

Conversations

A Chronicle of Social Currents

For Free Circulation Only

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Editor's Note

Greetings!

"If you have much, give of your wealth; if you have little, give of your heart."

This is a proverb I am reminded of whenever I interact with a social change agent. I admire them for their conviction and strength. Sharing their stories through this tabloid has renewed my energy and drive to identify many more such icons of goodness.

Last week, a friend of mine, on reading the first edition of Conversations, made a comment which I would like to share with you. He said, "The Bhagwad Gita is a compilation of divine conversations between Krishna and Arjuna but your tabloid Conversations is simply divine. Every story touched my heart and made me want to connect and make a difference in society"

I hope Conversations continues to meet his expectations, and yours.

P. N. Devarajan



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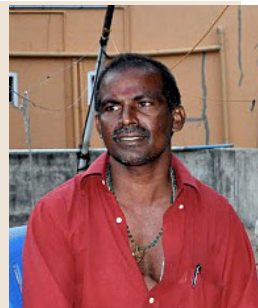
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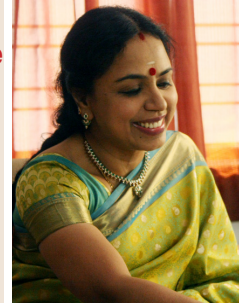
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Right to Information

Union Government's Department of Personnel and Training initiated the Right to Information Act in 2005 as a mandate for timely response to citizen requests for government information. The initiative is aimed at promoting transparency and accountability in the working of every public authority, the constitution of a Central Information Commission and State Information Commissions. Making of the Right to Information Act has been welcomed from all quarters of the society as it is a significant step towards establishing a regime that guarantees citizens' right to know. Despite the Act, transparency in the Indian system of governance has not been up to the desirable level till now. Thanks to the sustained grassroots campaigns of activists and government bodies, the state needs to be equipped well with adequate apparatus so that easy and inexpensive access to information is provided. The Act gives a new impetus to investigative journalism. We observe that the Social groups, anti-corruption agencies, media persons and social activists use the law to expose social evils.

In my long experience with live television programs, I have understood that the effective use of RTI would, in a long run, curb corruption and make the government more accountable. I have also realized that RTI is a key component in the attainment of economic, social and political privileges of an individual as well as the community at large. I find it necessary to point out how critical the difference in approach is, to the perspective of the Right to Information movement and of the aspirations of the poor. RTI campaigns have

helped expose and remove the many impractical norms in development programmes.

I am happy to see that all stages of the struggle for RTI have established the fact that an elected government has to be accountable to its people. Having effective legislation passed at the State and Central levels and supporting grassroots level initiatives for right to information are the two key factors in the changed scenario. The right of everyone to be heard, to speak and to participate in political, artistic and social life is, in turn, integral to the attainment and enjoyment of equality.

RTI empowers people for enjoyment of all the recognized rights as well as claiming rights and making accountable to the public agencies. Pluralism and diversity are hallmarks of freedom of expression. Realization of the right to freedom of expression enables vibrant, multi-faceted public interest debate giving voice to different perspectives and viewpoints. Inequality results in the exclusion of certain voices, undermining this. Freedom of expression and equality enhance the growth and vitality of civil society which in turn give visibility to the disadvantaged groups and attempt towards the protection of their rights. Right to information or freedom of information is the foundation for the enjoyment of all sorts of human rights. One of my journalist friend said "For every corrupt politician to achieve something, there need to be many more manipulative bureaucrats. They blame each other in public and work together in confidence". Though it is a humorous statement, we need to understand the broad reality.

- C.R.Bhaskaran
Founder, Needhiyin Kural

Social Audit & CSIM

The development sector has been grappling with the issue of measurement, metrics and accountability for a long time now. Several tools such as scorecards, ROI measurements as well as application of quality methodologies such as Six Sigma have been attempted with varied degrees of success. Social Accounting and Audit (SAA), in this context is a framework of accountability developed voluntarily by an organization to define its alignment with its mission and to understand how it has performed in relation to this mission. It is applicable across organizations from charities to social enterprises, and can be adapted to audit 'mission' compliance of organization as well as individual projects. It is a flexible and adaptable tool that allows organizations to 'prove and improve' performance.

The Social Audit Network (SAN) started in UK informally in the year 2000, is a non-profit company which has dispersed membership across the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Germany. It has defined the broad approach to SAA and is actively engaged in positioning it as the framework of choice for development sector, social enterprise and community organizations. It also certifies social auditors to chair a social audit panel which is the penultimate stage of SAA. (www.socialauditnetwork.org.uk)

CSIM has partnered with Social Audit Network (SAN) of UK, to spread the concept of Social Accounting and Audit in India. The CSIM-SAN India chapter has facilitated eight organisations across India to prepare its social accounts and have it audited by the SAN, UK auditors in 2009.

The Organisations are:

- Centre for British Teachers, Hyderabad, (NGO)
- Confederation of Indian Organisations for Service & Advocacy, (CIOSA) Chennai (NGO)
- Department of Social Initiatives – Forbes Marshall, Pune, (CSR Project)
- Dr Reddys Foundation for Health & Education, Hyderabad (CSR Project)
- Fullerton India Credit Company, Mumbai (For Profit Company)
- Indusree Crafts Pvt Ltd, Bangalore (For profit Social Enterprise)
- Madhuram Narayanan Centre, Chennai (NGO)
- Sri Arunodayam Charitable Trust, Chennai (NGO)

CSIM has three trained and SAN, UK certified social auditors. If you want to implement the Social Accounting and Audit process in your institution, please contact us at: csimchennai@gmail.com or contact me at +91 9282205123

- Latha Suresh
Director, CSIM

Benefits of Social Audit

- ♦ Understanding the impact
- ♦ Reducing strategy-operations gap
- ♦ Reaching out to stakeholders
- ♦ Improving transparency and accountability
- ♦ Improving public relations

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The 'Auto-man' Empire

"I am the proud father of 48 children", says Srikanth to Yogini



Photo credit: AK

Srikanth and Latha

Manjula

Mahalingam

Vetrivel, Sakthivel & Murugavel

He stood on the terrace of the rented, two-storey building and gently proclaimed, "I am the proud father of 48 children." To this, his wife Latha just smiled.

Srikanth, 45, got orphaned at the age of four. His education came to an abrupt halt when he was eight and, from then on, he had to work to make a living.

He grew up craving for parental warmth. Years later, he decided to turn his heartache into a resolve: to fill the vacuum that existed in the lives of orphaned children.

With this vision and a scanty savings of Rs. 5000 from his auto-rickshaw, in 2004 he started the Atheeswarar Charitable Trust to house orphaned children. Tucked in a remote corner of Tambaram in the outskirts of Chennai, the Trust is now home to 48 children.

My photographer friend and I had arrived at the Trust with some skepticism about how comfortable the children would be in this modest building. A portico led to a medium-sized hall, the outside of which had pink chipped walls. One side of the hall was covered with English, Tamil and Hindi alphabet charts and the other with pictures of animals and plants. Children, aged between five and fifteen, seated neatly in rows, greeted us strangers with disarming smiles. Instantly, our skepticism evaporated.

The children were from neighboring villages.

Most of them were orphans barring a few who were from poor single-parent families. Some children got to meet their parents or relatives once a year.

Boys greatly outnumbered the girls. While seated on the floor, the children waited for one of the staff to adorn their foreheads with kumkum, the red powder that many religious Indians use. After introducing themselves, the children asked us what had brought us there. The idea of being written about excited them immensely.

To capture their beaming faces in natural light, we took the children to the terrace. Their excitement did not come in the way of the discipline with which they climbed the stairs. Once seated comfortably, again in neat rows, they were ready to share their stories.

Irrespective of their age, they were all ambitious and confident. Vetrivel, 15, wanted to be an IPS officer. His friend, Sakthivel, seated next to him, echoed the same ambition. Together they wanted to beat up the bad guys! Murugavel wasn't far behind either. He wanted to be an IAS officer. Nagesh on the other hand, wanted to go the technology way. Computers and graphics were his forte, he said.

Some of the tinier folks were unsure of their careers but they all chorused, "We want to keep studying." The youngest and the latest addition to the family, Mahalingam, all of 5, simply wanted to earn loads of money and relax in life. Most of the girls wanted to be teachers or

beauticians. One of them seemed oblivious to our presence. Manjula preferred to look after the younger children, one of whom she carried on her waist. Latha, Srikanth's wife, explained that Manjula had restarted her studies after a break of two years. She had been physically abused by her relatives after she had lost her parents. At 14, she took care of almost all the children there. She considered it to be her duty. She did not have any interests and preferred household chores to studying.

The kids spend their day in either acquiring knowledge or in physically strengthening themselves. With a breakfast that consists of Boost or tea, they have an intensive session of yoga post which they are off to a nearby government school. Srikanth makes sure that the children receive their lunch in school. On returning from school, the kids get ready for their tuitions which ultimately give way to an hour long session of singing devotional songs. Before turning into bed, the kids eagerly discuss their day's happenings with each other. It is then that Srikanth's and his wife's busy day ends.

From taking care of the children's basic needs of food, clothing and shelter to more demanding needs of getting them married, Srikanth has decided to take it all up. But running this institution brings along its own challenges. After meeting all the expenses for the children, the couple is left with no real savings of their own. Aside from his earnings from the auto-rickshaw, Srikanth relies on private donations.

I suddenly felt that Srikanth was saying something to me. I looked up to realize that it had been a while since I had been standing on the terrace, absorbing what I had seen and felt there. The kids had gone down for their tuition.

"I have confidence in only three entities: God, my auto-rickshaw and myself," Srikanth said.

We came down the terrace and bid farewell to Srikanth and his humongous family. In all this, I suddenly wondered if the couple had biological kids of their own. When asked, he pointed to three boys that had been playing merrily with the others. "We want them to mingle with the other kids. This way they will learn to appreciate what they have."

We took a last glimpse of the children. Seated in the hall, they recited the English alphabet, followed by Tamil. They insisted that we take another set of photos with them.

We were warmly invited to visit them again and have a meal together some day. As we were leaving the home, Manjula came up to us and said, "There may not be too much variety here as compared to your home. But the love with which we offer is the same, if not more."

Her words stayed with me for a long time.

- Yogini

S.Srikanth - Trustee

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The Big Little Senators

"If action has not been taken, the minister who held the respective portfolio is asked to give an explanation."

-Sasikala, 12 years, PWD Minister of Arunavayal Children's Parliament

As I walked towards the temple in Arunavayal village in Tiravallur district, I heard young voices engaged in a serious discussion. I sneaked in when I thought I would be some little chatter about some movie or game. I was wrong by a mile.

"The street light is not working for the past two days and Ram akka stopped and fell last night while crossing the road. I have already sent the petition yesterday and hope by tonight it starts burning," said one girl.

"What about the leaking tap in South street? Did the plumber come as promised?" asked another kid.

"Of course! He came in the morning and repaired it," retorted the girl.

"Did the Maththethacher join duty yesterday?" a boy asked.

"No she did not. But the headmaster arranged for a volunteer to take her class," replied another.

Curious to know more, I entered the temple, walked towards the voices, and sat down. I was told that the Children's Parliament was in session.

I sat near a respectful elderly.

A group of 18 children sat in a circle with a few registers and notebooks in their hands. Their animated, serious discussions revolved around real issues in their village.

I was astounded by the topics they discussed:

- Deciding on issues to be raised in the forthcoming Gram Sabha meeting. Gram Sabha is constituted by all members of a village over the age of 18 years. The Gram Sabha elects the Gram Panchayat, a council of elected members taking decisions on key issues in the village.
- Allocating space for computer and typewriting classes for students who have completed class X.
- Deciding on where to plant saplings.
- Approaching transport authorities to ensure bus service for school children.
- Preparing an archive of news items on the children of Arunavayal and their welfare.
- Taking measures to improve the quality of teaching in a particular school because the teachers were not many teachers.
- Convening the Parent Teacher Association meeting regularly.

After a few heated debates and a game of resolutions were passed, points were recorded and the session was concluded. Throughout the session, the children discussed the problems earnestly before arriving at a solution.

Logammal has been taking tuition for the past seven years. She understood all the problems the children faced both at school and at home. When she spoke to them about the concept of Children's Parliament as a measure to resolve their problems, the children were excited about launching one in their village. The parents were first sceptical, but then they were convinced that this might affect their studies. After seeing the examination results in which all the children scored well, the parents were convinced. The first Children's Parliament started in April, 2007.

About the Parliament

Children from Class 4 to 12 are encouraged to be members of the Children's Parliament. Younger children are allowed to attend meetings as observers. Till date, there are Children's Parliaments have been formed, each consisting of 20 to 25 members.

Ten of the elected members hold the following portfolios: President, Vice President, Prime Minister, Home Minister and his assistant, Finance, Health, Law and order, Information and Broadcasting and Public Works Department. The tenure for each position is five years. Children are selected by the members for these positions unanimously based on their capabilities. If there is a contest, voting takes place. When members express their inability to continue, a special meeting is organized and a re-election is held. An attendance register is maintained and all the proceedings are documented.

The first resolution in the Children's Parliament is to respect elders and those who are physically challenged.

"Our parliament has been functioning for the past two years. There is a Prime Minister, a Speaker and eight more Ministers holding different portfolios. There are no specific criteria for participation - children who are interested, join the Parliament," said the current Prime Minister, 16-year-old B. Mohithkumar.

The Speaker starts the session and requests the Home Minister to read the minutes of the previous session. The members start discussing whether any action has been taken on the resolutions passed in the previous sessions. If action has not been taken, the concerned minister is asked to give an explanation," said Sasikala, the 12-year-old PW Minister.

"My role is to monitor the activities of the group and assist the President. We have submitted petitions to the Panchayat and have facilitated repairs of water taps and street lights. The Panchayat would discuss the petition during the Gram Sabha on 26th January. If the Panchayat is unable to support, then we will mobilize funds and coordinate the repair on our own," said Jayakumar, the 12-year-old Vice-President.

Children are given real-life responsibilities at a very early age. For instance, the Finance Minister of the Children's Parliament maintains her group accounts and has an account in the local post office.

All children attend the Gram Sabha meeting that is conducted in Arunavayal village. When meetings are organized in the neighboring villages, four children represent members from each Children's Parliament and submit petitions.

The advocacy efforts coordinated by the children are many. For instance, there was an air rack shop in the village which they wanted removed.

The Mahalir Sangam and Youth groups had submitted several petitions to the Panchayat to remove it, but failed. The children conducted a rally on Independence Day protesting against the presence of an air rack shop and on the very next day, August 16, 2009, the shop was relocated.

There are two Children's Parliaments in Arunavayal and one in Sakkarathoppa. Azhakarottur, two meetings

have been organized and members have been registered. If each Children's Parliament functioned in every neighborhood in Chennai, Singapore would become an amazing reality.

-Marie Barua

For more information contact: Ms. Logammal at: 9445152814

Questions & Answers



"If the Panchayat is unable to support us, then we will mobilize funds and coordinate the repair on our own."

-A. Deepa, 13 years, Finance Minister of Arunavayal Children's Parliament

Questions & Answers



How did you get the idea?

After pursuing my Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management at CSIM, I joined a rights based organization in Thiruvallur. It was there that I learnt about 'Children's Parliaments'. I used to also continue volunteering for the tuition centre out of my own interest and it was here I formed the first Children's Parliament in 2007.

What was CSIM's role?

CSIM has been a immense source of support for me. They sent volunteers to train the children in spoken English and general mathematics. Today, if I am confidently speaking to you it is because of CSIM. My interview was published in CSIM's monthly newsletter as well as the annual newsletter. This provided us with a lot of visibility and now we are receiving support from corporate houses too.

Tell us about your proudest moment.

There was one water tap in the main road which was not functional. Members of the Children's Parliament organized a meeting and resolved to repair the tap on their own. They mobilized funds from the village members - one rupee per house to meet the expense. This I would call achievement as, as I was not there to coordinate the meeting nor mobilize support.

Tell us about your most unforgettable day.

I can never forget the day when the wine shop was closed in our village as a result of the protest march led by the children against them. It made the parents proud of their children and the whole village rejoiced that day. Also, the joy on every child's face on seeing an article about them a few months ago in Dinakaran newspaper is something which I can never forget.

What are your plans for the Parliament?

The parents of the children are proud to see their children given responsibilities and being recognized and respected by the village. I also want to create a federation of these children in which two members from each Children's Parliament would be members and engaged in advocacy efforts.

"I will continue to work for the children and I want to be with my last while working for the children. I want to encourage these children to be elected as Panchayat presidents when they grow up."



Impact on children

- They assume a role in society and take responsibilities including that of governance and caretakers of their neighbourhood.
- The children who generally resent advice begin to learn from their experiences and advise one another.
- They find solutions to their problems.
- They gain self-confidence and become self-disciplined and self-motivated. They develop their personalities and enhance their leadership qualities as they have handled opportunities to lead.
- They learn practical lessons in becoming responsible citizens.
- They begin to envision a new world order starting from their neighbourhood and village, extending to the panchayat, block and district, and then the state. Their new world order will go beyond to include national and international levels.

The Rainwater Catcher

The story of a social entrepreneur who re-invented the practice of Rain Water Harvesting in Chennai.

India is among the very few countries which permits ground water to be tapped by the citizens. However, are we exercising the freedom in the right manner? Of course not! We dig a well and expect water to be available eternally! We never realize the water cycle is complete only when the rain water is recharged back into the earth. We unfurl before you, the story of a dedicated man who works to reinvent the practice of Rain Water Harvesting (RWH). While working for the Centre for Policy Studies, Dr. Sekhar Raghavan rigorously gathered exhaustive information about the temples, agriculture, livelihood, habitat styles and water management systems in 150 villages in Tamil Nadu. This study kindled Sekhar Raghavan's interest in RWH. He discovered that it was an ancient and excellent method to recharge ground water.

After studying the various soil types, he found that the sandy soil in Chennai enabled the rain water to percolate and acted as a natural source for recharging the ground water level. As there was less or no open ground available in residential areas, he wanted to introduce the concept of building structures to store the rain water. From 1995 to 1998 he organised a door-to-door campaign in Besant Nagar, Chennai, to educate people on the importance of recharging ground water and RWH. The response was poor and opposition stiff.

Sekhar Raghavan used the newspapers to create awareness on RWH and highlight the importance of recharging ground water. There were few responses but the enquiries did not transform into action. In June 2001, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu established a special cell to promote RWH and a law was passed, which required every building in Tamil Nadu, residential or commercial to install a rain water harvesting structure.

Modern RWH methods

- Percolation Pit Method
- Bore Well with Settlement Tank
- Open Well Method with filter bed Sump
- Percolation Pit with Bore Method

He collaborated with the Centre for Science and Environment* and the first Rain Centre in India was inaugurated on 21st August 2002 at Mandavelipakkam, Chennai. Today, every Collectorate in Tamil Nadu has a Rain Centre which creates awareness, provides information and support to the public on RWH.

The Government set an ultimatum for all buildings in Tamil Nadu to install RWH structures by 31st August 2003. Sekhar Raghavan observes, in a melee to meet the deadline, nearly 98% of the houses installed RWH structures. But around 50% did not apply the right methodology.

In the year 2005, there was a heavy rainfall in Chennai and the citizens reaped the benefits of

RWH. The wells and temple tanks swelled with increased levels of water despite most of the buildings not having proper RWH systems in place. Though RWH practices are slowly catching up in parts of the country, Tamil Nadu is the only state in India that has made RWH mandatory for new and existing buildings. The Government of Delhi has made it mandatory for new buildings only.

"Water cannot be taken for granted and the laid back attitude of the urban citizen needs to be rectified", says Sekhar Raghavan.

He asserts that RWH must be done in rural and urban areas. Rain water can either be used immediately or recharged into the soil to replenish the water table.



Sekhar Raghavan, (Ashoka Fellow, India) directs the Rain Centre in Chennai that creates awareness among urbanites about the importance of rainwater harvesting (RWH) in cities and rural areas to sustain the groundwater resource. He is also the Founder-Member of the Akash Ganga Trust - a voluntary group of dedicated RWH activists.

Their focus is on civic participation and strengthening citizen awareness. Presently, they are also working on ecological sanitation in the rural areas. Since 2006, they have built thirty toilets in Kovalam village. Their total sanitation campaign has harnessed the interest and support from Tokyo.

What is a Rain Centre?

Rain Centres are a network of permanent exhibitions to spread water literacy among urban Indians. They portray the significance of rain in the Indian way of life-its influence on the customs, traditions, economy and politics of this country. They define the role played by every Indian citizen in harvesting rainwater and using it to manage the issue of water scarcity effectively.

The Rain Centres provide people the know-how to harvest rain. They equip the civil society to take leadership in the movement to conserve water. They begin the process of rebuilding a society of water literates.

CSE is in the process of setting up rain centres across the country. Local NGO's and citizen's groups are identified in towns and metros as partners to launch.

"We do get support from corporate bodies and Rotary Clubs. However, a sustained support is what we need to execute our activities and maintain the Rain Centre. We welcome volunteers to support and conduct surveys, awareness campaigns and prepare communication material", he says.

After visiting the Rain Centre and talking to Dr. Sekhar Raghavan, we felt that each one of us have a responsibility towards RWH. We welcome you to visit, get motivated and do your part in recharging the ground water.

To know more about the Rain Centre visit www.raincentre.org or contact Dr. Sekhar Raghavan at: No.4, Third Trust Link Street, Mandavelipakkam, Chennai 600 028 Ph 24616134 / 24918415 Sekar1479@yahoo.co.in



*Centre for Science and Environment works to promote the concept of water harvesting for more than a decade now. CSE started its campaign with the research on traditional systems of water harvesting systems existing across the country. Rain Centres are being set up to create awareness, provide education and support to the public on RWH. Visit www.cseindia.org

Violence Against Women

Violence against women is an evil of epidemic proportions. It is the one tragedy that transcends nationalities, cultures, religions and races that international conventions and national laws have been impotent to stop. Women are subjected to violence in all facets of their life: in public spaces, inside the home, at the workplace, by family and strangers alike.

The Missing Girls

Violence against women starts even before their birth, with sex selection of fetuses resulting in the case of 'missing girls'. According to the 2001 census, there are only 927 girls for every 1000 boys in India. Despite laws banning sex selection, foeticide and female infanticide is practiced widely. The sex ratio in several States, have in fact, declined over the past decade. Alarming, female foeticide and infanticide is markedly higher in prosperous States such as Punjab & Haryana.

UNICEF reported that over 50 million women were 'missing' due to systematic sex selection through infanticide and foeticide. The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994 was enacted to check misuse of technologies for sex selection and female foeticide. The law has not been successful in eliminating female foeticide since it is not accompanied by social change.

The Government and several NGOs have been working on the crisis of sex selection through female foeticide and infanticide. Various State Governments have initiated incentive schemes for girl children including monetary assistance to families on the occasion of their birth and marriage.

NGOs have played a crucial role in spreading awareness on the ills of sex selection.

Violence against women & the IPC
The Indian Penal Code penalizes all forms of physical violence against individuals, be it sexual in nature or otherwise. Sexual violence directed

against women is governed by Section 376 of the IPC on rape and Section 354 on outraging the modesty of women. In addition, Tamil Nadu has enacted a more comprehensive Prohibition of Harassment of Women Act 1998 that criminalises harassment in the form of eve-teasing and stalking.

There, is however a deficiency in the IPC. Between rape and outraging a woman's modesty that attracts only up to two years imprisonment, there is no separate provision that covers a variety of serious sexual attacks that fall short of rape. The National Commission for Women had recommended in 2005 that 'rape' be substituted with 'sexual assault' in the IPC in order to widen the definition and not restrict it to vaginal penetration. Unfortunately, the Parliament has not acted on this proposal.

Sexual Harassment at Workplace
Worldwide it is observed that women hesitate to seek employment owing to sexual harassment at workplaces. The Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) identifies sexual harassment of women at workplace as an important reason for their vulnerability and disempowerment.

The CEDAW, to which India is a signatory, recommended that all countries enact suitable laws to prevent sexual harassment at workplace. In light of this social reality, the Supreme Court in the landmark Visaka judgment recommended that the Parliament enact a law to particularly combat it. It further provided guidelines to be followed by every employer by forming a committee on sexual harassment to look into complaints and take suitable action against the offenders.



Despite passing of 13 years, the vision in the Visaka judgment has not been put to action and the Parliament has not enacted law on sexual harassment. However, several organizations have constituted sexual harassment committees and have been taking internal disciplinary action against perpetrators of sexual harassment.

Violence within the family
Domestic violence has a high incidence and contrary to popular perception, is not restricted to economically backward families. According to UN statistics, around 70% of married Indian women have suffered domestic violence in the form of beating, rape or other sexual assault. Women are not safe within their own homes, and ironically, violence within the household is tolerated and even socially accepted. Violence within the family or 'intimate violence' as it is called, is most deplorable since it has the added dimension of betrayal of a woman's trust and autonomy. However, law is more lenient towards intimate violence and marital rape is not a punishable offence under the IPC.

Responding to the high incidence of matrimonial violence and 'bride-burning', Section 498A and Section 304B of the IPC were introduced. Accordingly, dowry harassment and

dowry death are punishable with three years and seven years imprisonment respectively. These laws, however, are not invoked in most cases owing to (i) lack of awareness, (ii) sense of shame associated with domestic violence and their reluctance to use the police machinery, (iii) economic dependence on their husbands and the non-viability of divorce.

Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act

It was found that criminal law does not provide any real remedy to victims of domestic violence. It was also observed that women choose to suffer in silence owing to severe social prejudice against separated women and their vulnerability outside the matrimonial house. In fact, separated women were facing immense difficulty finding rental accommodation and were even facing vagrancy due to their economic dependence on their husbands/in-laws. As a result of activism of several women's organizations, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA) was enacted.

The PWDVA is a law intended to provide civil remedies to women suffering from domestic violence. It is a comprehensive law that provides remedies not only against husbands and in-laws, but also birth parents, siblings and people in 'live-in' relationships. The PWDVA defines domestic violence widely to cover physical, mental, emotional and economic violence. Under this Act, women can get urgent reliefs including the right to live in the shared matrimonial home, custody of children, monetary relief, compensation for the violence suffered and protection orders.

The PWDVA also provides for shelter homes, hospitals, counseling

and other Service Providers that help victims in need of urgent intervention.

Inadequacy of legislations

India has a number of well-intended laws on protection of women, a few of them having been discussed above. They have not achieved their objective owing to poor implementation, insufficient policing and lack of awareness. Justifiably women prefer not to invoke courts owing to rampant delays. Further, such laws often face heavy opposition since they challenge the status quo, campaigns such as 'Save Indian Family Foundation' being prime examples. Due to improper understanding of these laws, people perceive laws protecting women as disempowering and prejudicing men. It is pertinent to note that violence against men is also punishable and is not excused by law.

Crucial role of NGOs and public-spirited individuals

Laws, particularly relating to women, cannot be successful without popular support and social change. NGOs and activists play an important role in creating awareness and informing citizens of their rights and options under law. An interesting example is that of the 'Bell Bajao' campaign against domestic violence. It was produced pro bono by advertising professionals in association with the Ministry of Women and Child Development and several human rights organizations.

NGOs and public-spirited individuals can act as a bridge between State and victims, helping them escape situations of violence and also get justice through judicial channels.

- Sudha Ramalingam
Senior Advocate & Human Rights Activist

"We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children"

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Mr. M.B. Nirmal, Exnora International
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Venue: Balaramandir German Hall,
17, Prakasam street, T. Nagar,
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Time: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

For Registration:

Contact 24867565/66 or
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Organised by CSIM

Her Melodious Mission

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

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

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

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

Sudha entered the room with a gleaming smile and wished me 'Happy Republic Day!' She added, "I think that patriotism is very important. It gives you that moral responsibility." We soon slid into a discussion about how she used music to fulfill her desire to serve the deprived.

What inspired you to start Samudhaya Foundation?

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

I wanted to do it with my music.

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

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

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

I sang on behalf of all the organizations who



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

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

This was followed by the Gujarat earthquake relief. I asked Shri. O.S. Arun, senior Carnatic vocalist, "Can you do it for us without your usual professional charges?" He was kind and obliged to sing, while Smt. Urmila Satyanarayana performed Bharatanatyam. We raised around Rs. 4 lakhs and contributed it to the State Fund.

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

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

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

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

those who have made a mark. Most of our projects were connected with children. We donated Rs. 10 lakhs to the Cancer Institute to support poor children affected by leukemia.

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

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

Who is your role model in social work?

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

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

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

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

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

Your advice to social workers?

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

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

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

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

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

For more details about Samudhaya Foundation visit <http://www.sudharagunathan.com>

Support Corner

Launching a Rural Computer Centre

Hi, I am Loganathan from Bright Indian Rural Development Service Trust, started in 2008 to work for Women and Children.

We plan to start a rural computer centre at Vallipuram village. For this, require a minimum of two computers and furniture.

I would be happy if you could

support me in establishing this rural computer centre.

Please get in touch with me at:
Birds Trust,
241, Satras road,
Thirukkazhukundram,
Kanchipuram District - 603109
Mobile: 9566379054



Garden and Camera

Hi, I am Ekambaram from Earth Watch Foundation. I am an organic farmer, specialized in setting up terrace and vegetable gardens in the city of Chennai. If you require my service, you can contact me at 9942927765

If you have a good quality camera and a computer that you wish to donate, give it to me as I need it for my documentation purpose.