

# Conversations

*A Chronicle of Social Currents*

Volume 1 | Issue 06 | June 2010 | For Free Circulation only | A CSIM Product



## Cover Story >> Pg 6 Expressions

**Stories about autistic children who are trained to express their needs and desires**

## From the Editor

**Dear friends,**

I strongly feel that when you share what you have with others, the balance that stays with you multiplies, and grows manifold. When you get a little, give a little.

What can you give immediately and now are: a smile; a kind word; an applause; hope; happiness; cheer; and a loving response. These responses come out of the heart, emotionally integrated, and therefore leave a lasting, positive feeling. It is an unending chain of relationship.

When you try and abandon the pity and the pride in yourself, you are on your way to becoming a positive thinker. Each story inside carries this positive philosophy. Happy reading!

**P.N. Devarajan**

## inside



### Alumni Talk

**Pg3**

**21 Children**

The story of a family sharing their home with needy children



### Profile

**Pg9**

**Solidarity in Sobriety**

An organisation helping alcoholics recover and realise their deprived needs



### Chit Chat

**Pg12**

**Lights, Camera, Social Action**

An interview with Nandita Das



**Printed and published by:**

Mr. P. N. Devarajan on behalf of  
Centre for Social Initiative and  
Management  
391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar,  
Alapakkam, Chennai -600 116.  
Phone: 24867565/7566  
Website: www.csim.in

# Socially Responsible Business

With the growing number of organizations working towards CSR, the need for the right tools is evident

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is evolving to be a hot topic in management circles. However the CSR concept does not travel beyond a certain level in the organizational hierarchy and is therefore not understood by all the employees in the organization. By adhering to socially responsible production process or employee relations, the Corporate could reap abundant benefits. It also helps to transform the image of the company in the eyes of the employees and the public. CSR also helps the Corporate to powerfully align its operations and social environmental "Foot print", which attracts investments and boosts overall economy.

With the growing number of organizations working towards CSR, the need for the right tools is evident. The tools? Yes, to help them define and address what CSR means to the organization, how to implement the CSR project and reach all rungs in the hierarchy. It has been proven that, building CSR activities into the heart of business strategy and embedding the activities throughout their organizations leads to higher productivity and profitability.

The Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) pioneered Social Entrepreneurship (SE) education in India and have successfully coached over 100 prospective social entrepreneurs.

As another initiative, we intend to provide expertise and guidance to CSR projects. We have evolved a 25-hour module customized for professionals in the Corporate Sector, consultants and business advisors aspiring to broaden their knowledge on CSR. In addition, the course will assist people who take up corporate social responsibility within their job.

**The 25- hour module would include:**

- CSR Basics
- Introduction to Socially Responsible Investment (SRI)
- Social Entrepreneurship
- Stakeholder Mapping and Engagement
- CSR and Business Strategy
- CSR Implementation
- CSR Reporting & Social Audit

The major highlight of the program would include field visits to successful CSR and SE projects in

and around Chennai. This would enable participants to get practical insights and skills needed for implementing their CSR project.

**At the end of the module the participants would be able to:**

- Set practical, clear and achievable objectives for their CSR initiative
- Identify the issue which the Corporate wants to be involved in
- Have some well defined criteria for choosing beneficiary organizations, if needed
- Clearly identify what not to support
- Allocate budgets for their CSR projects
- Appoint specialists and other required staff for organizing and delivering the support
- Install systems for reporting, monitoring and evaluation
- Create Communication tools for their CSR activity

*This 25 hour module would be held on four consecutive Saturdays. Want to enroll or know more? Contact: P N Devarajan at 98400 39307, or Latha Suresh @ 92822 05123*

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

  
Oriental Cuisines Pvt. Ltd.

Head to our restaurants this season and be overwhelmed by the special festive menus.

Benjarong: TTK Road 24322640/ 42110061 | China Town: Cathedral Road 28112246 | Citi Center 43533582  
Copper Chimney: Cathedral Road 28115770 | Citi Centre 43533582 | Cream Centre: R. A. Puram 42815777  
Nungambakkam 43561777 | Enté Kerala: Poes Garden 42328585 | Kokum: MRC Nagar 42185462  
Anna Nagar 43500181 | Zara: Cathedral Road 28111462 | Anna International Airport 22560779



Kalpana and Meenakshi with the children



# 21 Children

"I live with twenty one children, and do not differentiate them from my own", said Meenakshi as she supervised the cooking.

Some children were playing shuttle, and few were watching television. She said: "It is summer vacation, so all the children are at home. During the holidays, we permit them to play and engage in healthy activities of their interest. While all children go to school, eighteen year old Rajasekar undergoes training at ITI, Guindy."

Meenakshi is the Managing Trustee of Ramamoorthy Education and Rehabilitation Trust. Her husband Ramamoorthy worked in Lucas TVS. When he was 39 years old, he suffered paralysis due to hemorrhage in the brain. This made him dependent for the rest of his life. At that point of time Meenakshi worked as a school teacher in KK Nagar. Their relatives did not extend emotional or financial support when they needed it very much. In 1999, Meenakshi and her husband decided to dedicate their lives for orphaned children and launched a trust.

Initially, with the support of NGOs in Chennai, care and support was offered for seven orphaned children. After Ramamoorthy expired in 2007, Meenakshi and her youngest daughter

Kalpana continue to manage the home. Now, they provide care and support for eighteen children in the age range of 5 to 18 years. Of them, seven are girls.

Kalpana (25), a student of CSIM, is managing the trust activities. "CSIM widened my knowledge horizons. Vijayakumari of Sivasakthi Kakkum Karangal sponsored my education at CSIM and guided me in the path to gain knowledge in the social work field.

The Public Relations and Fund Raising techniques helped me to approach sponsors. The field visits, field work, and block internship provided me tremendous exposure. The experience that I gained when I worked with many child welfare organizations, helped me in managing the children in my home."

"It is better to have a small group, and provide personalized attention in bringing up the children, than have large numbers. I do not turn down children coming to me seeking care and protection. We removed all the doors inside our home, as we do not want the children to feel restricted," says Kalpana.

The orphanage functions at Kalpana's residence, and is filled with love, care, and cheer. Daniel, a volunteer teaches the children during the evenings, and the



**"We removed all the doors inside our home, as we do not want the children to feel restricted"**

children are allowed to watch television after studying. Senthil Kumar Manian from Aspire Software Systems has been a long term donor, and a pillar of strength for the organization.

"I am watching 'Stuart little,' said twelve year old Tamil Selvi, who was watching television. Children who come to the orphanage face a lot of anxiety, and take almost two years to settle down

in the home. Some children need special care and affection. Once they complete their education, and are independent, they are permitted to move out of the home.

Meenakshi treats all the children like her own. "I have twenty one children now. We do not receive a fee concession in any of the schools, and we do not demand either. All the children like to study, although some need special attention," said Meenakshi.

Besides orphans, even single parent children, and those whose parents are HIV infected are provided shelter in the home. Children are given nutritious food, and a full-time cook is employed by the trust. All children are encouraged to study and engage in extra-curricular activities.

"I have approached corporate houses for donation, and have succeeded in seeking the support of individual employees. Support from the organization itself is yet to happen. I am quite happy with the support that I receive from my family, friends, and neighbors. Volunteers are our immediate need. We need them to teach the children as well as play with them. The focal point in my life is this home and the children," said Kalpana.

—Radha Jagan & Marie Banu

If you wish to know more about Ramamoorthy Education and Rehabilitation Trust, contact Kalpana at 9841802852 or write to [kalpanareart@gmail.com](mailto:kalpanareart@gmail.com)

# Echo Off A Cloth Heap

Come every disaster, peoples' first instinct is to bundle old clothes to give away

Anshu Gupta is establishing a culture of sustained donations in India by creating a mechanism for second-hand clothes and goods to pass from the wealthy to the poor.

Come every disaster, peoples' first instinct is to bundle old clothes to give away. It's a quick and easy way of feeling good. The first time Meenakshi and Anshu put their pile together, they stopped in their tracks. Then they sat down and pondered the message behind the pile: "Here we are, a young family of two adults, new home-makers for just three years, not wealthy by any means and we have 67 pieces of good, usable garments we don't want any more. Yet, but for the disaster we wouldn't be giving them away."

GOONJ [meaning "Echo"] was born that moment in 1998. They resolved that they would collect old clothes round the year, sort them and target them precisely to the needy, who must receive them with their dignity intact. Meenakshi had a job with the BBC that could support them. Anshu quit his at Escorts to build GOONJ.

His mission was to facilitate an economic bridge between urban, wealthy India and impoverished, rural India by simply sharing the surplus of wealth. Anshu decided to focus on clothes as an effective entry-point for his mission. Clothes are essential, yet often unaffordable for the poor, and donating old clothes is an activity familiar to



Awareness and collection camp in residential areas, schools and colleges

Indians. Anshu initiated Vastra-Summan, a nationwide ongoing clothes donation movement to familiarize donors with the concept of conscious and sustained giving as a response to this problem. GOONJ is now channelising more than 50,000 kgs of material every month.

From the beginning the centrality was receivers' dignity. GOONJ talks to the urban masses about giving only

wearable/usable material. GOONJ encourages people to audit their wardrobes regularly and not wait for disasters, as the need for clothes is steady. It organises awareness cum collection camps in residential colonies, corporates, schools and other institutions where people bring their old clothes and other household material. On these days the local volunteers play a leading role in organizing the camp and motivating others in the area. "It's the sort of exercise that gives, at the end of a single day a great sense of fulfillment without having spent any money, just with a little effort", says Anshu. Invariably someone puts up a hand offering to organise a meet in another neighbourhood, a friend's or a relation's. That's how the movement has spread, first in Delhi and now to countless other cities and countries. (GOONJ has its own office in nine cities; Delhi, Mumbai, Pune (voluntary setup), Jalandhar, Chennai, Bihar, Kolkata, Hyderabad & Bangalore and also a project office in Kumool. The material is reaching different parts of 21 states where GOONJ is working with over 150 partner groups including the many voluntary organizations, Ashoka Fellows, social activists and Panchayats etc.

## Care is in the detail:

No cloth is ever wasted. Even the torn clothes are set aside for conversion into usable products like school bags, tote bags, quilts, mats etc. Even the last shreds of cloth are converted into narrow tapes to be used as drawstrings for

petticoats. The ultimate, unusable waste is chopped up and stuffed into pillows and quilts.

Good but dirty clothes are removed for washing. Based on the requisitions from organisations (detailing gender, age and size of people needing the material), clothes and other material is packed in used sacks. Sacks are given code numbers which are recorded in a database. And finally they are on their way to the most remote villages of India.

Perhaps, the most poignant of all products that GOONJ makes are its cloth sanitary napkins. Five napkins are packed with care into a newspaper pack for a woman to receive without embarrassment. The pads are re-usable and GOONJ also provides an undergarment which creates out of waste hosiery material/T-shirts.

Anshu's strength lies in creatively finding and engaging new partners for all aspects of GOONJ's work. The volunteers in GOONJ's collection drives include several working professionals who joined GOONJ after participating in a local collection drive. Several corporations support GOONJ by organizing collection drives on their premises and bringing their regional offices into the net. Anshu's excellent negotiation skills have resulted in some cost-cutting coups like subsidized transportation from transportation companies. Recently, for scaling up production of cloth sanitary napkins for a

GOONJ's Cloth for work initiative, motivated locals to build a bamboo bridge (240 ft by 6ft) in Madhepura, Bihar, to increase mobility in the adjoining areas





Making use of tsunami wastage

bigger population Anshu has started tapping garment exporters who possess extensive surplus stocks as a resource. Most of his local partners are Citizen sector organizations. Anshu has even collaborated with an army regiment to send woolens and blankets to inaccessible villages in Kashmir.

### ***Cloth as currency:***

A social entrepreneur, he has an innovative strategy for fund raising. He plans to motivate the contributor of material to understand that getting each piece of cloth to the final receiver involves a cost; a symbolic one rupee for reaching one cloth. At a scale of operations for 3 million pieces, on an average this what will cover all the costs for financial sustenance for GOONJ.

On the other hand, in the villages Anshu has consciously made it a point to move away from the traditional notion of charity associated with old clothes. Its initiative Cloth for Work motivates village communities to do shram daan (voluntary labour) for their own community in return for good clothes. It is a successful experiment. In Moregaon, Assam, 120 villagers laboured a full day to repair an approach road and received clothes in payment. In flood hit villages of

Bihar, villagers got together to build a sturdy bamboo bridge over river Sukhsar, so that their children could go to school safely. In Khandwa, Madhya Pradesh, villagers dug up a well in a water parched village. Vidharbha, Maharashtra villagers built fences around their school and temple. In Sunderbans, Bengal clothes were given in return for total cleaning and sprucing of village environs. Looking at all these inspiring examples many more village communities are queuing up for participating in the programme.

Under GOONJ's 'School to School (S2S)' initiative, Anshu is building a long term equal relationship of awareness and empathy between urban and rural children. City children send their usable school material like water bottles, school bags, uniforms, stationary, toys etc. to their village friends in rural India. GOONJ is also passionate about reuse of discarded one side used paper and is involving schools, collages and even engineering and architecture collages in this endeavor. The one side used paper is turned into writing notebooks and art books for village children or used for making Braille books for blind students.

GOONJ has played an active role in reaching relief material at the time of many major disasters across India, by intensifying its rural and urban networks. GOONJ took up the pioneering project of turning the Tsunami rejected cloth into a resource for the people of Tamil Nadu and for the rest of India. More recently in Bihar, after the devastating floods there, GOONJ is still implementing wide ranging long term projects after doing massive relief efforts for the flood hit people.

GOONJ has won many prestigious awards including the India NGO of the Year Award, Changemakers Innovation Awards ( thrice for its three initiatives), Development Market Place Award from the World Bank, CNN IBN Real Heros Award and more recently Innovation for India award from Maricos.

— LS

Interested in joining GOONJ, or want to contribute clothes?

Visit [www.goonj.info](http://www.goonj.info)

GOONJ head office (Delhi):

011-26972351, 41401216

GOONJ Chennai:

Mr. Vimal ( 9092877543 ) &

Mr. Andrew ( 9790911001 )

## AROUND THE WORLD IN 60 MINUTES

Savour the delicacies of vegetarian kitchens from across the globe right here in Chennai. Relish the crispy onion rings, **Lebanese** humus, **Russian** salad to **Mexican** quesadias and nachos dripping with cheese, **Italian** penne with tomato and basil or the traditional **Indian** signature bhatturas and the works! Drop in for a sumptuous global vegetarian cuisine this weekend!



Italian Siciliana Sizzler



North Indian Thali



Sizzling Paneer Chilly



Vegetable Dum Biryani



The Big Nachos

55, (old no.25), 2nd Main Road, R A Puram, Chennai 600028. Ph. +91-44-42815777  
45, College Road, Nungambakkam, Chennai 600006. Ph. +91-44-43561777

# Expressions

"When my daughter Natalie grew, I observed the difference in Steven. Natalie started speaking even before she was one-year old, and spoke more than her brother."

Six-year-old Steven was playing with his football and enjoying the bouncing noise. His sister Natalie, four, drew his attention to the new week that she held in her hand. Though hesitant, he wanted a share.

"My son Steven is autistic," said his mother, Sudha. "He has been a student at Sankalp for over three years. I never knew that he had a problem until my daughter grew up. His development milestones were right and, in fact, a week ahead. He was always attracted to wands, colors, and started to walk even before he was one. It was only the physical and motor skills that I could see."

Steven is one of the 150 children who attend Sankalp - The Learning Center, an exclusive school in Chennai where autistic children are trained to express their needs and desires like any other child.

Action for Autism India, a non-profit organization, states that one in every 250 persons in India is affected by autism, and there are over 40 lakh autistic persons in India. But, there are only 40 special schools in India - 3 of which are in Chennai - that are exclusively meant for autistic children.

Steven was not an answer when he was called by name and could not speak like other children. When Sudha consulted a pediatrician, she was told that it was normal for a boy to start speaking late. She checked with the doctor again if he was suffering from Attention Deficiency Disorder. The doctor diagnosed for him to be normal.

Steven was later admitted in a nearby play school. Within a week, the teacher asked Sudha to admit her son in a special school as he had difficulty in hearing. Sudha disagreed as she had observed Steven running towards the television set when his favourite programs were on. She shifted him to another play school. Here, the teacher advised her to consult a developmental psychologist, and carry out a thorough health checkup as he found Steven to be different from other children.

"When my daughter Natalie grew, I observed the difference in Steven. Natalie started speaking even before she was one-year old, and spoke more than her brother. My mother's friend, a therapist, trained Steven on speech therapy and occupational therapy for over a month," Sudha said.



Sudha with Steven and Natalie

Steven was difficult to manage when Sudha was at work. A thorough medical checkup was carried out for Steven, and the results proved that his auditory skills were normal, and his brain responded to sounds even when he was asleep. It was then diagnosed that he was suffering from Autism Spectrum Disorder. The doctor advised occupational therapy and speech therapy along with special education.

"When I first heard about occupational therapy, I thought that it was like physiotherapy where the treatment would be required only for a couple of months. It is only when I went to Sankalp that I understood that the treatment would take a much longer period," said Sudha.

Steven underwent occupational therapy in Sankalp for a year before he enrolled in the regular special school in 2008. He was active in sports and enjoyed playing with his classmates.

"I see a lot of improvement in him. Earlier, he would not respond to you when you called him by name. But now, he will look at you when you call, and he is

comfortable to be seated amidst strangers," says Sudha.

Steven had problems associated with sensory integration. Autistic children easily get annoyed when they hear certain sounds that might appear normal to us.

Steven would either overreact to a particular smell or sound or not react at all. If he did not like a particular sound, he would close his ears. He could communicate his likes and dislikes by the way he smelled the food, and detested sticky foods like curd, butter, and cheese.

He could not sit in one place for more than a minute and was not attentive.

Autism is a spectrum where growth cannot be measured on a scale. For autistic children, growth is not steady in all the areas, and in certain areas the growth appears to be above normal. One type of autism is Asperger's syndrome, where the children are very intelligent. An autistic child can calculate 25 x 30 within a fraction of a second but this does not mean that the child can be admitted in a regular school. The child will have

behavioral issues that require attention. The cause for autism is not known.

Doctors advise parents not to plan for another child when they already have a child with autism.

"Thankfully, I realized that Steven had autism only after Natalie was born. It is a blessing to have a daughter who is absolutely normal. All my stress is relieved when I look at her. She is very affectionate towards her brother, and takes care of him well. I have seen people with many more problems than I have. I am thankful that my parents, relatives, and friends are supportive, and have accepted Steven. Life moves on. God knows that I have the strength to take care of Steven, and so gave him to me," says Sudha.

Sudha is a post-graduate in computers and management, and works with the World Bank in Chennai. She wishes to pursue a Masters in Child Psychology so that she can be more receptive not only to her son's needs but also to other special children.

Like Sudha, Deepa's son Vinay also attends Sankalp - The Learning Center. Unlike many other autistic children, Vinay is cheerful and socializes well. He stopped babbling when he was eight months old, and could not converse at all. When he was one-and-a-half, his mother Deepa observed that he had peculiar mannerisms. For instance, Vinay used to scream when he watched cartoons on television, flap his hands repetitively, and shriek when he saw vehicles with flashlights on the road.

Deepa said, "We first thought that our son had a hearing problem. His behavior was different when compared to other children, and he was not meeting the growth parameters. We consulted Dr. Balasubramanian, the head of Child Trust Hospital, who suspected Vinay to be affected by autism, and referred us to Dr. Virudhagirathan for an assessment. I did not know what autism meant at that point in time. I asked my friends to check in Wikipedia, and when I received the reference material for autism, I felt shattered."

Dr. Virudhagirathan diagnosed Vinay to have autistic features, and assessed his development and IQ level to fall under mental sub-normal range. Deepa was then referred to

Dr. Jayanthi, Consultant Psychiatrist at Red Hospital.

"Dr. Jayanthi was the first person who gave us hope. She told us that although Vinay had fleeting eye contact, he could still sustain a social smile, and this was a positive indicator. She advised me to quit my job at Citicorp and spend time with my son. Vinay was retrained from watching television, and we used only one language to communicate with him. We enrolled him in a play school at TNagar, and this was an excellent opportunity for him to mingle with other children. He started to speak very slowly, and although hyperactive, he could obey commands and imitate actions," said Deepa.

Vinay underwent occupational therapy at Sankalp - The Learning Center for six months. He then joined the group therapy in June 2008. The occupational therapy reduced his hyperactivity. Besides, he was also provided speech therapy as an add-on.

"When Vinay was four years old, he called me 'Amma' for the first time. It was a moment of happiness that I will cherish forever," said Deepa.

Vinay's teachers Kanchana and Priya encouraged Deepa to enroll him in a regular school. Vinay can now write three-letter words and can also write the names of animals, birds, flowers, fruits, and

vegetables besides the days of the week and the months. Vinay is also trained to read simple sentences and, although he cannot communicate what happened in the school, he can follow the instructions given by his teacher.

"He is more of a visual learner. Before he could start speaking, we taught him phonetics by downloading software from the internet. Although he cannot list events that happened the previous day, he is aware of his training time. His teachers say that he is the first in his class to stand up and say 'Snack time' or 'Prayer time'. He has an excellent memory, and can recognize movie names and advertisements on television as well as in the newspaper."

"I did not plan for another child because I might get to be partial and ignore Vinay. I do not want to take the risk. It took a long time for me to recover from my sadness. Although the unhappiness remains, I take life positively," said Deepa.

Vinay can access the computer and select the educational programs that are installed. He was promoted to UKG in Joshua Matriculation School and continues to attend Sankalp - The Learning Center in the afternoon.



Children undergoing occupational therapy at Sankalp

For further information about Sankalp please contact: Sulata, 944419841 or write to sulata.sankalp@gmail.com

Sulata, a special educator, founded Sankalp Learning School in Chennai along with her friends Lakshmi and Subashini, in 1999. A graduate in psychology, Sulata is a B.Ed. Special Education and has a Diploma in Learning Disability. Lakshmi is a psychology student and Subashini manages the school administration.

"We initially focused on helping children with learning disabilities. We started Sankalp Special School, which functioned as a pre-school in the morning and a remedial center in the afternoon. Our first student was three years old and was affected with Down's syndrome. Another student had autism but we were not sure, as there was no method for diagnosis. We consulted with Mythili Chari, a special educator and founder of IRIS, an institute involved in diagnosis and treatment of autism.

Sulata is a post-graduate in computers and management, and works with the World Bank in Chennai. She wishes to pursue a Masters in Child Psychology so that she can be more receptive not only to her son's needs but also to other special children.

Sankalp Special School started with 15 children who had learning disabilities. Later, they initiated Sankalp - The Learning

Center to train children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Children between 3 1/2 and 18 years of age with autism spectrum disorder are provided occupational therapy and sensory integration along with special education. The school currently provides education to 150 children.

In the occupational therapy

(OT) play group, the child is provided OT through a play-way method, and each play up to 15 minutes more than five children. The primary group children are between 4 and 8 years. They are provided education based on the LKG and UKG syllabus of a regular matriculation or CBSE school. The curriculum is

simplified to teach the child in a way he can learn. The intermediate group children are 9 to 11 years old, and their curriculum is similar to Grade 1 to 3 in a regular school. The senior grade children belong to 11 to 17 years of age. In 2009, Sankalp - The Learning Center introduced the NIOS (National

Institute of Open Schooling) group, where the children appear for the 10th Grade examination.

"Our first child passed the examination last year in all the five subjects, and three children have attempted with a score this year. So far, only children who can speak appear for exams. Lifelong training is required for a child with autism. Children of parents who cannot afford the school fees are linked with donors for sponsorship. We seek corporate sponsors to help the parents of autistic children, and reach out to more children who are in need," said Sulata.

—Marie Bano



Special educator Smita with children at Sankalp - The Learning Center

Autism is a neurological disorder present from birth, which affects the way the brain receives information. The cause is still unknown. It is a lifelong developmental disorder that primarily affects communication skills, social skills, thought and behavior, and processing and integrating sensory information.

*The lack of farming has also led to people migrating to other parts of Tamil Nadu to work as construction workers*

Off the National Highway 7, lies wasteland where development seems to be a taboo. The road to Korayur – a few kilometers off the swanky highway – takes one several decades back in time.

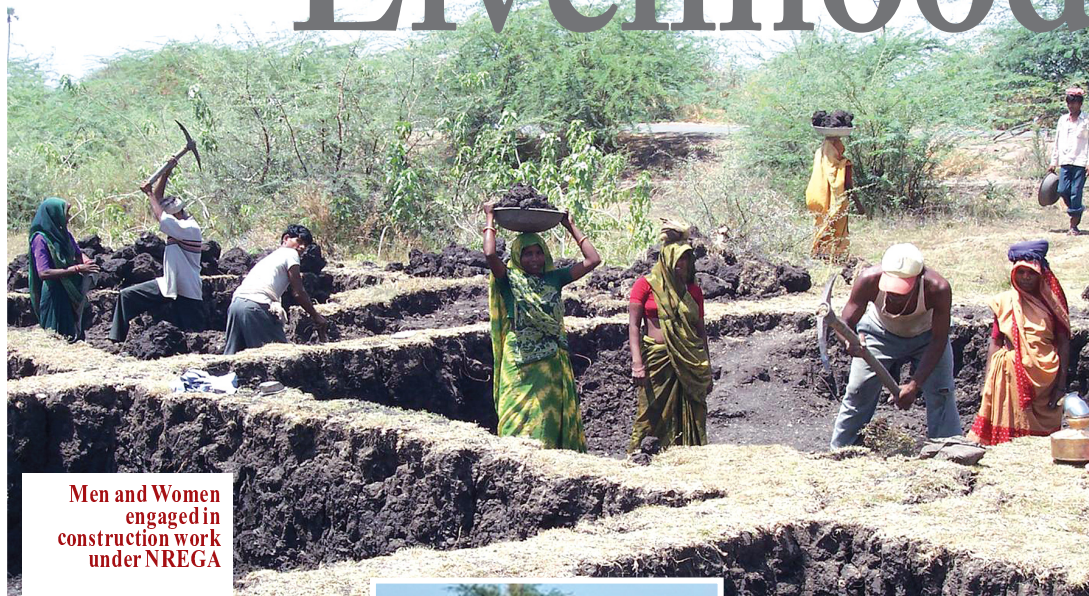
One thing that strikes in the face is the complete lack of water. The fields are dry, the vegetation looks green but is full of the semi-arid foliage like the acacia tree and even the ponds and tank are either shallow or have no water.

The standing paddy crop has dried out in the scorching sun due to lack of irrigation as canals are all dry. It is a nightmare for the farmers who have lost their only means of livelihood. In the village Panchayat office is the usual government official, the Village Revenue Officer, Senthil Kumar, who has joined just two months back. Being new to the village becomes a pretty good excuse to absolve of all the problems facing the village!

*“The NREGA was one of the flagship schemes of the ruling central government meant to alleviate the poverty of villages by guaranteeing 100 days of labour in a year for 1 person per family”*

One of the most fertile districts in the region has seen 3072 acres of cultivated land turn barren due to drought and silted canals, according to V.Jairaj, a Panchayat assistant. According to him, the saving of rain water in ponds is not feasible due to lack of rains. Digging of bore-wells is also not sufficient as the water table is becoming shallower by the day. He also added that most of the farmers have moved to Thanjavur, where they work in fields irrigated by the Vaigai River and bring back paddy as wages for their labour.

The lack of farming has also led to people migrating to other parts of Tamil Nadu to work as construction workers. As we moved to the NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Authority) site, the first thing that strikes you that the



**Men and Women engaged in construction work under NREGA**

entire workforce consists of women. About 150-200 women aged mostly in the 55-60 year age group are trying to dig a trench to store rainwater in the scorching sun. On enquiring with persons overseeing the work, we learn that a ditch, at least 3 feet deep and 20 feet long has to be dug every day.

Chengamma (56) is of medium build, wears a coarse, green cotton sari. Her wrinkled hands and shoulders are not able enough to carry the load of mud. Lifting the shovel to dig the earth was difficult even for well-built people like us. However, she does it without much fuss and that too under the glowing sun. She says, “My husband goes to work in Madurai as construction worker. But he does not earn much to feed both of us.” She also added that the NREGA work is very irregular. There will be no work for at least 2-3 months after this week.

Then, they are also not getting the required pay of Rs. 90 per day. The women complain that most of the time they end up getting only Rs. 65- 70 per day. The officials who come to inspect the work at the end of the day have very stringent expectation of each worker’s contribution. There is a lot of discontent among these women as they alleged most of the time the revenue officials who are supposed to distribute the payment pocket at least Rs 15-20 per person per day. That seemed to



be one of the primary causes of the workers getting such measly pay at the end of the day.

They also voiced their displeasure that the rice may cost only Re 1 but all other food items have become so costly that it is not enough to sustain daily nourishment of an average villager on such meagre wages. One of the workers said quite ironically that food items cost so much that they will have to end up eating only rice.

The NREGA was one of the flagship schemes of the ruling central government meant to alleviate the poverty of villages by guaranteeing 100 days of labour in a year for 1 person per family. However, the

*“The women complain that most of the time they end up getting only Rs. 65- 70 per day”*

pay is at first so low that in this day of inflated prices it is impossible to subsist on such measly wages. Again, the amount of work which is supposed to be done in a day is too back-breaking to be able to be completed by already starving villagers. Unless there is a concerted effort to improve the wages and also the regular availability of work, villagers like that in Korayur will continue to live in the starved state and without any means to live a decent life.

— Nilanjan Patra  
Asian College of Journalism

*The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act aims at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing hundred days of wage-employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. For more information about NREGA visit <http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/home.aspx>*

# Solidarity in Sobriety

"My father died due to alcoholism, and my husband was an alcoholic. I saw people affected by addiction, and how it affected their lives. I wanted to start a program to help the alcoholics recover," said Bhanu Suresh Babu, the Founder and Project Director of CONCERN.

CONCERN is a Non-Governmental Organization working in the field of addiction and rehabilitation. Staff and members of CONCERN have enormous experience in dealing with addiction at various levels with both men and women. CONCERN is equipped with academic, professional, and practical experience in the area of addiction and treatment.

Bhanu says: "After my son was born, my husband started drinking. He turned into an alcoholic within a span of seven years. There was a television serial on alcoholism, and it was then we learnt about TTK Hospital (T.T. Ranganathan Clinical Research Foundation). In 1995, I admitted my husband for de-addiction treatment in TTK, and learnt that alcoholism is a disease which can be treated but not cured. Dr. Shanthi Ranganathan, Director of TTK has been my source of inspiration."

While Bhanu volunteered at TTK when her husband was undergoing treatment, Dr. Ranganathan encouraged her to pursue higher studies. Bhanu completed her M.Phil in Psychology, and studied various courses related to addiction. She received a fellowship from caregivers of alcoholics, and was personally trained by a doctor from Queen of Peace Rehabilitation Center, United States, on how to use simple methods for de-addiction treatment.

"As a caregiver, I learnt that de-addiction treatment was a lifelong process. I underwent counseling courses, besides reading many books on addiction. I authored a protocol for 15-day treatment, and made the treatment procedure simple so that whoever is willing to give up alcohol can walk into the centre with confidence, and go out with hope," says Bhanu.

Prior to starting CONCERN in 2008, Bhanu worked with several NGOs that were connected with de-addiction to gain practical experience. She worked with TTK hospital for five years in the area of rehabilitation, and as a Senior Counselor in Freedom Foundation, an NGO working in the field of substance abuse and HIV/AIDS interventions in India.

*"People come with a lot of opinions and theories about addiction. This is the challenge we face while providing treatment"*

"People come with a lot of opinions and theories about addiction. This is the challenge we face while providing treatment. Addiction is connected to physical craving and mental obsession. Once a person gets addicted to alcohol, they require professional help, and need to undergo treatment," says Bhanu.

CONCERN offers motivation to their patients when they arrive at the center. Detoxification treatment is provided for three days, where IV fluids along with multi-vitamins are given, and the sleep pattern is regulated. Initially, most of the patients have appetite problems. Psychotherapy protocol, based on important books on addiction, is provided to the patients for a period of 12 days. They are made to understand their traits, thinking pattern errors, and their needs that are deprived.

After the initial treatment, patients are provided a relapse prevention therapy for a week, where they are provided detoxification and counseling. In cases of relapse, they are admitted into a transit home, where they are allowed to attend work from the rehabilitation home. They are provided with an anti-abuse treatment before they leave for work. This medication causes allergy to the

body when alcohol is taken.

"I used to drink along with my friends, just for fun. Very quickly, I became an alcoholic. My sister came to know about CONCERN, and admitted me for treatment. I used to spend all my earnings to buy liquor, and had a debt of Rs. 80,000, which my family repaid. Now, I am sober for almost a month. I do not mingle with my earlier friends, and even changed my mobile number as I do not want to get influenced. I still have the five-hundred rupees that my mother gave when I got discharged after treatment in CONCERN," says Senthil, a 29-year-old man who works as a marketing executive in a private firm in Chennai.

CONCERN treats alcoholism in a simple and holistic manner. A 15-day caregivers program is offered to the family of patients. They are advised to take care of their addicted family member, and help them recover.

"Till date, 150 persons have been treated for alcoholism, and there has been a 50% recovery rate.

Most of the people who relapse, return voluntarily, and strive to recover. My husband is sober for over 15 years now, and works for a nationalized bank. He joins me in serving those affected by alcoholism. We named our organization CONCERN because we mean it. We have genuine concern towards alcoholics, and wish to see many families lead a happy life. Our son is pursuing his Masters Degree in Landscape Architecture in Germany, and we have dedicated our lives to CONCERN as our family is settled now," says Bhanu.

CONCERN also offers outpatient treatment for those who cannot get admitted for 15 days. The charges for de-addiction treatment are nominal, and concession is offered for those who cannot afford the treatment.

(Names of those affected by alcoholism have been changed to protect their identity.)



Counseling session for family members at CONCERN

Ganesh, a 40-year-old businessman in Chennai, has been sober for over one and a half years now.

"I started consuming alcohol because my first marriage failed within six months," said Ganesh. From 2000 through 2006, he lived all alone in his apartment, which led to depression. He drank regularly and became an alcoholic. He got married again in 2007 and, when he accompanied a friend to an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting in September 2007, he was inspired to stop drinking. After remaining sober for five months, he consumed alcohol once again. It was then that his friend advised him to undergo treatment at CONCERN, a de-addiction centre in Chennai.

"None of my family members knew that I was an alcoholic. I was at first hesitant to undergo the treatment, which was for a period of 15 days. After informing my wife, I got admitted at CONCERN for 10 days. After treatment, I was referred to AA, and I am now enjoying being sober. Parents, siblings, doctors, or wife, nobody can make you stop drinking but you yourself. Without determination it is impossible to fight alcoholism. For this, we need the support of treatment centers like CONCERN who refer us to AA," said Ganesh.

Ganesh attends the AA meetings regularly. AA does not disclose the identity of its members, and only asks for their name so that the members can greet each other during meetings. Members are not compelled to reveal what work they do or where they come from. AA advises its members to avoid hunger, anger, loneliness, and tiredness. There are 55 to 60 AA meetings in Chennai, and these are organized between 7:00 pm to 8:30 pm every day in each of the centers.

"When I travel to different parts of the country, I attend the AA meeting that is held in the nearby center. People who are affected by alcoholism share their bitter experiences during such meetings. I was alarmed when I heard that many persons have lost their health, family, and property to alcoholism. I also learnt that many have regained their social as well as economic status by remaining sober. It is a miracle to be part of the AA program," said Ganesh.

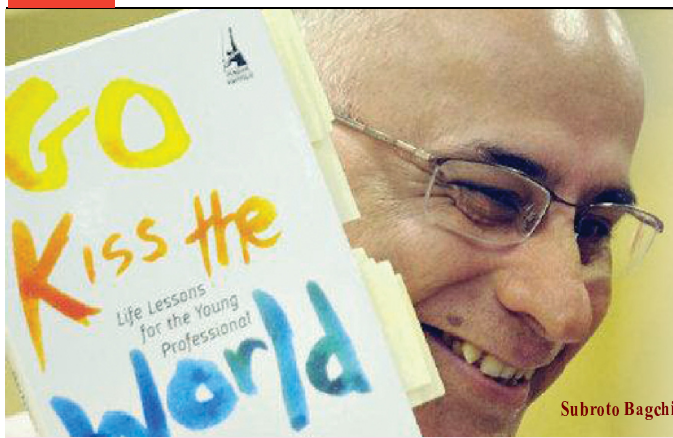
—Marie Banu



Bhanu Suresh Babu with the rehabilitated patient and his spouse

*Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for AA membership; they are self-supporting through individual contributions.*

CONCERN is located at 120, Sri Devi Kuppam Main Road, Radha avenue, Valasaravakkam, Chennai – 600 087.  
For further information, contact Bhanu Suresh Babu at 9840800816, +91 44 24862910 or write to concernrehab@gmail.com



Subroto Bagchi

# Go Kiss The World

I have often wondered whether I, as a person, am out of sync with the times. New developments – I refer to those in technology mainly – hardly enthuse me. I still prefer tried and tested methods and am a firm believer of the adage, Old is Gold. I'm sure if I had a good, portable typewriter I would be happy using it rather than an MS Windows XP driven computer. I love history, reading old books, and still swear by Enid Blyton, whose books kept me engrossed as a child. Not for me Harry Potter, although my daughter tells me that J.K. Rowling is magical.

I still wear my first watch – an HMT Jawahar that my brother-in-law purchased for me in Calcutta when I was in Class 11 or 12. It cost Rs 178 then. I still wind it every other day and wear it with more than a touch of sentiment. The other watch I treasure is the one my father received the day he retired from office, an HMT gold-plated day-date classic. The year was 1978 and you won't find many of them anymore. The Rolexes, Omegas and Rados do not really interest me. Yes, a Tissot will, because my dad had a Tissot, which he sadly lost one evening in the tram. If he hadn't, I would have had that, too, and treasured it as well.

I hardly buy new things for myself. I am more excited in giving or buying for others, to see the smile and excitement on their faces. My wife and daughter reprimand me for wearing the same shirt on two consecutive days, but I tell them I don't wear the same shirt to office on two consecutive days – may be at home, which is excusable. They don't comment on my inner wear though, but I know I like to use the banyans and underwear as long as there are no holes or tears. Recently, when buying a new pair of spectacles, my wife and relatives pointed to one frame and insisted that I buy it. Finally, I did, but was aghast when I learnt it cost Rs 4,000. I wear it but I know I'd have been happier wearing a frame that cost Rs 350.

Subroto Bagchi, the CEO of MindTree, reminded me of some of my 'idiosyncrasies' when I was reading his article on 'defining success'. I

not only felt immensely moved at what he had written (it was his speech to the Class of 2006 at IIM Bangalore), but also empathized deeply with his experiences.

Bagchi was the last child in a family of five brothers. His earliest memory of his father was as a district employment officer in Koraput, Orissa. There was no electricity, no primary school, and water did not flow from a tap, he says. Bagchi learnt at home, he did not go to school till he was eight. The family belongings fitted into the back of a jeep. His mother, raised by a widow who had come to India as a refugee from East Bengal, was a matriculate. His parents set the foundation of Bagchi's life, his values.

Bagchi's father was given a jeep by his office, but he used it only to travel to the interiors. He walked to office, saying it was an expensive resource. It was

“In that paralytic state and a garbled voice, she said, ‘Why are you kissing me? Go kiss the world.’”

Bagchi's first childhood lesson in governance.

Bagchi's father treated the driver with respect. Even the children called him 'dada' (elder brother). It was a lesson Bagchi passed on to his children. When he had a car and driver, his children would call the driver 'Raju uncle'. The lesson Bagchi learnt: you treat small people with more respect; it is more important to respect your subordinates.

The children would read aloud the newspaper every day. It was a routine and Bagchi and his brothers learnt of the outside world by reading it. But they were told to fold the newspaper neatly once it was read. His father would say that the newspaper and the toilet had to be left the way it

was found. The lesson here for Bagchi: show consideration to others.

The family did not own a radio, forget owning a home. Everytime, Bagchi's father would pass it off lightly, saying that they did not need one – there were already five of them (referring to his sons). For Bagchi, it meant it was important not to measure personal success and sense of well being through material possessions.

Although Bagchi's father had a transferable job, his mother would plant seedlings, nurture them and get the flowers to bloom. Neighbours wondered why she took all that trouble, she would say that she wished to make a place she inherited more beautiful than how she found it. It is not about what you create for yourself, it is what you leave behind that defines success, Bagchi says.

During the Indo-Pak war of 1965, Bagchi's mother developed cataract and her eyesight was none too good. So, he would read the newspaper aloud to her and they would discuss happenings. All of it provided fertile ground for Bagchi's imagination and he realised that if we could imagine a future we could create it, and if we created it others would live in it.

In 1969, Bagchi's mother went blind. She lived till 2002. During those 32 years, she never complained, but went about her work as if nothing had happened. It showed Bagchi that success was about achieving a sense of independence, about not seeing the world but seeing the light.

In 1992, Bagchi's father who had by then retired, suffered third-degree burn injuries and lay in a Safdarjung Hospital bed bandaged from head to toe. The place was "cockroach-infested, dirty and inhuman", a "theatre of death". The nurses were so overworked, one even refused to change an empty blood bottle, urging Bagchi to do it himself. Yet, his father, seeing the nurse, asked her why she had not gone home after working so long. "There I learnt that there is no limit to how concerned you can be for another human being and what the limit of inclusion is you can create",

he says. Bagchi's father died the following day. "He was a man whose success was defined by his principles, his frugality, his universalism and his sense of inclusion. Success is your ability to rise above discomfort. Success is not about building material comforts – the transistor he could never buy but or the house he never owned. His success is about the legacy he left, the continuity of his ideals that grew beyond the smallness of an ill-paid, unrecognised government servant's world," Bagchi explains.

At age 82, when Bagchi's mother had a paralytic stroke and lay in a hospital bed in Bhubaneswar, he, now in the IT industry and travelling wide, flew down to see her. He spent two weeks with her, but she hardly showed any sign of improvement or change for the worse. Finally, when he had to leave, he bent down and kissed her cheek. "In that paralytic state and a garbled voice, she said, 'Why are you kissing me? Go kiss the world.' Her river was nearing its journey, at the confluence of life and death, this woman who to India as a refugee, raised by a widowed mother, no more educated than high school, married to an anonymous government servant whose last salary was Rs 300, robbed of her eyesight by fate and crowned by adversity was telling me to go and kiss the world!"

And Bagchi ends: "Success to me is about vision. It is the ability to rise above the immediacy of pain. It is about imagination. It is about sensitivity to small people. It is about building inclusion. It is about connectedness to a larger world existence. It is about personal tenacity. It is about giving back more to life than what you take out of it. It is about creating extraordinary success with ordinary lives."

I haven't read such brilliant, moving stuff in a long, long time. Some day, I hope I will be able to meet Mr Bagchi himself and reminisce about the values of old.

—Sashi Nair

## Feedback

Dear Editor,

On going through all the five issues of "CONVERSATIONS" I have realised how much concern you do have on the society. At the age of 66, for the first time, I have come across such a news edition dedicated to bring into limelight a fully different angle of the social activities of many people, belonging to various

walks of life, involved in doing their best service to mankind.

I wholeheartedly place my sincere appreciation and pray for the news paper, which remains synonym to mankind, to continue its yeomanservice for ever, and equally, wish all the staff associated to lead a healthy, happy and long life.

With regards,  
N.Subramanian

Dear Editor,

I have been privileged to read Conversations. The content is excellent and it is of great help to all NGOs. This tabloid has filled in a big void and it is very good. NGOs will draw inspirations, and you will serve as a bridge between NGOs and Corporates.

You should share the publication even with people outside India so that they understand our social issues.

I was interested to go through it and am going to keep it in my office so that people who visit me can read the tabloid. My best wishes!

Best wishes,  
Arun

# GROWING - Reflections for Deep CHANGE EGO – a deterrent to ‘Growing’



**E**GO – a deterrent to ‘Growing’  
Most of us who get into social entrepreneurship, nurture a feeling that we are the saviors of the world and we are better than the average person. This feeling and attitude starts pumping one’s ego. Over a period of time the person starts becoming more powerful than the idea he/she is serving. There starts the point of decline of furthering the idea the social entrepreneur is working on. While efforts and hard-work takes you high, EGO pulls you down.

The biggest question a social entrepreneur needs to ask is ‘Am I serving the Idea? Or is the Idea giving me the opportunity to serve?’ While the relationship between the server and the served starts at one point, over a period of time it changes. Initially, the one who wants to serve feels good about the possibility of serving. As the idea grows and becomes large and the reach increases, the environments begins to project the server as the important person, the relationship begins to change. To work on a social idea and further the same is a great opportunity one has got; the humility with which one serves the idea actually furthers the growth of the idea and influence the larger system.

There was once a scientist who discovered the art of reproducing himself so perfectly that it was impossible to tell the reproduction from the original. One day he learnt that the Angel of Death was searching for him. So he reproduced a dozen copies of himself. The angel was at a loss to know which of the thirteen

specimens before him was the original scientist, so he left them all alone and returned to heaven.

But not for long, for being an expert in human nature, the angel came up with a clever plan. He came back and said, “Sir, you must be a genius to have succeeded in making such perfect reproductions of yourself. However, I have discovered a flaw in your work, just one tiny little flaw.”

The scientist immediately jumped out and shouted, “Impossible! Where is the flaw?” “Right here” said the angel, as he picked up the scientist from among the reproductions and carried him off. (Sampath. J.M. story 41 Discovery – 3rd edition, Insight Publishers, Bangalore, India, 1998)

**There are certain symptoms that can indicate that Ego is taking over. They are :**

- Developing a feeling and demonstrating that you know everything.
- Believing that you have a solution for everything.
- Resisting ideas from other sources.
- Unwilling to learn and easily entering into arguments than explorations.
- Attending too many functions that glorifies one’s achievements
- Canvassing for winning awards and lobbying to be seen as someone doing a lot.
- Building a larger than self image.
- Unwilling to collaborate for larger good.
- Subordinating the idea to one self

then subordinating the self to idea.

- Engaging in more than required PR.
  - Getting to be more directive than collaborative in team work.
- The danger that many social entrepreneurs’ experience is that they are not aware of the cycle that they have got themselves into. Their ego’s doesn’t allow them to see the problems created by their ego. By the time the awareness dawns the damage is done and one has reached a point of no return.

The rising Ego can be recognized through Self-awareness. While there could be several indications from the environment, Ego sometimes forms a strong cloud which can mask the awareness. Many times, Ego is confused with rise in self confidence and self esteem and therefore goes untapped. At that time, mechanisms to keep one aware enables you to quickly detect your own folly and respond to that. The important question is what is the gratitude you offer everyday to have the space to serve others?

**Pointers for Reflection:**

- What is the nature of ‘Ego’?
- Where does my Ego come from?
- What are the events that trigger my Ego?
- When my Ego is questioned how do I react?
- How do I deal with my Ego?
- What ways can I adopt that ensures that my Ego is at the effective zone of self esteem?

—J.M.Sampath & Kalpana Sampath

## Network and Communication

*Network in Social Entrepreneurship is the Net worth of the Social enterprise.*

**I**n Social work arena, networking is an essential initiative and it is the heart of the process of social action.

Network in Social Entrepreneurship is the Net worth of the Social enterprise. What is network and how is it built and nurtured and grown? Network is the product of definite moves by the social enterprise as it connects all the stakeholders, locally and globally.

The stakeholders are people who support financially, advice as patrons and Board Members, Volunteers, Specialist and Government functionaries, Charitable trust, Venture philanthropists, beneficiaries, staff members and capitalists.

To remain networked with the above people is very essential for continuous and mutual dependency in the matter of quality, reaching goals, documentation of best practices, reviews and further strengthening of the network base.

The greater factor in achieving quality networking is in communication. Communication is the lifeline in networking. All stakeholders need to be in touch and hence communication is a powerful tool to stay in touch. The mode of communication varies from context to context, it can be oral, written or both. However communication has to be direct, simple and graceful. Listening carefully is a powerful communicator. The periodicity of

communication should be regular to make it worth looking for by the receiver.

Communication should not be one way, it should be designed for being two way to give communication its worth and beauty.

One should extend this to group communication



exercise, by regular ‘town hall’ like meetings, where openness will be encouraged.

Communication shall be inspiring and absorbing for the receiver. Hence it can be short and brief, well illustrated, like a case study or a story told.

Communication should not run down to be only a routine, it should be creative, innovative and rich and should mirror reciprocity.

Communication should be so powerful and inviting that the receiver or his/her will tend to circulate to friends and like minded people, so as to increase and spread the network community.

The networked community will offer more

“  
*As a Servant Leader,  
you can set an example  
of an excellent  
communicator to your  
friends, colleagues and  
followers, so that they  
follow your steps and  
excel in it*  
”

services to the Social Enterprise in term investment of quality time, talent Treasure and Touch.

Communication should flow through the website created for the purpose by creating a group of stakeholders.

Communication can be through a song, poetry, citation, music, through a play, street play, painting, a work of art like sculpture – it is endless.

We should communicate so much to the heart and mind so that we say nothing that goes wrong or amiss due to bad or faulty communications.

As a Servant Leader, you can set an example of an excellent communicator to your friends, colleagues and followers, so that they follow your steps and excel in it.

Of course communication is not by words only and also by ideas. Communications is those deeds and deals that fully and truthfully reflect the words. As they say, you walk the talk every time and at all times.

What we all search for ourselves in life is peace and happiness. We also seek peace and happiness for all others. The aim is one and the same. The path we chose may be different in the path we walk or process we employ. We can achieve mutual understanding, dependence and inter dependence with sound, happy and meaningful communication by talk and design.

—P N Devarajan

# Lights, Camera, Social Action

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



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

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

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

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

Ankur, a women's organization was where I worked first. I was already doing my fieldwork as part of my Master's degree in Social Work there. As I was attached to the community, I accepted their job offer. I come from a very liberal family where the women got all the space to question and to make choices. But, while working with the community, I realized that all women obviously did not enjoy that kind of space. I feel that those of us who are privileged should take on a greater responsibility to become the voice for those whose voices are not heard. This experience was very precious to me, and it exposed me to realities that otherwise I would not have known. It was challenging, and at times emotionally draining, but served as a big eye-opener for me.

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

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

long way to go before we can say that women have equal choices, or equal opportunities.

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

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

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

*“On every Women's Day, I wonder if we should be celebrating, or expecting something better to happen”*

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

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

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

worked along with her team in bringing in the RTI Act.

**Which of the social issues are you most passionate about?**

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

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

These are public service advertisements, and we made it for different organizations with a hope that the television channels would telecast them. But because of TRP rating and airtime being very expensive, the television channels do not want to give even a 60 second slot for free. It wasn't easy to market it. But when the 'Right to Education Bill' was recently passed, the 'Roll Call' film that was done five years ago for Unicef was used for the campaign. The PSA on rain water harvesting was done for Centre for Science and Environment. They have used it for their campaigns and we learn that they have had a lot of hits on their website. None of these will change the world but are tiny steps towards creating awareness.

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

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

## Editorial

**Latha Suresh  
Marie Banu  
Radha Jagan**

Printing Courtesy: The New Indian Express, Chennai