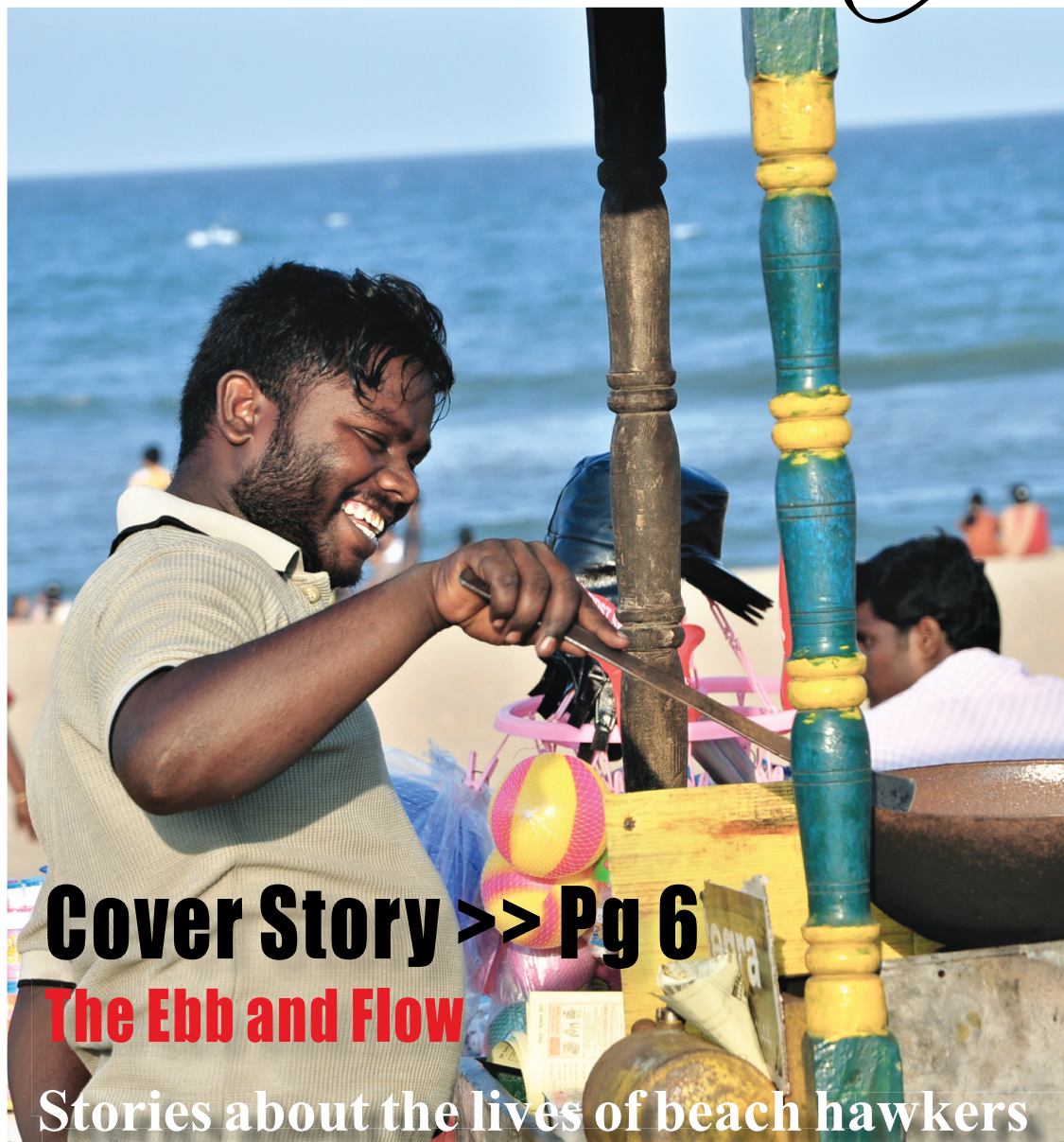


# Conversations

*A Chronicle of Social Currents*

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## From the Editor

**Dear friends,**

It is my firm belief that one can always be happy, if whatever we think, say, and do are in harmony. When this 'happiness quotient' increases amongst us, we can spread cheer and joy around us.

All the stories in this edition of conversations stand testimony to my thoughts. The courage, conviction and dedication these change-makers possess, along with a will to make others happy in spite of all the odds their face, is what inspires me to share their stories with you.

Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and therefore the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared.

Join me in my journey of spreading happiness by reading Conversations.

—PN Devarajan

*Each of you should have an ambition. A person who lives without an ambition, is like one living in a home which has no roof*

The inauguration of the tenth batch of the Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management at CSIM was held on 14 July 2010 at Textan house, Ashok nagar, Chennai. 20 prospective Social Entrepreneurs have enrolled in the course.

Padmashri Krishnammal Jagannathan was the Chief Guest, and G V Subramanian, Founder, Swami Vivekananda Rural Community College, Puducherry was the Guest of Honour for the inauguration. The CSIM team comprising of Mr. P N Devarajan, Founder, Mr H Narayanan, Chairperson Academic Council, Faculty, and alumni were also present.

Mrs. Krishnammal Jagannathan shared her life experiences. She said: "Each of you should have an ambition. A person who lives without an ambition, is like one living in a home which has no roof."

Mr G V Subramanian highlighted the need for total dedication and commitment in pursuing goals for people

# A New Beginning



*Krishnammal Jagannathan interacting with CSIM students*

aspiring to work in the social sector. He quoted Bharathiar's poems and requested the students to adhere to its words.

Mr. P N Devarajan motivated the students and shared his dream of launching 100 CSIM centers all over India. He said, "There is a need to

simplify social work. More students should join our course and spread the social entrepreneurship model all over our country." He also emphasized on the following attributes: drive, initiative, discipline, determination and dedication in a social change agent.

Around 12 CSIM alumni members shared their learning experience in CSIM.

Mrs. Krishnammal handed over the course kit to each of the new entrants and wished all of them a successful learning journey at CSIM.

—Latha Suresh

ADD SPARKLE TO THE SEASON WITH A  
TOUCH OF THE ORIENT AT **China Town**  
A SIP OF SCINTILLATING SPAIN AT **Zara**  
A TINGE OF EXOTIC THAILAND AT **Benjarong**  
A MESMERISING SENSE OF NORTH INDIA  
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**“The spark to play an active role in social work was there in me even when I was a young girl, but I did not have the means nor money to help others.”**

# Leading Lady of Thirumullaivoyal

The tuition centre was buzzing with children memorizing their lessons while their teachers were mentoring. Manoj Kumar, an eight-year-old boy rushed to the tuition centre, holding his trousers. “Miss, I have scored 90 marks in the mathematics test today,” he said. Kalaivani patted his back and smiled.

“I started with one tuition centre at Kannadapalayam village, which is seven kilometers from Thirumullaivoyal. The classes were conducted in the open ground until the panchayat provided the village community centre premise. Now, I manage three tuition centers in three different villages—Thirumullaivoyal, Kandigai, and Kannadapalayam—benefiting 150 children,” says Kalaivani.

Kalaivani is the founder of Nightingale Social Trust, an NGO registered in 2006. The Trust’s primary objective is to provide education for the underprivileged children. The centre functions from 6 to 8 p.m on all days, and children are

meet our other expenses,” said Kalaivani.

Kalaivani eyes welled when she remembered her childhood days. She had to discontinue her studies when she was in 9th standard as she had to take care of her ailing grandmother. She got married when she was 21 to Kuppuswamy, an employee in the private sector. Her husband Kuppuswamy understood her desire to engage in social work, and encouraged her to pursue her higher studies.

“The spark to play an active role in social work was there in me even when I was a young, but I did not know the means nor did I have any money to help others. I have now completed my Bachelor’s Degree in Public Administration in Madras Open University. I started to work for my village community. Besides the tuition centre, I also worked towards village development and approached authorities to lay proper roads and install street lights in our village. Since then, our village has access to regular bus services,” says

**“I believe that every individual plays a crucial role in the overall development of the village and it is our duty to motivate them”**

organizes health care programs at Uvbarapalayam, Kannadapalayam, Pothur, Pothur colony, Ankambedu, Kandigai, and Kollumedu villages that are located around Thirumullaivoyal. With the support of M N Eye Hospital in Chennai, free eye surgeries were conducted for ten people, and free spectacles were provided to thirty people at Kannadapalayam. Recently, Nightingale Trust and Rotary Club have taken over the management of a private hospital in Nerkundram. While the trust refers patients to the hospital, Rotary Club coordinates the administration.

“Kannan, never knew that he was having a heart ailment until he attended our health camp. As he could not afford the medical expenses, he did not reveal about his ailment to his family. One day, he suddenly took ill and was hospitalized in Chettinad Hospital at Kelambakkam. Dr. Satish Nair who had diagnosed him during the camp saw him by chance and informed me. I coordinated the insurance claim that was offered by the



Kalaivani, Kuppuswamy with Rm. K S Jayaraman distributing free notebooks for the tuition children at Kannadapalayam



Tree planting coordinated around Thirumullaivoyal as part of the environment awareness campaign

offered biscuits and snacks. Each year, Rotary Club provides free note books and stationery to all the tuition children. Once in a year, during Diwali or Christmas the children are offered gifts by Bhoomi. Besides tuition, children are also taught environment education, yoga, and spoken English.

Few children are also offered educational support through Nightingale Trust. Bharati, 17, a student of the tuition centre recently completed her 12th standard and ranked third in her school. She is now pursuing her graduation in Mahalakshmi Women’s College at Poonamalee, and all her educational expenses are borne by the Trust.

During weekends, the tuition centre doubles up to serve as a computer center. “We received four computers from Bhoomi, a voluntary group, and with the support of ten volunteers we provide free computer education to the tuition children. Zonta Club sponsors the salary costs for three tuition teachers, and we mobilize individual donations to

Kalaivani.

Kuppuswamy supports Kalaivani in all the project activities, including coordinating the health camp once in three months. “My husband teaches yoga, general knowledge, and tailoring for the tuition children. He spends most of his leisure time with the tuition children,” says Kalaivani.

Kalaivani leads a self-help group that she formed in 2000. This was her first step into social work. She is also the Secretary of Thirumullaivoyal Grama Pengal Sabha (Thirumullaivoyal Village Women’s Forum) since 2001.

“While I was actively engaged in the SHG programmes as well as Grama Pengal Sabha programmes, I also attended Entrepreneurship Development Trainings. I was keen to widen my knowledge about social issues and social work, and so participated in short-term courses conducted by NGOs. This gave me the opportunity to work with Madras Social

Development Society’s ‘Care and Support Program for HIV patients’. As part of my work, when I visited the Kilpauk Medical College, I met Senthil, an alumnus of CSIM. He shared with me information on the courses offered by CSIM, and motivated me to enroll for the Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management Program.”

“A world of change happened to me after enrolling at CSIM. My ideas on social work became more focused. I learnt about many practical aspects like registering a Trust and the formalities associated, and the strategic approach in addressing a social issue. The training provided by CSIM also strengthened my communication and inter personal skills, as well as made me understand the power of networking. Today, I network with many organizations and individuals which enables me to scale up my work effectively,” said Kalaivani.

Nightingale Trust along with Rotary Club

government which enabled Kannan to undergo the by-pass surgery successfully,” said Kalaivani.

Awareness programs on health, hygiene and nutrition, pre-natal and post natal maternal care was also conducted. “Our health care volunteers co-ordinate with the Public Health Centre and distribute medicines and supplements benefiting people living in seven neighbouring villages. “Our children planted 100 saplings in and around Thirumullaivoyal as part of our environment awareness campaign. I believe that every individual plays a crucial role in the overall development of the village and it is our duty to motivate them,” concluded Kalaivani.

Fighting against many odds, this young woman Kalaivani has paved the way for hundreds of villagers living in around Thirumullaivoyal. If you wish to extend support to Nightingale Trust, please contact Kalaivani at 09962993947.

—Radha Jagan

# To Live and Let Live



Solayan

**S**olayan of Positive Friends Welfare Association (PFWA) is living proof that anyone with AIDS can live a normal and healthy life. He travels around the district with this message to spread hope: "Any person with HIV can live normally. All he has to do is consume ten times the nutritious food a normal person has," he says.

The PFWA was set up by Solayan and six others living with HIV in 2003 to help spread awareness about the condition, to teach those who are infected to lead normal lives and to monitor the spread of the virus.

"I was born and brought up in Madurai but when I was diagnosed with AIDS, I ran away fearing exile to Thiruvallur, wanting to commit suicide. I met a friend here who told me that I have a gift and that I must use it to become an example to others like me. I found six more people who were dedicated to the cause and together we

**"Any person with HIV can live normally. All he has to do is consume ten times the nutritious food a normal person has,"**

formed PFWA. Today, there are more than 2000 people involved and everyone who works here is HIV-positive," he explains.

With AIDS awareness centres all over the State, the NGO has spread its wings wide, being predominantly funded by Population Foundation of India (PFI). They set up awareness camps in

various villages, conduct activities to increase condom usage, and induce survivors to come forward to inspire others. This, they hope, will change people's attitudes towards AIDS and get tested voluntarily.

"If I tell them that they can live normally, they tend to believe it. Most people don't admit having HIV because they fear of being isolated by the community. We diagnosed around 30 to 50 people with HIV every month; and this are those who voluntarily agree to be tested upon. There are hundreds more, who never do," he adds.

PFWA also works with the government hospital in various districts and other AIDS awareness NGOs like the Integrated Counseling and Testing Centre (ICTC) to monitor the spread of the virus. According to Solayan, more than ten thousand people are likely to be infected in Thiruvallur alone.

"The richer patients don't come to us. They get treated privately and ask not to be included in our

survey. So, we will never know the exact number. We do what we can and counsel them on how to live with their condition," says Anitha, a volunteer.

Since there is a sizable infiltration of commercial sex workers into Thiruvallur from the Andhra border, the looming threat spreading of the disease worries Solayan. And according to a latest survey by the PFWA, commercial sex workers are the main cause for AIDS in the area.

"We have approached the sex workers and asked them why they don't insist on the use of condoms by their customers. They tell us that clients pay more if they don't have to wear one. The girls end up giving in to the prospect of earning more."

Solayan feels that if the stigma attached to the disease is eliminated and people with AIDS begin to gain social acceptance, the disease will stop spreading.

"People with AIDS aren't eligible for surgery for the fear of it spreading through the instruments. So, they hide their condition to survive, in turn spreading it inadvertently. If society accepted them and treated them normally, then the spread of the disease can be arrested," says Solayan.

—Anusha Parthasarathy  
Asian College of Journalism

*Since AIDS was first identified in the early 1980s, an unprecedented number of people have been affected by the global AIDS epidemic. Today, there are an estimated 33.4 million people living with HIV and AIDS, and each year around two million people die from AIDS related illnesses.*

#### What is HIV?

HIV stands for: Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV is a virus. The human immune system usually finds and kills viruses fairly quickly, but HIV attacks the immune system itself – the very thing that would normally get rid of a virus.

#### What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS is a medical condition. A person is diagnosed with AIDS when their immune system is too weak to fight off infections.

#### What is the connection between HIV & AIDS?

HIV causes AIDS by damaging the immune system cells until the immune system can no longer fight off other infections that it would usually be able to prevent. It takes around ten

years on average for someone with HIV to develop AIDS. However, this average is based on the person with HIV having a reasonable diet, and someone who is malnourished may well progress from HIV to AIDS more rapidly.

#### What is the treatment for HIV?

Antiretroviral drugs keep the levels of HIV in the body at a low level, so that the immune system is able to recover and work effectively. Antiretroviral drugs enable many HIV positive people to live long and healthy lives and can prolong the time between HIV infection and the onset of AIDS.

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# Citadel of Compassion

*Sevalaya - an NGO  
working for the poor  
and the deprived*

As one enters Sevalaya the writing on the gate welcomes you "Please shed all your preferences, prejudices if any, based on cast, creed, colour, religion, language, sex, and nationality before entering". With this as their basic principle, Sevalaya receive all who need their services, or whoever they want to serve.

V. Muralidharan, a dynamic enterprising software engineer along with a few like-minded friends founded Sevalaya in 1988 when he was 27 years old. The trust was launched in a small hut at Sivanvayil, a small village in Tamil Nadu. Later Sevalaya purchased one acre of land at Kasuva village in Thiruninravur, 40 km west of Chennai.

Now Sevalaya has completed 21 years of service. It has grown like a banyan tree under whose shade and shelter is housed Mahakavi Bharathiar Higher Secondary School, Ramakrishna Paramahansa old age home, Vivekananda home for orphaned boys and girls, Swami Vivekananda library, and Vinobaji Gosala that is spread over 13 acres of land.



Children engaged in gardening



Library

Muralidharan has drawn inspiration from all these great men and translated their ideas into reality. "When I was in the 7th standard, I read a Bharthiar poem on the Saraswathi pooja day. The poem talks about the actual significance of Saraswathi pooja. Bharathiar has said that by reciting mantras, offering flowers, and placing books for worship alone, is not Saraswathi pooja. One needs to go to places and start schools where there aren't any, and educate the poor. These words inspired me and I have fulfilled his dream with the help of my friends. Today, there is not a single town or village in this country without a school—this is true Saraswathi pooja," said Muralidharan.

After completing engineering, Muralidharan married Bhuvaneshwari who was employed at Unit Trust of India. Sevalaya dedicates its service through education, food, and a above all love and care.

Sevalaya bases its functions on philosophies

of three important personalities: Mahakavi Bharathiar—education for all, Mahatma Gandhi—development of villages, and Swami Vivekananda—food for the hungry. Sevalaya extends its reach to 15 neighboring villages benefiting the deprived through their various projects.

Mahakavi Bharathiar Higher Secondary School, a project of Sevalaya provides free education from Pre-kg to Standard 12. Besides, students are provided free uniforms, books and transportation facilities. Educational tours are organized for the children and tuitions are offered free of cost.

The classrooms are spacious and well ventilated, with 35 to 45 students in each room. Science laboratories are fully equipped and since 5 years, the school has scored 100% results in 10th standard examinations. During the last academic year, one student scored 481 out of 500, and lost the state rank by 14 marks.

The school adheres to a special syllabus called BGV where all students learn about the lives and works of Bharathiar, Gandhiji and Vivekananda and appear for a competitive examination for this subject.

The Vivekananda Library contains 12,000 books that have been donated by several institutions and sponsors. The students have a library period once in a week and the students from nearby villages are permitted to use the school library as well. A mobile library visits the neighboring villages twice a month. In this way, reading habit is inculcated amongst the students and the villagers. Students who have passed out from the school serve as teachers here. G. Ilayaraja, a software engineer, and a past student of Sevalaya, is now a board member and actively participates in all the development projects.

Free technical education is given to students who are interested in seeking employment after they complete 12th standard. Professionals from different fields train the students. Kasturba Tailoring Class imparts free training for girl children in the school as well as to the girls from nearby villages to equip them with skills to be self employed or seek employment in export garment houses. Sevalaya also has a placement center, and higher education in professional colleges is sponsored for meritorious students.

Sevalaya offers free hostel facilities for boys and girls who are either orphaned or have single parents. Presently, 160 students reside in the hostel. Food, uniform, clothes, books are provided free of cost to these children. Once a week the children are taken to a church, temple, mosque, or gurudwara. On every Saturday, a cultural programme called Neelamuttram is organized, where the staff and hostel children spend the evening in the open singing, dancing, and enacting skits. Teachers narrate to the children interesting stories and anecdotes from the lines of Bharathiar, Gandhiji and Vivekananda.

On Sundays, a children's parliament is conducted where various issues are discussed

and debated upon. The students also spend time with elders in the old age home—Ramakrishna Paramahansa house. There are 60 senior citizens, many of them husband and wife, who lead a dignified and peaceful life here. Free health checkup and tours are organized for the inmates once in a month.

Sevalaya is self sufficient. The premise houses a dairy farm—Vinbaji Gosala—which provides milks for the inmates. The extra milk is sold, and the dung is used as manure and to prepare bio-gas which is used for cooking. Sevalaya has five and half acres of paddy fields, coconut and mango trees, banana plantations, vegetables, and flower garden. Experts in the field of organic farming guide the workers and the students in maintaining the farm.

Sevalaya students have excelled in sports and have won many prizes. A physical trainer trains the students in various sports activities and the students have participated and won prizes at state level for kho-kho, handball, volleyball, and athletics. Recently, two of Sevalaya students have joined the state athletics team.

Sevalaya also plays a great role in the development of the nearby villages. Once in a month, free medical and veterinary camps are organized and Mahatma Gandhi medical centre offers medical care for the school students and villagers who live nearby. Cultural programmes on social issues are conducted by students and counseling support is offered to villagers.

Sevalaya does not encourage any form of punishment or humiliation for the students. The students and senior citizens are treated with love and affection. The teachers and other staffs are oriented to render service with love.

Sevalaya has received many awards for the service they have rendered for over 21 years. Mahakavi Bharathiar School won the National Award for the Model School in India. Muralidharan and Bhuvaneshwari received the Sathguru Gnanananda award in 2008 for family in social work. Pegasus institute of excellence, selected Sevalaya as the best institution for value based management and was presented Rs. 3,00,000 on July 2008. The school also won the best green campus award in September 2008. Muralidharan has been selected president of NGO Guardian, an organization to fight the onslaughts against NGO. He has been also nominated as convener of Thiruvallur district, Tamil Nadu Sarvodaya Mandal, a Gandhian organization.

With selfless service, Muralidharan and his wife Bhuvaneshwari with many like-minded people move on with their social service to fulfill their dream to launch a university at Kasuva village.

*If you wish to support Sevalaya, Contact  
Muralidharan at: +91 9444167625*

—P Ambika



Health Camp

# The Ebb and Flow

The Conversations team spent a Saturday evening at the Thiruvannmiyur beach in Chennai trying to understand the lives of the hawkers who make a living there



Nagendran



Murgan



Kallamma



Anjala

As the evening progressed, the canvas pulled busier. At dusk, the beach was thronged with people of various denominations. They came in cars, on bikes, and some even on foot. They came to walk, talk, play—and eat.

The hawkers had kept pace. Since late afternoon they had been busy setting up their carts, mats, makeshift tables—or they cycled along them in beach road and in the byways. The first shop to catch our attention was a cluster of pink and orange candy floss that clung to a wooden pole plunged in the sand. The shop owner, reluctantly agreed to a brief chat. Nagendran, 40, said that he had been a hawker since 2004. After his father's death, he came to Chennai along with a fellow villager to earn for the family.

Nagendran said: "It has been a year since I came to Chennai, and I earn 2,000 rupees every month. Whatever I manage to save, I give it to my family when I visit them during Raksha Bandhan (a Hindu festival which celebrates the bond between brothers and sisters). I eat two packets of candy when I am hungry. At the end of each day, I hand over the sales amount and the unsold packets to my owner. These unsold packets are taken to hotels that use the candy to make *rasam chutney*. Fresh candy is made every day."

During weekdays Nagendran manages sales worth Rs 1,500. On other days, he only makes 150 to 300 rupees a day. "I need to earn for my family as there is no one else who can support them. In the morning, I sell candy in residential areas. I do not find it difficult to walk all day long; it has become a habit. Today, I have made a sale of Rs 300 so far."

Across the road was Murgan setting up his *masala porri*—spicy pulsed rice—stall. The cart was decorated with sliced mangoes and tomatoes, and Murgan was expertly washing for his customers to arrive. With pulsed rice, groundnut, onions, cabbage, tomatoes, and mangoes, Murgan was quick to make a snack within less than a minute. He was attentive to customers who needed more spice, and served each one with a smile. "My friends sell the vegetables while at home, and I manage this stall here. I have three children aged 10, 8, and 6 years, who study in the nearby corporate school. They visit the stall during their holidays, and like the *masala porri* that I make. They also enjoy buying ice-creams and *bajjis* from the nearby stalls," said Murgan.

Murgan earns around Rs 200 on weekdays and Rs 500 during weekends. "It has been ten years since I set up this stall. When I started, I used to sell a pack of *masala porri* for 10 rupees. Now the same pack is sold at 15."

Kallamma is the most experienced hawker

here, and has been running her *bajji* stall for over 24 years. Her husband, who was working in a hotel in Madurai, decided to move to Chennai and set up a *bajji* stall to earn their livelihood. "We did not know any other trade. My husband is a good cook, and so we thought that this would be ideal for us. We now earn 200 rupees a day and much more during weekends," said Kallamma.

Kallamma relocated to Semmencherry after her house was severely damaged by the tsunami in 2004. Now, she spends two hours a day commuting to the beach to earn a living. Her son, Sarath, studies in a school in Royapettah and lives with his uncle, while her daughter remains at home. "I help my husband by cutting vegetables, cleaning vessels, and also attending to customers. We use refined oil, and ensure that the food quality is good," said Kallamma.

While each hawker was busy managing their stall, Anjala was working with a vessel that was half-filled with *rasam*—a spicy South Indian snack made out of legumes. "I left from the state auto and dropped more than half of the snack that I brought to sell today," she told us matter-of-factly. "I invest 50 rupees for one kilo of *rasam* and earn 25 as profit. I do not come here every day. It is only when I need the extra money that I come," said Anjala.

Anjala works as a domestic help to raise her children, but had to quit due to poor health. After she lost her husband, her two sons disowned her. Now, she lives with her daughter who works as a staff nurse in a hospital in Ayer. "I earn more from selling *rasam* than from my job. They are the ones who make me happy, and give me company when I am at home. I feel that I need to do something to return for them."

A group of children drew our attention to a rather odd beach stand. One such notable balloon was heart-shaped and had two smaller balloons shaped like crows stuck on it. Kandam, 28, was busy blowing the balloons with his mouth and attending to his customers. One could hardly notice that his left arm was deformed. "I tried to bring the pump today. Else, it would have been easier for me," said Kandam.

Kandam has studied up to high school, and could not read or write properly due to his disability. He is married and has a nine-month-old daughter. "People mocked me, asking me what work I could do with one hand. I tried to work as a construction laborer but found it very difficult. I then decided to sell balloons. I now earn around 300 rupees a day, and during weekends earn up to 500. I am happy being a balloon seller as I make enough money to sustain my family. Moreover, I need not work for any one else," said Kandam confidently.

Saravanan was trying groundnuts, a popular favorite, and attracted customers to his stall with the clanging noise he made from his ladle. "I sell

10 kilos of groundnuts daily. I am paid 2,000 a month, and I need to return the cart and the unsold groundnuts to my owner before 10:30 p.m. each day."

Saravanan moved to Chennai eight years ago. His family stays in Sattarama, a village in Vilupuram District. "Whenever I see people coming to the beach in a car, I feel that I should have taken my studies more seriously. I would have earned a decent income from a degree job, bought my own car, and come to the beach to relax. Instead of standing here each day trying a groundnut," said Saravanan, regretting that he stopped studying after Class VII.

During monsoons the hawkers find it difficult to commute, and thereafter when they do not have a sale, it is a customer. "I am planning to visit my family next month when we have the temple festival. Spending time with my family, and sharing my life savings with them, gives me the satisfaction of having worked all day long at the beach," concluded Saravanan.

A little further away on the beach were Rajeshwari making hot *bajjis*. Her customers were mostly women and children who were living in the slum tenements nearby. "I married my uncle and we had a petty shop in our hometown where we sold fruits. The earnings were not sufficient to meet our family needs. We therefore moved to Chennai four months ago and set up this *bajji* stall," said Rajeshwari.

Rajeshwari manages to earn a profit of 100 rupees a day. Her husband, a vegetable vendor, assists her in cutting vegetables and purchasing raw materials. "Although my husband earns 200 rupees a day, he spends 120 rupees to buy liquor. After paying current, we have hardly any money left to meet our domestic needs. I have left behind my one-year-old son with my mother as I am expecting another child in August. We are now thinking of returning to our hometown," said Rajeshwari.

Children were crowding around Azem. Sherik's *soan puppi*—a crisp Indian sweet—stall, Azem, 42, has been engaged in selling *soan puppi* for the last 15 years. "With sugar and maida, I make the *soan puppi* in my home with the help of a machine. My father has been selling *soan puppi* for over 40 years in Chennai, and I was involved in it since I was young. My wife and two children live in Lalur. I visit them once in three or four months. I send a money order of 2,000 to 2,500 rupees to my wife Sharmila every month. Earlier, I used to earn only 50 rupees a day. Now, I earn 100 to 150 rupees a day," said Azem.

As the night ebbed, people began to disperse, although they wished to stay much longer. But, the hawkers remained in anticipation that their customers will visit their stalls yet again.

—Marie Bano



Saravanan



Rajeshwari



Azem



Kandam

Photo credit: AK





Photo credit: AK

Vidya with Pounamma

# HOME, but not alone

**“Whenever I see a person entering the home, I hope that they are not coming to seek admission.”**

**—Shantha, Trustee,  
Sri Satyanarayana  
Charitable Trust.**

“I am 100 years’ old,” says Vidya.

She could easily pass off as one. She walks bent in a right-angle and her face has more wrinkles than the bark of a Banyan tree. She wears what looks like thick magnifying glasses held in place by a string.

“She has been saying that for the last 12 years,” says Ganesh with a fond cackle. Ganesh looks after the 35 orphaned and abandoned elderly men and women who stay in a home run by the Sri Satyanarayana Charitable Trust.

Vidya was abused by her daughter-in-law, and her son brought her to the home promising to visit her every week along with his children. “It has been nearly three months since my son has visited me. I have his phone number and am going to call him now,” says Vidya, not having lost hope just yet.

Like Vidya, there are 25 women and 10 men, most of them aged over 60 who reside in the home. Shantha, a trustee of Sri Satyanarayana Charitable Trust supervises the day-to-day activities of the home, and spends time interacting with the residents.

“Earlier, I used to visit the home once in four

days as I lived far away. Now, I have moved closer and spend most of my time here. I find a lot of peace interacting with the residents, and ensure that I speak to everyone every day.”

“When I was 35, I decided to dedicate my life

to serve those elderly who lacked family support. Being a Satya Sai devotee, I helped in organizing temple events and coordinating food distribution among the poor. Like me, there were over 300 Satya Sai devotees who convened under one umbrella for which Shekar was the convenor. During the early ‘90s, when Shekar spoke of his interest in starting a home for the orphaned elderly, I expressed my willingness to be part of the initiative. My husband, currently a supervisor in a catering company, supported the idea. Thus, Shekar and I launched the Sri Satyanarayana Charitable Trust in 1994 along with our friends: P. Sridharan, S.

Sridharan and Ganesh,” says Shantha.

The Trust provides care and shelter to abandoned or orphaned elders who have been referred by friends and well-wishers, and does not publicize its work. A thorough reference

check is carried out by the trustees before anyone is brought into the home to ensure that they do not have any family support. Separate dormitories are provided for men and women, and each of the rooms is equipped with a television set. The home also houses a Satya Sai temple where rituals are performed every day, and the residents are encouraged to spend time in prayer.

The residents are active, and can manage their needs on their own. They also share responsibilities in maintaining the premise clean. While some are engaged in cooking, the rest help in managing the daily chores. Speaking about the willingness of

**“I received a call saying there were no provisions to prepare dinner. I was about to go to the store, when I received another call saying that a donor had visited the home and left behind 5 kilos of wheat, oil and dal”**

the residents to work, Shantha says: “When they are asked to engage in work, they readily agree. They say that they feel at home, and engaging in small tasks keeps them occupied and helps them get over depression.”

The residents are served vegetarian food, and congee is provided to those who are ill. “We call it Prashad—a food offered to God. One day, I received a call saying there were no provisions to prepare dinner. I was about to go to the store, when I received another call saying that a donor had visited the home and left behind 5 kilos of wheat, oil and dal,” says Shantha.

P Sridharan, a trustee, spends his free time in the home. He coordinates the purchase of rations and consumables, and counsels the elders. “When a family lives together, there are differences of opinion. Likewise, in this home too we have, at times, misunderstandings among the residents. We try our best to resolve them amicably. Swami Satya Sai once said: ‘Take one step towards a good cause, and I will lead you to a hundred more steps.’ This is the ideology that we follow.”

“Some elders come to the home after they had a dispute with their family members. First, we

console them, and later contact their family. Many a times, their children apologize and take them back to their home on the same day," smiles Sridharan.

"When we started the home, we had only two residents: one was an old man receiving a monthly pension of 1,000 rupees and had no one to care for him, and the other was a young man who was disowned by his family. We learnt that those who are solely dependent on their children have suicidal tendencies when they are asked to leave their home. Therefore, we decided to extend our support to those who have been disowned by their family members as well," says Sridharan.

The Hindu mission hospital provides free medical care to the residents, and the trust bears only the cost of the medicines. Dr. Hariharan, who owns a private hospital in Chromepet, organizes monthly health camps at the home, and extends his services to the neighborhood residents as well. He does not charge his patients, and provides them with free medicines. "Around 42 patients visit the medical camp regularly. The elderly mostly complain of hypertension, diabetes, and arthritis. I source the medicines from clinics that have unused medicine samples, and use them to treat patients here," says Hariharan.

Besides care for the elderly and medical camps for the under-privileged, Sri Satyanarayana Trust also provides vocational training for children who live in the neighboring areas. "Tailoring, typewriting and computer coaching is provided to students who have completed 10th standard. The children who attend the training programme are encouraged to spend their free time with the elders, and help them in keeping the premise clean," says Mahalakshmi who coordinates the training programs.

—Marie Banu

Kamala, 82, a Keralite had moved to Chennai after she got married. After the demise of her husband, she struggled hard to take care of her eight children. She worked as a construction laborer, and as a domestic maid to meet her family's needs. Having lost seven out of her eight children, her son found her to be a burden when he got married eleven years ago. She was thus sent to Sri Satyanarayana Trust. "I am very happy here. I do not have much work to do and I spend my free time in prayer. I do not wish to be a burden for anyone and wish for a peaceful death. Shekar treats me like his mother. When I expressed my desire to eat a mango, he immediately got me few mangoes to eat," says Kamala.



Kamala and Eswari



Ravi

Ravi was walking with the help of a trolley from the men's dormitory towards the Satya Sai temple. Although he could not speak fluently, he managed to communicate using signs. He tapped his hand when he wanted to say soda, and pointed a finger at his teeth when he meant tooth brush. "When I was 5 years old, I fell down and hurt my head. Since then, I cannot coordinate my limbs, nor speak normally. My mother spent a considerable amount on my medical treatment, but this did not help. I set up a petty shop in my home, and earned Rs 300 a day. After my mother passed away, I was sent to the home as there was no one to take care of me. Earlier, I used to walk with the help of a stick. Now I have a trolley which makes me move around easily," says Ravi.

Sri Satyanarayana Charitable Trust is located at : 1/462 Ponniamman Koil Second Street, Sathya Sai Avenue, Nanmangalam, Chennai.  
If you wish to know more about the trust, please contact K N Sekhar at 9444165030

## Social Entrepreneurship Outlook program E-learning module (eSEOP)

**Proposed date of launch - Mid August, 2010**

**Duration :** Four months

**Eligibility:** Knowledge of English and computer skills essential

**To promote the concept of social entrepreneurship amongst individuals who have an inclination towards social work**

**Participants gain a clear understanding of Social Entrepreneurship. The course helps in understanding the development sector and practical knowledge on NGO Management and legal requirements.**

**For details contact**



**CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INITIATIVE AND MANAGEMENT**

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# Inspiring Conversations

*Interesting conversations serve as road signs directing Creative thought. We bring you a few conversations that we feel are inspiring and thought provoking. Here is an interesting conversation about "Silence and Solitude" between Ramana Maharishi and his disciples.*

**D: Is a vow of silence useful?**

**M:** The inner silence is self-surrender. And that is living without the sense of ego.

**D: Is solitude necessary for a sannyasin?**

**M:** Solitude is in the mind of a man. One might be in the thick of the world and yet maintain perfect serenity of mind; such a person is always in solitude. Another may stay in the forest, but still be unable to control his mind. He cannot be said to be in solitude. Solitude is an attitude of the mind; a man attached to the things of life cannot get solitude, wherever he may be. A detached man is always in solitude.

**D: What is mauna?**

**M:** That state which transcends speech and thought is mauna; it is meditation without mental activity. Subjugation of the mind is meditation; deep meditation is eternal speech. Silence is ever-speaking; it is the perennial

flow of 'language'. It is interrupted by speaking; for words obstruct this mute 'language'. Lectures may entertain individuals for hours without improving them. Silence, on the other hand, is permanent and benefits the whole of humanity. . . . By silence, eloquence is meant. Oral lectures are not so eloquent as silence. Silence is unceasing eloquence. . . . It is the best language. There is a state when words cease and silence prevails

**D: How then can we communicate our thoughts to one another?**

**M:** That becomes necessary if the sense of duality exists....

**D: Why does not Bhagavan go about and preach the Truth to the people at large?**

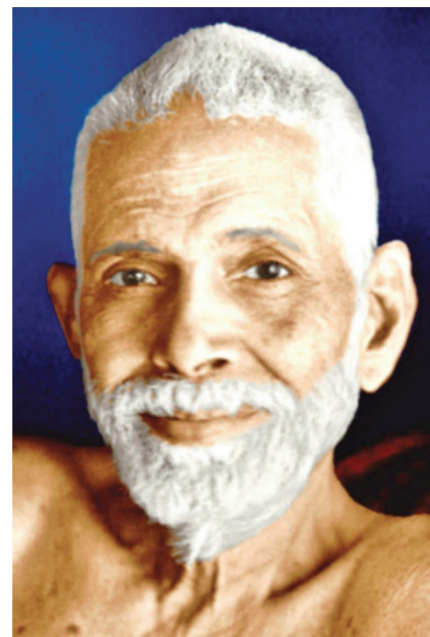
**M:** How do you know I am not doing it? Does preaching consist in mounting a platform and haranguing the people around? Preaching is simple communication of knowledge; it can really be done in silence only. What do you think of a man who listens to a sermon for an hour and goes away without having been impressed by it so as to change his life? Compare him with another, who sits in a holy presence and goes away after sometime with his outlook on life

totally changed. Which is the better, to preach loudly without effect or to sit silently sending out inner force?

Again, how does speech arise? There is abstract knowledge, whence arises the ego, which in turn gives rise to thought, and thought to the spoken word. So the word is the great-grandson of the original source. If the word can produce effect, judge for yourself, how much more powerful must be the preaching through silence! But people do not understand this simple, bare truth, the truth of their everyday, ever-present, eternal experience. This truth is that of the Self. Is there anyone unaware of the Self? But they do not like even to hear of this truth, whereas they are eager to know what lies beyond, about heaven, hell and reincarnation.

Because they love mystery and not the truth, religions cater to them so as eventually to bring them round to the Self. Whatever be the means adopted, you must at last return to the Self: so why not abide in the Self here and now? To be a spectator of, or to speculate about the other world, the Self is necessary; therefore, they are not different from the Self. Even the ignorant man when he sees the objects, sees only the Self.

*Excerpted from Maharshi's Gospel – The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*



## Lessons Learned

One day, the father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to a village with the sole purpose of showing him how poor people live. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family.

On their return from their trip, the father asked his son, "How was the trip?"

"It was great, Dad."

"Did you see how poor people live?" the father asked.

"Oh yeah," said the son.

"So, tell me, what did you learn from the trip?" asked the father.

The son answered: "I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that

reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon.

"We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight."

"We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs."

"We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them."

The boy's father was speechless.

Then his son added, "Thanks Dad for showing me how poor we are!"

## Feedback

### Dear Editor,

Congratulations on bringing awareness and showing the path to many!

I am sure parents reading the article on autism will now be able to identify the signs and provide early intervention for their child if needed.

Great job on bringing out the angels amongst us like Kalpana and Meenakshi - inspiring articles and I

hope more people will get motivated to do something. I loved the interview with Nandita Das and the questions were great.

About the article on Alcoholic Anonymous - again it is a great path to people who need help - great choice in picking articles.

Best Wishes!

— Christina Nirmala Nathan

### Dear Editor,

Greetings! I just read your tabloid *Conversations*. Its an unique initiative and the contents are informative and impressive. I wish to be a subscriber of it and please let me know what are the procedures. Hope, its an no-cost magazine. Thank you.

— John Prathap Kumar

# ASPIRATION – the springboard for action

## A Series on Growing- Reflections for Deep Change

A few years back in one of our workshops, during a discussion on personal vision and aspirations in life, one of the participant said she has had an aspiration in life for the past twenty years; to start a school of her own for the under privileged. This is something that she had formulated when she was twenty years old and for the past twenty years several things have happened in her life... but she is still living that aspiration in her mind... but insisted that she is on the path of her vision!! This is a very interesting space in life. We get caught with a nice thought or an idea and continue not to lose that idea all through life but there is no action with regard to making it a reality. There are several ideas that many people hold for life in their minds but life continues in a separate track by itself. Some of us also join social entrepreneurship forums and courses but do not take much action with regard to converting the idea into a reality. Society needs social entrepreneurs who will act and pursue their dream as though it is their very life. If it remains in mind, it is like the person in this story – One day a disciple came to sage Ramakrishna and said, “Oh sage! I



hear you say that depth of aspiration is the springboard to the discovery of truth. I don't understand what you mean.” Ramakrishna asked the disciple to come with him to the river and take a dip in the water with him. The disciple thought that the master was going to give him a special initiation. He readily went along and as the master had requested, and put his head under water. Ramakrishna just held the disciple's head under water and would not release his hold until the man almost drowned and his struggle became a frenzy. As he

rose up, the sage remarked, “When you aspire for truth the way you did for a breath of air, you'll not rest until you've discovered it.” (Sampath. J.M. story 68 Discovery – 3rd edition, Insight Publishers, Bangalore, India, 1998) Until an idea is not something that is as close as the next breath of air for a person, the passion does not get ignited. Every successful social entrepreneur displays a passion that is arising out of the aspiration and vision that is embedded deep within. This passion when kindled gives the enormous amount of energy that is

required to rise against the tides, tread the un-trodden path and emerge with the power to make a difference to oneself and the society. Being interested in society and its development is not a fashion to be followed. It calls for efforts, dedication, sacrifices, and actions, leaving no stone unturned with sometimes zero expectation on the rewards and returns. Sometimes it is a set of pure actions because one feels that it is what will make a difference. The belief is strongly embedded in the person and the

power of that belief converts the thought or the idea into reality. People with high aspirations do not seek reward or praise for the work that they do since they are internally anchored and their motivation comes from within.

In order not to admit that it is one's passion that is lacking, people find enough justifiable reasons and excuses on why they cannot pursue their idea rather than finding one good way on how they can act on their idea and convert it into reality.

“All the beautiful sentiments weigh less than a single lovely action” (Rousseau and the Sentimentalists, quoted in John Bartlett, Familiar Quotations, 14th ed. 1968, p. 695.)

### Points for Reflection:

- The idea of making a difference to me and society is in my mind or in action?
- What are my expectations from the society and others in return for the efforts that I take?
- What prevents me from putting all my efforts to achieve what I aspire for?
- What are the things I am willing to stake for converting my dreams into reality?
- Are the ideas that you nurture in mind merely idea for a long time or have you taken concrete actions to realize the same in reality?

—J.M.Sampath & Kalpana Sampath  
This is the sixth article in the series 'Growing...reflections for deep change'.



## CORPORATE SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

There is a dearth of vision from business leaders with regard to society. They are generally accustomed to power leadership and not servant leadership. There is lack of imagination, but growth of corporate virtue.

What India needs is Corporate Social Involvement, innovation and responsibility as governance, and we do not need only Gross Domestic Product to increase every year. This may be happening with poor ecology and equity responsibilities but with impressive economics.

Take on a rural area or a city slum, identify the needs for growth in good health, basic sound education, clean drinking water, food and nutrition, security for the inhabitants at affordable costs, leading to environmentally friendly practices and have earnings improvement or in other words a wholesome, integrated management of the

community leading to better standard of life, balanced life style and bring in Gross domestic Happiness as an index of growth with joy.

If corporates develop and sustain such a model through application of Time, Talent, Treasure, and Touch, it will become something to replicate in different places and geographies with due customization. Social entrepreneurs and employees can be engaged in the above activities for giving it a human touch, concern and sensitivity. Thus, at a fraction of resources at the disposal of corporates, a tremendous leverage can be achieved for long-term good.

In such development, there is a win-win for corporate and the society. It brings a working model for managing the gap between the 'Haves' and the 'Have-nots'. The 'model' so executed becomes one which can be used and replicated for reaching out

and derive spread effect at an epidemic speed. The so called disadvantaged sector due to improvement and better equity becomes productive and becomes a market.

At the bottom of the pyramid lies an enormous business potential to be explored and derived by getting involved in integrated development. At the bottom of the social pyramid there are about 400 crore people with an income lower than Rs 2000 a month and in this, half of them earn below Rs 1000 a month. This is where we have to work in a multi faceted manner to bring major change in equity, ecology and economy and corporates should lead the effort. The growth at the bottom sector of the economic and social pyramid can be fast.

Networking and building access are processes which bring services at affordable costs even to the people at the bottom of the pyramid. Stream lining supply chain helps in low cost or no cost access. Corporate social responsibility should consider 'women' as potential players in economic development, by training and development and empowering them.

Are you interested in launching effective CSR practices in your organisation?

Contact P N Devarajan @ 98400 39307



# Sunshine Actor

**Suriya** shares with **Marie Banu** why he puts charity before films



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

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

**What inspired you to start Agaram Foundation?**

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

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

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

**Who has been your inspiration to engage in social work?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Any day, Agaram Foundation tops my priority.

The sense of satisfaction I receive from this can never be compared with anything else. It's just not the satisfaction but more a responsibility that I owe here. I would never give up this responsibility and Agaram would continue to be my first preference.

**What are the future plans of Agaram Foundation?**

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

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

## Editorial

**Latha Suresh**  
**Marie Banu**  
**Radha Jagan**