

Conversations

A Chronicle of Social Currents

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From the Editor

Dear Friends

Greetings!

Social Entrepreneurs are idea generators. Ideas are potential sparks, which are backed by intuition. There is tension between 'business as usual' and 'new ideas'. The new ideas lead to

affordable, 'more for less', sustainable, and replicable models.

Their motto is:

"There will never be another now, I will make the most of today.

There will never be another me, I will make the most of myself.

The me I see, is the me I will be." Join us on the morning of March 12th to applaud the work done by a few social entrepreneurs who follow the above dictum.

—P. N. Devarajan



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Social Accounting and Audit

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a learning centre that nurtures and supports social entrepreneurs. As part of its agenda to introduce new and current concepts to NGOs and other development initiatives, CSIM has partnered with Social Audit Network, UK to propagate the concept of Social Accounting and Audit (SAA). SAA 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. Both in terms of scope and scale, it is a flexible and adaptable tool that allows organizations to 'prove and improve' performance.

Over 15 organizations across India have written their social accounts under the guidance of CSIM over the past two years. CSIM has facilitated 6 organisations to write their social accounts and have it audited by Mr Patrick Boase, Social Auditor from SAN, UK.

The Organisations were:

1. **Smile-Train** at Owaisi Hospital

Hyderabad. The Plastic Surgery Department did a study of the impact of the cleft lip and palate operations that was carried out over the last 2 years.

2. **Concern** is a residential de-addiction centre in Chennai, treating about 140 alcoholics per year. The Centre provides a wide range of in-house and after-care services and is linked to Alcoholics Anonymous.



3. **Sevalaya** is a school, orphanage, and a senior citizen's home in Tiruvallur. The school provides free education to nearly 1300 pupils of all ages, most of whom are first generation learners.

4. **Ma Foi Foundation** offers educational scholarship to over 1000 economically deprived teenagers each year to enable them to continue their education. They have also started leadership classes, a

creative club and a Sports Academy to 'produce sports champions from the lower economic section of our society. They are funded by the recruitment agency, Ma Foi Randstad.

5. **Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS)** is the parent organisation of CSIM, our partners in the SAN Project. It covers a wide range of activities, including awards to successful social entrepreneurs, support for budding social entrepreneurs, promotion of in-kind food gifts (dal, oil and sugar) to NGO's providing basic care services to the elderly, disabled, orphans, etc.

6. **Desicrew** is a Chennai-based social business at IIT Madras, providing business process outsourcing in the rural areas. Significant investment has been made to develop a viable model which provides over 200 jobs in 5 centres to young graduates in the remote parts of Tamil Nadu.

—Latha Suresh

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


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A Positive Experience

“I was born to liberal parents who encouraged me to pursue my passion. I studied in Ramalinga Mission School, where service was part of our daily routine.”

— Balaji, Founder, Real Charitable Trust

Championing the cause of children infected with HIV is Balaji, Founder Trustee of Real Charitable Trust, a home “not unlike any other”. Balaji is an alumnus of CSIM, having completed the Post Graduate Diploma course in Social Initiative and Management (PGDSIM) in 2005.

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

Hearty laughter retorts the very suggestion, which confirms how oddly naïve the question itself was. “I have no stories of loss, grief, suffering, or inspiration to tell you,” he chuckles, adding that, “I was born to liberal parents who encouraged me to pursue my passion. I studied in Ramalinga Mission School, where service was part of our daily routine. Since serving people has been my lifestyle, it never occurred to me as being different when I chose to continue in the same path. Indeed, the idea of caring for HIV infected children in a familial environment flashed across casually when I was sorting out my priorities in setting up my own organization. It appealed me enough to settle for it”.

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

“While I was volunteering at FPAI, I would frequently avail leave from work to pursue my volunteering services,” he admits. Armed with a Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration, Diplomas in Networking, Hardware, Autocad, and Air conditioning mechanics, Balaji was designing machinery for few companies. “Although I did actively continue volunteering for several years,



the thought of starting an organization was actually conceived while I was pursuing the PGDSIM course at CSIM. Senthil of Child Charitable Trust, a good friend of mine, introduced me to CSIM. Here, I learnt the basic lessons such as how to choose a specific issue or area of interest, how to set up an organization, etc. I can claim to have been trained well in all these lessons today, given that my organization has stood up on its own feet now,” says a confident Balaji.

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

“I had made a network of contacts of many of the prominent organizations that work in the area of HIV/AIDS, and to gain more experience, I worked for a year with YRG care after I completed

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

On the background of children who come under his care, he says: “There are some children whose either or both parents are alive. Children are free to live with their families and visit us for treatment alone, or they may choose to stay with us for a

certain period of time. The choice is theirs! These children are boys, usually belonging to the age group 7–15 years. There are practical problems with taking in girls. We did have one young girl of 15 years who lived with us for a short while. However, when she turned 16, her mother insisted that she gets her married to a boy who was also HIV positive. That was the last we saw of that girl.”

The children attend regular school at their neighborhood in Vanagaram, where the Principal and the teachers have been informed about their medical condition. According to Balaji the school is very supportive. “We take leave of absence at the slightest hint of cold or any other common ailment, and ensure that the children get proper medication and rest before they get back to school,” says Balaji solemnly. He adds: “A couple of months ago, one of our children who looked apparently healthy suddenly fell sick, and within a span of one week passed away. Ever since, we have been extra careful about our children. We maintain a strict regimen for their daily medication and hygiene.”

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

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

—Archanaa R.

Balaji

“Although I did actively continue volunteering for several years, the thought of starting an organization was actually conceived while I was pursuing the PGDSIM course at CSIM.”

New Lease of Life

“We make sure that the culprits—those who employ children—pay an amount of Rs. 20,000 as fine. We also make sure that the establishments that are engaged in such violations are closed for an indefinite period”

—Kanyakumari, Teacher, NCLP School



Imran was a rag picker before he was picked up by the Vellore District Collector a few years ago. Now, Imran is in a foreign country working in a restaurant. Imran is one among thousands of children who have been rescued from the child labour system, and rehabilitated under the National Child Labour Project (NCLP).

Like Imran, there are 170 children who are being rehabilitated by NCLP school at Konavattam, one of the 22 village Panchayats situated along the national highway (NH-46), at North Vellore District, Tamil Nadu.

A visit to this rehabilitation school informed us that the number of child labour and bonded child labour cases has come down from 15,421 in 1995 to 1,330 in 2007.

“Vellore is the only district in India which has taken severe action against the child labour system, punishing industries and establishments with fines and sealing factories forever. So far 69 establishments in and around Vellore district has been sealed, and the District Collectorate has collected more than Rs. 15 lakh as penalties from establishments who had engaged child labour. There are 69 special schools located between Arakkonam and Tirupattur in Vellore district who are rehabilitating children affected by the child labour and bonded labour system. In Tamil Nadu alone, there are 17 districts which are implementing the NCLP Programme,” says K. Rajapandian, Project Director, Child Labour Relief Project in Vellore.

After speaking to D. Kanyakumari, a teacher and S. Kalaiarasan, Clerk, we found that most of the children were rescued from beedi factories and

some from butcher shops, tea shops, and fast food outlets. “These children are sent by their parents to the beedi factories and other places of work to earn. We rescue them with the help of Child Labour Project Officers, Village Head, and Panchayat leaders,” says Kanyakumari.

The NCLP School rehabilitates children aged between 9 to 14 years of age, and later admits them in mainstream schools for further education.

When we ask Kanyakumari how they ensure that the children do not revert to child labour after being rehabilitated, she says: “We make sure that the culprits—those who employ children—pay an amount of Rs. 20,000 as fine. We also make sure that the establishments that are engaged in such violations are closed for an indefinite period.”

The teachers put in extra effort to educate these children as they find it very difficult to study. “To teach these children is an uphill task as they come here beyond the ideal age limit and they don’t adapt themselves to the new environment. We start teaching them from the basics and follow Activity based learning. The Central Government schools that function under the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) has classes from 1 to 5 with no sub sections, and all students share one common class room”, says Kanyakumari.

The teachers distinguish the classes based on students’ current skills and learning abilities. They take three months to analyse the aptitude of the students, after which the student’s learning schedule is prepared.

The Government provides free uniforms, books, and note books. Food is being provided under the mid-day meal scheme by the state

government. The government pays a monthly stipend of Rs. 100 to the parents of the students to encourage them to send their children regularly to school. This amount is deposited in a bank account for a period of three years, and disbursed to the parents at the end of every year. Apart from these schemes, the government also financially supports children who aspire to study further.

A sum of Rs. 25,000 (Rs. 20,000 collected as fine from the violating establishment and Rs. 5,000 funded by the government) is deposited in the

name of the student in a nationalised bank. This fund remains in the bank until the student completes his higher studies, and the interest earned from this amount is utilised by the student for his educational expenses.

In addition to this, students are provided with an educational loan to pursue their education in Colleges/Universities. There are 34 students who have successfully completed their schooling at NCLP and are presently pursuing their studies in engineering colleges and polytechnic institutes.

There are many such success stories from this school in Konavattam. The story of Imran is one among them. While few students continue their higher studies, some seek employment in metropolitan cities such as Chennai and Bangalore, or go abroad to earn a regular income.

We don’t know whether the Central Government’s ‘Education for All’ is a huge success in India, but it seems to be a huge success in Tamil Nadu. Vellore stands as an epitome to this success.

However, another Child Labour Relief Project Extension Centre known as Indian Council for Child Welfare (ICCW) which also rehabilitates children rescued from child labour and bonded labour system say: “These children are educationally rehabilitated, but due to years of working in the beedi factories and exposed to hazards of rolling beedis, they have their health affected and show symptoms of diseases and illness which are typical to people working in beedi factories.”

—Ramesh.S

Asian College of Journalism



“While in first standard, I have studied in 35 schools in a year’s time.” —Shankar, Founder, Tribal Society.

Bead Maker to Change Maker

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

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

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

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

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

After completing his Bachelor’s Degree, Shankar pursued his Master’s Degree at Annamalai University, and then did his LLB at Balaji Law School at Pondicherry. “My parents camped near my college as well. I used to visit



Shankar and Narikuravar community members submitting a petition to the Collector of Villupuram District, Tamil Nadu

them during the interval and joined them for lunch every day. Most of my friends understood and respected my family culture, but few used to mock at me,” says Shankar.

After completing his post graduation, Shankar got associated with social activists—Geetha Ramakrishnan, advisor to the All India Construction Workers Association in Chennai, Nalini Nair of Kerala, and Medha Patkar of West Bengal. It was from these personalities, he learnt how to campaign for one’s rights. In 2003, he organized a *padayatra* (foot journey) along with Geetha Ramakrishnan from Kanyakumari to Chennai for the unorganized workers federation. While he campaigned for the rights of the

Narikuravar community, Geetha Ramakrishnan campaigned for the rights of the construction workers. “In the 53 days of *padayatra*, I learnt a lot from Geetha Ramakrishnan. Immediately on return, I registered a trade union ‘Tamil Nadu Pazhangudi Vaghirivel Thozhilalar Sangam’ (TAPVATS), to create more awareness amongst the members, and prevent corruption,” he adds.

Through the trade union, Shankar campaigned for a uniform policy at the national level to recognise the *Narikuravar* community as Scheduled tribes in all the states of India. Through trade union membership, Shankar offered the tribal people a common identity, and an assured place in government classification and censuses. This provided the communities a common platform to

Narikuravar, who has done her Master’s Degree in Social Work. Shankar’s mother supervises the kitchen at the residential school and continues to make bead chains during her free time. His younger sister Vijaya is educated up to tenth standard and is now managing the residential school at Perumbanur, Cuddalore. His brother Selvam is also educated up to tenth standard, and he assists him in his day-to-day work.

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

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

Shankar proudly says that his community does not have people with major diseases nor anyone is affected with HIV/Aids. Likewise, there are no cases of suicides or dowry deaths, and there is no one suffering from mental illness or stress. “All this is due to the strong family culture and strict norms we follow in our community. Within the *Narikuravar* community, there are three sub clans—*Mevado*, *Gujarato*, and *Selio*. The community members marry within these clans. We are led by a Panchayat leader called ‘*Navio*’ who resolves domestic issues in the community,” adds Shankar.

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

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

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

—Marie Banu



Narikuravar Children celebrating Independence Day at the residential school

fight for their rights, to be listed as scheduled tribes, and obtain social welfare benefits. Their trade union membership cards gave them an identity when they travelled to other states, and provided them with access to trade unions in those states. Till date, Shankar has enlisted over 1,000 members in four districts of Tamil Nadu.

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

“Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani Trust extended further support to my organisation by providing educational support to five of our community children who were struggling to pursue their college education. Now, Rajasekaran is pursuing his MBA, Murali is doing his Bachelors Degree in History, and Jayachithra and Annapoorani are undergoing their teacher training course. I am thankful to Mr. P.N. Devarajan for providing us with an education aid of Rs. 1 lakh.

In 2003, Shankar married Anuradha, a

My food habits have changed as I mingle even with people outside my community



Shankar and Anuradha with Narikuravar Children

Accelerating Social Citizenry

Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS) is a Public Charitable Trust launched by Sri. P. N. Devarajan and four of his friends in 1999 at Chennai. It's multi-pronged approach is targeted towards accelerating social citizenry.

"In order to create social consciousness, we should first celebrate. Hence, we started recognising social entrepreneurs and celebrated their work in the form of Awards," says Sri. P. N. Devarajan. This prompted him to institute the Sadguru Gnanananda National awards for women social entrepreneurs in 2000.

When social service is rendered with a spirit of love, joy, and dedication to the Divine, we find God's signature in such acts. In fact, it is the grace and compassion of spiritual masters that inspire people to work for social causes. The sage of Tapovanam says in his unique style: "when we bring light, darkness will dissolve on its own." This being the guiding philosophy, the awards have been instituted by MSDS in the name of one of the great sages of our time, Sadguru Gnanananda of Tapovanam, to salute women social entrepreneurs for their excellence in social work.

The award comprises of:

- Citation elaborating the services and

commending the work of the Awardees

- Purse of Rs. 75, 000 (Rs. 50,000 was offered until 2008)
- Silver plaque
- Shawl

The award is not just recognition, but a celebration of the great efforts of women who are the torch bearers, dispelling darkness, and ushering in hope and courage where there is despair. The purse is given in the name of the awardees (not in the name of the organisation to which they belong) in appreciation of the work they have done.

While MSDS appreciates and nurtures individual initiatives, we also believe that sustainable social change can be brought about by families that work together. The family is potentially, a powerful agent of change and hence the 'Family Awards' have been introduced since 2006 to honour those who have shown the initiative and teamwork to chalk out innovative solutions to resolve social problems.

MSDS also introduced another award 'Socially Responsible Corporate', to honour individuals who head corporate houses and provide equal employment opportunities for the disadvantaged.

Awardees reaction on receiving the award

"It was indeed a great evening and I was very happy that Jeevodaya was honoured. The work done by the other fellow awardees was also amazing. It was an unforgettable evening"

—Sister Lalitha, Jeevodaya, Chennai

"I am extremely glad to be a recipient of this award. It has made me realize that I need to do more service than before. I felt encouraged and motivated, when I gave the speech on behalf of my fellow awardees,"

—Amutha Shanthi, (organisation) Madurai

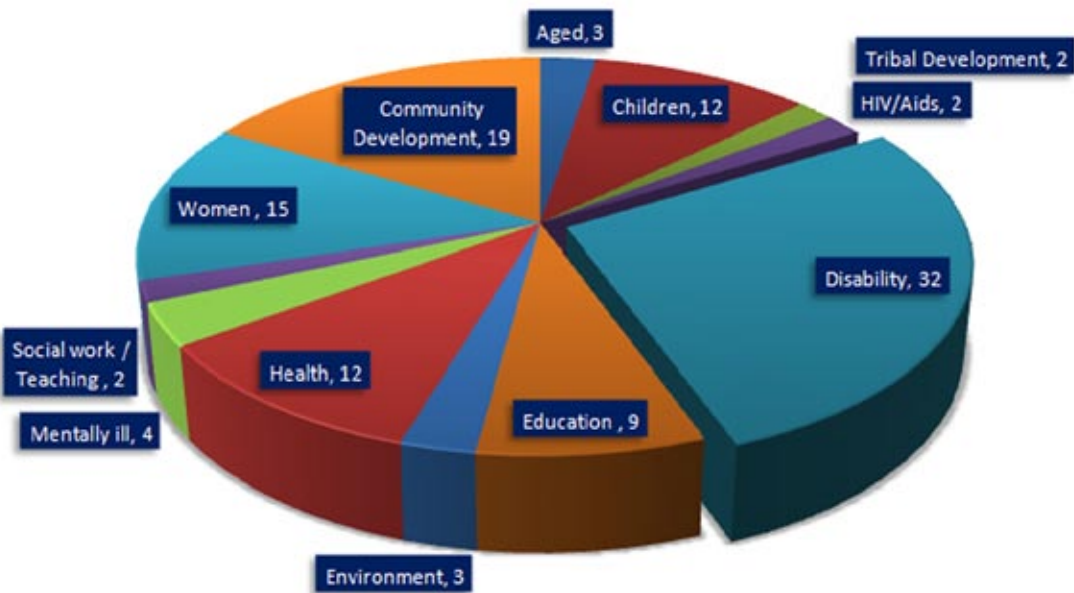
The Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship scheme was launched in 2010, wherein young budding social entrepreneurs were identified and offered a monthly stipend of Rs.10,000 for a period of two years.

Thus these awards help the awardees get a positive reinforcement through venture philanthropy. The economic support through fellowship helps budding social entrepreneurs overcome their teething

problems, and help them in replicating and expanding their activities.

"Charity is like water flowing through a pipe. We should continue to facilitate social citizenry."

Issues Addressed by Sadguru Gnanananda Awardees



Year	Chief Guest	City	No. of awardees		
			Women	Family	Corporate
2000	Sri.G.V.Ramakrishna IAS, Former Chairman, Dis-Investment Commission, SEBI.	Chennai	5		
2001	Dr. B. Ramamurthi, Eminent Nuero Surgeon Sri.D.R.Mehta IAS, Chairman, SEBI	Chennai	6		
	His Excellency Dr. C. Rangarajan, Governor of Andhra Pradesh	Hyderabad	6		
2002	Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, President of India	Chennai	5		
	Dr.Nageswar Reddy, Leading Gastroenterologist	Hyderabad	5		
	Her Excellency Smt. V.S.Ramadevi, Governor of Karnataka Smt. Sudha. N.Murthi, Chairperson Infosys Foundation	Bangalore	5		
2003	His Excellency Sri P. S. Ramamohan Rao, Governor of Tamilnadu His Excellency Sri Mohamed Fazal, Governor of Maharashtra	Mumbai	16		
2004	Sri. N. Damodharan, Chairman UTI	Bangalore	6		
	Padmashri Shantha Sinha, Magsaysay Award winner-2003	Hyderabad	6		
2005	Dr. Mohan, M.V. Diabetes Specialities Centre (P) Ltd	Chennai	5		
	Padma Vibhushan Justice MN Venkatachaliah, Former Chief Justice of India	Bangalore	5		
2006	Sri. T. S. Krishnamurthy Former CEC	Chennai	3	1	
	Sri. Y. S. Chowdary Chairman, Sujana Group	Hyderabad	3	1	
2007	His Excellency Thiru Surjit Singh Barnala, Governor of Tamil Nadu	Chennai	5	2	1
2008	Dr. Indu Shahani, Sheriff of Mumbai	Mumbai	6	2	
2009	Sri. A. S. Venkatesh, Past District Governor, Rotary International Smt. Ela Bhatt, Founder SEWA	Chennai	4	1	1
2010	Sri. N.Gopalaswami Former, CEC	Chennai	2	1	
2011	Sri. R. V. Shekhar, MD, Lancor Holdings Ltd.	Chennai	2	1	
	Total		95	9	2



Dal, Oil, & Sugar (DOS) Scheme

MSDS propagates and initiates social work and volunteerism from households through the Dal, Oil, and Sugar (DOS) scheme, by collecting these essentials from donor families on a monthly basis. DOS is collected through ten collection centres headed by socially motivated women in dispersed localities in Chennai, and this is distributed to 47 Non-Governmental Organisations who run homes for children and senior citizens in Chennai and its suburbs.

"Small is beautiful. We should remain small and reach out to many. We are like passengers in a moving train. All of us are heading towards the same direction. While we get out when our station arrives, new people get into the train. This

is similar to donors. Through MSDS we did not want to prescribe, but instead provide a suggestive guidance for donors. This is why we launched the DOS programme. The habit of giving should imbibe in the family. When the family donates, the child learns from his parents to contribute. When he grows up, he becomes a donor." opines Sri. P.N. Devarajan

Highlights of DOS scheme:

- Totally Voluntary
- Creates a habit of giving and sharing in the community
- No burden on the giver
- Helps Social Service Organisations

- Networks families to reach out to Social Service organisations.
- No paper work involved & no financial accounts maintained

A total of 9,468 kilos of Dal, 5,052 kilos of Oil, and 11,052 kilos of Sugar are collected every year and distributed to 47 NGOs in Chennai. Around 750 families contribute to DOS scheme and 8 coordinators manage the collection and distribution process. These coordinators have been volunteering for this noble cause for over 10 years.

MSDS takes great pleasure in honoring these 8 coordinators and recognizing them with the

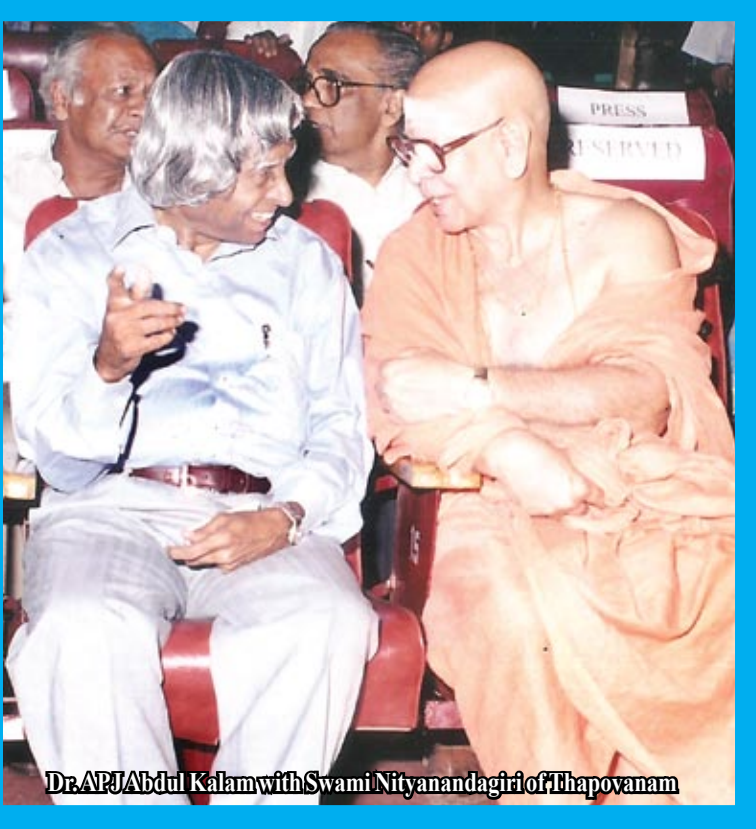
'Sadguru Gnanananda Social Citizenry Award'. This award which has been initiated this year will recognize volunteers in the social sector.

The awardees for 2011 are:

1. Smt. Jayanthi Karthikeyan
2. Smt. Vanjula Vasanth
3. Smt. Chandra Jankiraman
4. Smt. Janaki Raghavan
5. Sri. K. E. Margabandhu
6. Sri. K. S. Jayaraman
7. Sri. P. Subramanian
8. Sri. R. P. Krishnamachari

— Latha Suresh

Please join us on 12 March 2011 at Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai at 10.30 A.M. to acclaim the work done by 5 social entrepreneurs and 8 volunteers.



Life is a Miracle

“It has been a painstaking journey to raise a lobby for disabilities, what with the State of Punjab having so little awareness and sensitivity towards people with disabilities.”

—Dr. Neelam Sodhi, Founder, Ashirwad

Agynaecologist, mother, disability rights activist, life-skills coach and environmentalist, Dr. Neelam Sodhi, Founder of Ashirwad Trust, Ludhiana knows a thing or two about perseverance, dynamism, and faith.

Excerpts from an interview with the winner of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani Award for the year 2011.

Introduction

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

“When I had conceived my first child, I was in the midst of hectic activity. Before I realised it, problems arose in my pregnancy and my son Jaswinder was born pre-term. Soon, I had a hint that something was wrong with him. When he was eleven months old, I took him to my parent’s home where we had him diagnosed. It was then I learnt that he had cerebral palsy.”

Early years of motherhood

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

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

Birth of an idea

“When my son was about 7 years old, his teachers called me often to discuss his inability to register and reproduce the regular lessons that was taught to him. They complained about his inability to read or write a single word even after repeated teaching. Each time, I pleaded to them to give him another chance at learning. But, they were insensitive. I felt perturbed and wondered why they only saw the problem and not realise that Jaswinder is an intelligent kid. This anger created a lot of energy within me. I lunged at books to learn more about teaching techniques such as mental mathematics, and other such Montessori methods. Gradually, though without holding a definitive degree, I was becoming a physiotherapist, occupational therapist, a special educator, a trainer, all at once. However, all the work that I was handling was growing on me, making me very tired. I wanted something simpler in life.”

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

“The idea of conceiving another child was

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

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

About Ashirwad

“Ashirwad was set up in September 1999, by

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

“Visibility is an important factor in determining the success of your efforts. We have always tried to put in a word about our children, or have them meet other people in different fora. We put up cultural performances as an exclusive contingent in the state level Republic Day Parade in 2010. People were moved by the effort put in by these children, and several people have been asking us to conduct such performances again. The larger success lies in the fact that the very public which shied away from these children is now opening their arms to them. Acceptance levels have gone up and talking about disabilities is no longer such a tedious issue. I am optimistic that if organizations shed all their inhibitions and take on a more positive and rights-based approach things will change for the better.

Meet the family

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

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

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

“Being bestowed with Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani Award 2011 has boosted my morale by leaps and bounds. It has come at a critical time in our census related work. I can tell you that we have made a little more progress than we would have, thanks to the cheer of winning this award.”

—As told to Archanaa R.



Neelam Sodhi

“*I feel very fortunate to be my son’s parent, because he made me appreciate anybody who has faced exclusion, be it disability, colour, race, class, or anything else*”

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

Expanding vistas for dialogue and understanding

“It has been a painstaking journey to raise a

I feel good when I receive awards. But I feel even happier when people recognize our work, as this gives me the strength to work further.— Madhu Singhal, Managing Trustee, Mitra Jyothi

Light in the Darkness



Madhu Singhal receiving the National Award

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

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

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

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

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

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

was founded in 1990," says Madhu cheerfully.

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

Madhu conducted outreach programmes and organized surveys in urban slums. She decided to

conduct specific programmes for the visually impaired and initiated the 'Talking Book Library'. She organized regular meetings with fellow NGO workers to identify the need of the disabled in Karnataka, and also participated in advocacy campaigns related to disability.

"This gave me the opportunity to meet people who were affected with other disabilities like orthopedically handicapped and hearing impaired.

I understood the problems they faced, and realised that my problem was nothing when compared to them. They always depend on others, but for a person like me it is not so. They needed much more support. I have concern for people with all types of disabilities", adds Madhu.

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

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

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

Madhu has visited several countries and is a member of the World Blind Union. She also serves as a consultant to several developmental organisations. She received many awards and recognitions personally and for Mitra Jyothi. She received the National Award in 2008 for her achievement in working for the cause of people with disabilities, and IBN-7 Bajaj Allianz Award. She is also the recipient of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani National Award 2011.

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

—Marie Banu

Talking Book Library



Independent Living Skills Programme



“My mother went to my sister's school and requested them to allow me to sit in the classroom. The teacher assured that she would assist me in case I needed any help”

”

Liberation

An inspiring conversation between Ramana Maharishi and his disciple on liberation.

A visitor asked: What to do to get liberation (*moksha*)?

M.: Learn what liberation is.

D.: Should I do worship (*upasana*) for it?

M.: Worship is for mind control (*chitta nirodha*) and concentration.

D.: Should I do idol worship? Is there any harm in it?

M.: So long as you think you are the body there is no harm.

D.: How to get over the cycle of births and deaths?

M.: Learn what it means.

D.: Should I not leave my wife and family?

M.: How do they harm you? First, find out who you are.

D.: Should not one give up wife, wealth, home?

M.: Learn first what *samsara* is. Is all that *samsara*? Have there not been men living among them and getting realisation?

D.: What are the steps of practical training (*sadhana*) for it?

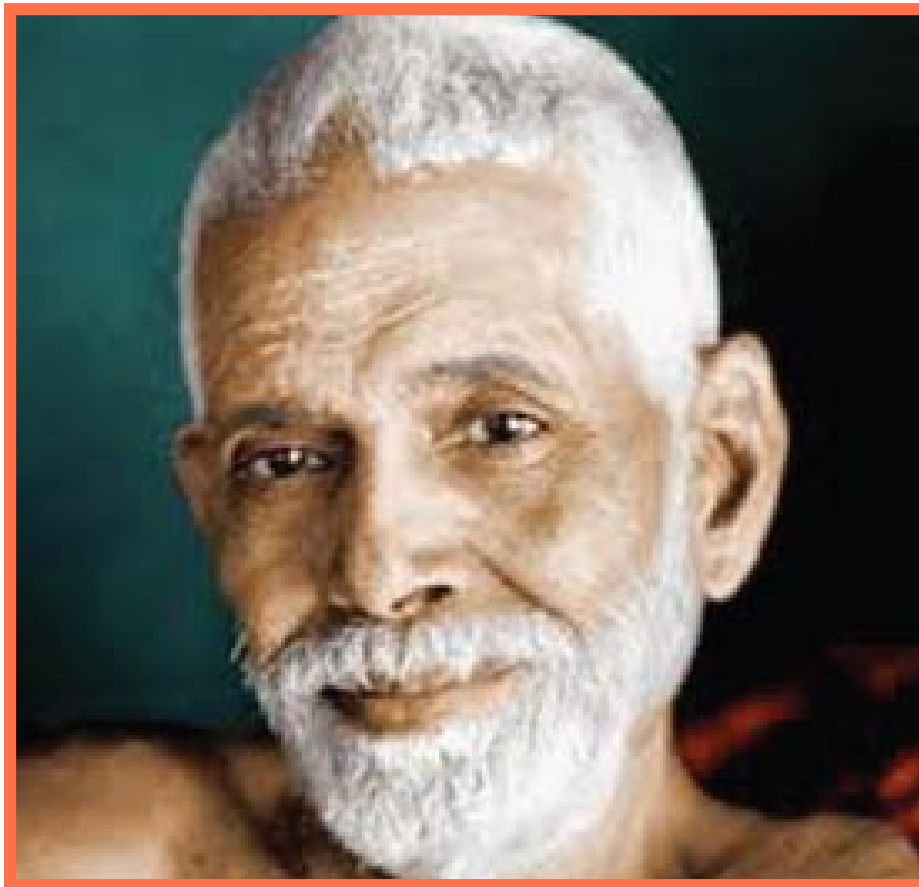
M.: It depends on the qualifications and the nature of the seeker.

D.: I am doing idol worship.

M.: Go on with it. It leads to concentration of mind. Get one-pointed. All will come out right. People think that freedom (*moksha*) is somewhere yonder and should be sought out. They are wrong. Freedom (*moksha*) is only knowing the Self within yourself. Concentrate and you will get it. Your mind is the cycle of births and deaths (*samsara*).

D.: My mind is very unsteady. What should I do?

M.: Fix your attention on any single thing and try to hold on to it. All will be right.



D.: I find concentration difficult.

M.: Go on practising. Your concentration will be as easy as breathing. That will be the crown of your achievements.

D.: Are not abstinence and pure food helpful?

M.: Yes, all that is good. (Then Maharshi concentrates and silently gazes at vacancy, and thus sets an example to the questioner).

D.: Do I not require Yoga?

M.: What is it, but the means to concentration?

D.: To help concentration, is it not good to have

some aids?

M.: Breath-regulation, etc., are such helps.

D.: Is it not possible to get a vision of God?

M.: Yes. You see this and that. Why not see God? Only you must know what God is. All are seeing God always. But they do not know it. You find out what God is. People see, yet see not, because they know not God.

D.: Should I not go on with repetition of sacred syllables, (*mantra japa*), e.g., Krishna or Rama's name, when I worship images?

M.: Mental *japa* is very good. That helps meditation. Mind gets identified with the

repetition and then you get to know what worship (*puja*) really is - the losing of one's individuality in that which is worshipped.

D.: Is the Universal Soul (*Paramatma*) always different from us?

M.: That is the common belief, but it is wrong. Think of Him as not different from you, and then you achieve identity of Self with God.

D.: Is it not the *Advaita* doctrine to become one with God?

M.: Where is becoming? The thinker is all the while the Real. He ultimately realises the fact. Sometimes we forget our identities, as in sleep and dreams. But God is perpetual consciousness.

D.: Is not the Master's guidance necessary, besides idol worship?

M.: How did you start it without advice?

D.: From sacred books (*puranas*).

M.: Yes. Someone tells you of God, or Bhagavan Himself tells you. In the latter case God Himself is your Master. What matters it who the Master is? We really are one with Master or Bhagavan. The Master is God; one discovers it in the end. There is no difference between human-guru and God-guru.

D.: If we have done virtuous action (*punya*) the achievement will not leave us. I hope.

M.: You will reap your destiny (*prarabdha*) that way.

D.: Will not a Wise Master be a great help in pointing out the way?

M.: Yes. If you go on working with the light available, you will meet your Master, as he himself will be seeking you.

D.: Do not we go to Heaven (*svarga*), etc. as the result of our actions?

M.: That is as true as the present existence. But if we enquire who we are and discover the Self, what need is there to think of heaven, etc.?

D.: Should I not try to escape re-birth?

M.: Yes. Find out who is born and who has the trouble of existence now. When you are asleep do you think of rebirths, or even the present existence, etc.? So find out whence the present problem arises and there is the solution also. You will discover that there is no birth, no present trouble or unhappiness, etc. All is That; All is Bliss; we are freed from re-birth in fact. Why fret over the misery of rebirth?

—Excerpted from Sri Ramana Maharshi teachings

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Inward Focussed Action Approach - the language of a social entrepreneur

*A Series on
Growing
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Deep Change*

It is very easy to point out what everybody needs to do to better a situation. In society when a social entrepreneur enters the scene there would be many things that are not existing and running in the best possible way, and several factors contributing to injustice, poor management, inequality, and abuse. Many times there are lot of deliberations on what should have been done, who is responsible, who has been irresponsible, and so on. It can go into an attitude of 'holier than thou', not making us realise the actual contribution each of us are making to the existing scenario. This little parable says it all.

The pupils of the Tendai School used to study meditation before Zen entered Japan. Four of them, who were very close friends, promised one another to observe seven days of silence.

On the first day all were silent. Their meditation had begun auspiciously, but when night fell and the oil lamps were growing dim, one of the pupils could not help exclaiming to a servant, "Please do fix those lamps!"

The second pupil was surprised to hear the first one talk, "We are not supposed to say a word", he remarked.

"You two are stupid. Why did you talk?" asked the third.

"I am the only one who has not talked," announced the fourth pupil.

(Sampath. J.M. story 75 Discovery – 3rd edition, Insight Publishers, Bangalore, India, 1998)

The question is not about who did or did not do things; it is, given the scenario what can I do best to better the situation? The answer does not lie just in deliberations, it lies in action; action emerging out of inward looking attitude.



It is very easy to get caught in looking outward, since the eyes face the world and can see the world outside more easily than see the world within. It requires a deep resolve to face self and continue to see oneself as a part of everything that happens in the world.

There was once a participant in our workshop who asked, "how can you say I am responsible for all that happens in my life? How can I be responsible if someone comes across in a road I am walking and hits me? I did not do anything." To this, I answered, "yes, you are in a way responsible since you have been a part to allow such a society to exist that people hit others who are not at fault. What have you done to build a better society from your side?"

An inward looking, action oriented person is easy to identify. They crib least about the world. They have a high level of acceptance of the context and are sensitive to its multi dimension nature. They will be constantly focused on strengthening their self conviction to respond to the world. They will be in a response mode rather than reactive mode. They do not have the time to find faults with people around them and identify how non-integrated others are. Instead, all time goes in finding how they are contributing and what more can be done by them. They have high initiative and seek a number of alternatives to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. They are also people whose work is seen in actions rather than in

speeches about actions. They work relentlessly and seek no external appreciation as motivation or rewards for what they accomplish. They will be driven by a strong vision and relentlessly pursue that vision. Some words which are usually not found in their dictionary: excuse; reasons; because; yes, but. ... They own up the problems and see what they can do in the situation thereby rising above the circumstance than blaming the circumstance.

Sant Kabir's *Doha* (two-line verses) says it very well—

Bura Jo Dekhan Main Chala, Bura Naa Miha Koye;

Jo Munn Khoja Apnaa, to Mujhse Bura Naa Koye.

(Translation in English)

I went in search of Bad in people, I couldn't find badness anywhere;

When I searched my own heart, I realized there is no one more bad than me.

It is the language of action emerging out of strong vision and conviction that defines a social entrepreneur.

Points for Reflection:

- What satisfaction does looking into others faults give me?
- Why do I fail to recognize the same faults in myself?
- What does it mean for me to take the complete responsibility and see myself in everything that is around me?
- Am I reactive to life, or am I responsive?
- How do I begin to become inward focused and action oriented?

—J.M.Sampath & Kalpana Sampath

SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is to do with discovering yourself, your consciousness, and stay away from pulls and push of external pressures, attractions and distractions.

Spirituality is the practice of oneness with God or a higher energy, and become for the external world an instrument of God in gracefully serving the cause of others, the children, and creation of God.

To serve people is to serve God and therefore the attainment of greatest joy of living.

Spirituality is not being religious, one can be religious but spiritual is an all embracing condition of body, mind and soul to being a human being, to live in the present, unmindful of the past or future, but to give the best of now.



RISK TAKING

Starting with no money is 'bootstrapping'. Many successful large companies like 'Microsoft' started up with few pennies. 'Bootstrapping' is in the start of each and every social enterprise with tight and less than required finances.

Concerning all acts of initiative there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and endless plans; the moment you definitely commit yourself, then providence moves.

All sort of things occur that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issue from the decisions, raining in your favour all manner of unseen incidents, meetings and material assistance, which you could never have dreamed would come your way.

Whatever you can do or dream, you can, begin it! Boldness has genius, power and magic to it. Go for it!

—P.N. Devarajan

Laughter Therapist

Padmashri Vivek shares with **Marie Banu** his view about humour and its importance in one's life

Vivekanathan alias Vivek, a post graduate in Commerce, is a leading comedian in Tamil film industry. He has won 5 Filmfare awards for 'Best Comedian', and received the Padmashri award from the Government of India for his contribution to the arts in April 2009.

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

In an exclusive interview, Padmashri Vivek shares with Marie Banu his view about humour, and its importance in one's life.

Why did you choose to enter the film industry?

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

I did my M.Com and was working as a telephone operator in Madurai. I used to come to Chennai, entertain the members of the humor club, and return. P.R. Govindarajan, known as Kalakendra Govindarajan, was a member of the humor club. He introduced me to his friend K. Balachander, film director, who asked me: "What do you want Mr. Vivek." I replied: "I don't want anything, Sir." Both of them exchanged looks. Govindarajan said to Balachander that I was a raw talent from Madurai and did not know how to talk. I stood looking at both of them and did not know what to say. Balachander said: "Neither Chennai nor Madurai, I cannot help you. Try to get a transfer".

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

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

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

Unlike others, you are more of a satirist than a slapstick comedian. Who has been



Photo: nologo

your inspiration? How do you conceive your ideas?

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

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

How important is humor for one's life?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is the biggest achievement or appreciation that you have received for your efforts in delivering social messages through humour?

Dr. Abdul Kalam was requested to be the Chief Guest for an event to be organised at Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore on April 14, 2011, and was asked to speak on the topic, "What I can do for the society". He has suggested to the organisers to invite me instead. I think this is my biggest achievement, and is more than a National Award for me.

Editorial

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu