

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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BAG-GING SUSTAINABILITY

About Ecotrends, a social enterprise in Tamil Nadu



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starting from zero again."**
An interview with
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From the Editor

Dear Reader,

Every religion has its own calendar, but the Hindus have many. In a culturally diverse India, New Year is celebrated on different dates and in different ways. Tamilians too have their own calendar and 'Varusha Pirappu' or 'Puthandu' (meaning New Year) is observed on the first day of Chithirai month. The festival date is set with the solar cycle of the lunisolar Hindu calendar and therefore falls on 14 of April every year on the Gregorian calendar. This marks the beginning of the Dravidian New Year and the focus is on prosperity throughout the year, and a prayer of thanks to the gods.

The same day is observed by Hindus elsewhere as the traditional New Year, but is known by other names such as Vishu in Kerala, and Vaisakhi in central and north India.

Many people make New Year resolutions and some live up to it and some do not. I hope that in this year to come, we will all get opportunities to make mistakes. Because if you are making mistakes, then you are making new things, trying new things, learning, living, pushing yourself, changing yourself, changing your world. You're doing things you've never done before, and more importantly, you're "doing something".

All the change agents featured in this edition have made a lot of mistakes and are now glad that they made them. They did not freeze nor stop: they pursued with their dreams whether it was good enough or not. They carried out their tasks without fear and were never scared of doing what they felt was right. It was this conviction that has driven them to do great wonders.

So, friends make a resolution and learn from your mistakes.

Happy Tamil New Year!!

Latha & Banu

Editorial

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

The Power of Gratitude

"Gratitude in so many ways is so dramatically missing in the world today. Without gratitude nothing is enough." - Julio Olalla



One of the earliest advocates of a daily gratitude practice was Dutch philosopher Rabbi Baruch Spinoza. In the seventeenth century, he suggested that each day for a month, we ask ourselves the following three questions:

- Who or what inspired me today?
- What brought me happiness today?
- What brought me comfort and deep peace today?

Grateful living is a way of life which asks us to notice all that is already present and abundant – from the tiniest things of beauty to the grandest of our blessings – and in so doing, to take nothing for granted. Focus on gratitude is a

state where "I, me, and mine" has been set aside. It empowers you to get out of our own way.

Gratitude is a fullness of heart that moves one from limitation and fear to expansion and engagement. Every situation offers us an opportunity to practice gratitude, and when we do, we can shift from an anxious feeling to a calm feeling and from an angry feeling to a more peaceful feeling. It's easy to underestimate gratitude, but research shows that people who exercise gratitude are more likely to be productive, optimistic, generous and happy.

When Mark Twain said, "I can live two months on a good compliment," he only told half the story. While the person who

receives the appreciation enjoys feeling noticed and valued (and is motivated to do more of the same), the giver can also bask in the connection.

Settle into the moment, and open your heart in gratitude.

- Write down & practice: In what ways can I expand the circle of gratitude—including the qualities of thankfulness, appreciation, acceptance and generosity—to all I come in contact with on a daily basis?
- Do a gratitude meditation or a gratitude walk everyday. Dwell upon three people or things for which you are grateful

Yours Energetically

Ms. Bhuvaneshwari Ravi is trainer, facilitator and coach of the Positive Energy (PE) program. She is a spiritual seeker with a vision of transforming her own energy state from surviving to being. In this journey she has gathered deep insights and is continuously working towards creating a pathway for more seekers. With years of exposure to spiritual practices like yoga, reiki, and personal development interventions like coaching, she is working in the Organization Development and Leadership Development space.

She can be contacted at bhuvaneshwari@teamthink.co.in for arranging Positive Energy training and Coaching sessions.

Development – from Records to Reality

Women activists are often forced to fight prejudices at two levels – one at the community level where they advocate for rights of a group and the other at family level, where they try to realise these rights within the family. Not all of them manage to succeed in both levels. However, failure either at the community or family level gives them the determination to succeed in the other. Ms S Vasanthi's career graph is a typical case in point.

Now popularly known as a tribal rights activist and a mentor of women's groups in Thiruvallur district, Vasanthi had to drop out of school while studying in class ten as she did not possess a caste certificate to validate her tribal identity. "For marginalised groups like us, only such documents have the power to assert our identities. Otherwise, we lose everything while proving ourselves for who we are," says Vasanthi, empathising with uneducated tribals who still remain clueless of the nitty-gritty. Diligently following all procedures, she managed to get her caste certificate from the Tahsildar after a couple of years. Meanwhile, she learnt tailoring and worked in local companies, completely unaware of what the caste certificate warranted her to become.

Having learnt that Vasanthi had her certificates in order, Irular Women's Welfare Society invited her in 1994 to work as an evening tuition teacher in their centres. During the day, she ran a small tiffin shop outside her house to add to her household income. Soon, Vasanthi was promoted as the Village Development Officer, in charge of development activities in ten villages. In the nine years she spent at Irular Women's Welfare Society, Vasanthi got an opportunity to play different roles – Programme Head, Coordinator, Senior Programme Manager, and Secretary. "I got married in 1990. I had a three month old daughter when the job was offered to me. I could not afford to lose this opportunity and hence took my daughter along with me during the field visits. It wasn't easy, but was empowering. I became more confident to articulate for and on behalf of tribal women," says Vasanthi.

In 2003, she founded the Vanavil Women's Welfare Society to work for economic empowerment of tribal women and help tribal families access government services by getting all their documents intact. "I had understood that economic empowerment was a result of a series of changes and that women's autonomy in household decision making was determined by many factors. Overt dependence on their husbands also curtailed women's ability to decide for themselves. Therefore, the initial focus was to open up windows for women to articulate and seek help. Forming of women's groups was the best option I could explore," she says.

Celebration of International Women's Day and the formation of forty women's



groups gave the right start for Vasanthi. She conducted household surveys to help resolve mismatch in addresses on different documents. As the records were set right, widow pensions became accessible, members in the community owned their own caste certificates, voter identification cards, ration cards, Aadhar cards and thus availed all government schemes and services meant for them. Women's groups were enrolled in vocational training programmes after which they were guided to take government loans to initiate their own business units. In the course of these formal interactions, women also began to realise the significance of education and made sure that their children attended school.

It was a tough journey indeed. Vasanthi

also recounts incidents where communities dreaded her presence, questioning her authority to articulate in such matters. Yet, she continued to work with women and communities with the help of funds received from two renowned networks of tribals – Desiya Adivasi Thozhamai Kazhagam and Tamil Nadu Tribals Federation. Noting the inter community dynamics, Vasanthi also mentions about some groups performing very well in terms of savings while others remained speculative due to interferences from their communities. She relates this to the political representation of some groups that has resulted in active engagement. She also saw that land ownership had a direct relationship with groups' interest in growth and representation.

Determined to demonstrate the possibility of such representation, Vasanthi contested the state assembly elections from Cuddalore district in 2009. Despite losing in the elections, Vasanthi managed to throw light on some critical issues. Forged land records were checked and a harassment case was resolved. There was more awareness on forest rights and women began to occupy key positions in their communities. "Women took to the role of panchayat leaders and ward members. Their growth reiterated why resources must trickle down to where they belonged. Ensuring this can mark a new beginning in the economic empowerment of tribal women in our villages," asserts Vasanthi, adding that the PGDSIM course at CSIM helped her organise her vision and put things in perspective.

While she started her organisation in 2003, Vasanthi managed to organise all events and activities with the help of local contacts and acquaintances. "It was so easy then. But now that I move to different districts, organising my work is very important to see the desired impact. Thanks to CSIM and the priceless interactions with civil servants – I can better organise my work," says Vasanthi, recently honoured with the Social Activist Award by Paran organisation in Erode district.

Vasanthi dreams of a more involved system that eliminates the need for activists as point persons to educate a community of all its entitlements. "Representation is the key and I am happy that I am able to prepare my community members for this".

—Shanmuga Priya.T

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL ‘AUDIT’

Is it me or is there a huge increase of almost epidemic proportions of social impact reporting amongst organisations and social enterprises that wish to explain the social difference they make.

This is to be welcomed, but it does raise the question of how much credibility we should attribute to these reports. Some of them are well-researched and detailed, others are more grandiose in their claims – but surely there must be some way of ensuring they possess integrity and are a true representation of what the organisation has achieved and the social impact it has made.

Understanding what changes as a result of an organisation’s actions is important, but it is also important to know that the claims made, have integrity. Thus, in the same way that financial accounts are given credence with an independent audit of the financial detail, it is clear that an account of the social change achieved by or organisation should be independently audited. This would enable an organisation to be confident of its claims and would show it to be accountable to a wide range of its stakeholders as well as to the wider public.

Organisations often employ independent evaluators to assess the degree of change that has happened as a result of their activity. This is fair enough, but it is expensive. Should an organisation not, therefore, keep social accounts using a social book-keeping system comprising of output and outcome information – and then subject that account to a ‘social’ audit? This would lie alongside the financial accounts and provide a more holistic picture of an organisation’s performance and impact.

The Social Audit Network (SAN) has been wrestling with these issues since the early 1990s. Through the experience of working with grassroots organisations and believing that organisations themselves can be empowered by keeping a track of their own monitoring and evaluation, we developed a process of ‘social accounting and audit’.

Annually an organisation would produce a social account of its performance and impact. This would then go to audit. In the early development of the process, a single ‘social auditor’ was used and this worked up to a point. However, a single person does not know everything and we plumped for the idea of having a panel of people – one who is a ‘social auditor’ and chairs the Panel meeting; at least one who knows the field of the organisation’s operation; and at least one other that knows the geographical area in which the organisation operates. To keep the costs down only the chair gets paid and the others volunteer.

The independent panel meets with the organisation for one day, having received the Draft Social Accounts in advance, and goes through them in detail suggesting



Understanding what changes as a result of an organisation’s actions is important, but it is also important to know that the claims made, have integrity.

changes, revisions, etc. There is a process which allows for feedback and discussion and also includes a random trail back to source materials and a checklist matching the draft against the eight social accounting principles (include here).

The Panel is not evaluating the organisation but, instead is assessing whether or not the Draft Social Accounts are credible. Once revisions have been made the Panel issues a statement – similar to a financial audit statement – that says, in their opinion, the social accounts are a fair reflection of what the organisation has achieved in terms of its performance and impact over the last social accounting period. The accounting process and audit is then built into the life cycle of the organisation.

In assessing the operations and activities of complex organisations over, say, a year, can be complex and result in long and complicated reports that have to be audited. For this reason often an organisation will write a summary version

that is more widely distributed. However, this summary could not be written as an accurate document if the evidence had not been included in a more substantial report.

The social accounting and audit process is not completely fool-proof, but actual experience shows that it is effective and can provide valuable and impartial feedback to an organisation that not only wants to prove what it does but also want to improve in its effectiveness.

SAN believes that the audit part of social accounting and audit is essential. If not, we are going to get swamped with detailed reports, purporting to explain the social, environmental and cultural change that has happened as a result of an organisation’s activities... without necessarily knowing if we, as the wider public, can take them seriously or not.

The social audit should not become a way of consultants and other companies making money. It is about subjecting what one says about the performance and impact of an organisation, is true,

meaningful and based on acquired and collected information – both quantitative and qualitative. It would re-assure the wider public of the authenticity of ‘social impact reports’ and at the same time can be used to plan focus and future actions.

These are key reasons why social audit is badly needed – particularly for organisations with a central purpose around social change.

Lastly it has to be said that carrying through with social accounting and audit is not for the faint hearted... An interesting early quote about ‘ethical accounting’ (which has much in common with social accounting) is... “Ethical accounting is not for softies or funks. It takes guts to hang your dirty linen in public and to walk your talk.” Jorgen Giversen, former CEO of SBN Bank

—Alan Kay
Co-Founder,
Social Audit Network, UK

Master Class in Social Accounting & Audit



Social Audit Network, India organised a Master Class in Social Accounting and Audit in Chennai from 23rd to 25th March 2017.

27 participants enrolled for this course. They were from Cognizant, Infosys, TCS, Venture Center, Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society; and College Students, NGO representatives, and Fellows supported by our Parent Trust Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani.

The resource persons were Mrs. Latha Suresh, Director, SAN, India & Social Auditor; Ms. Marie Banu, Director, CSIM & Social Auditor; Mr. Pushpanath, Director, Programme and Advocacy, Centre for Social Markets, India; and Mr. Karthik Ramaswamy, Principal consultant: CSR, Sustainability, Design thinking.

A live Social Audit of Eco Trends, a social enterprise in Tamil Nadu engaged in producing and exporting upcycled bags was also conducted on the final day where the participants reviewed the social accounts written by Mr. Vishnu of IIM, Trichy.

The Social Audit Master Class is a pre-requisite for those who aspire to become Social Auditors.

If you wish to enrol in our future programmes, please write to socialaudittraining@gmail.com or call 9282205123.

For more information, please visit www.san-india.org



CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INITIATIVE AND MANAGEMENT

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani. It is a learning centre that promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship.

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non-profits – to facilitate them to apply

successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives.

For more information, please visit our website www.csim.in

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CSIM also facilitates Social Accounting and Audit for social enterprises, CSR projects, and NGOs through Social Audit Network, India (SAN, India).

For further information, please call: Ms. Latha Suresh, Director, SAN, India @ 92822 05123. www.san-india.org

Bag-ging Sustainability



The success story of Ragulan Kadiresan and his company, Eco Trends, can be put down to simple serendipity — a happy accident that occurred when Raghu was taking shelter from the rains. It was perhaps this twist of fate that, in the end resulted in the very core Eco Trends' USP and its claim to fame. It happened just after Raghu had returned from the Netherlands a few years ago, where he met the founder of Ragbag, Siems Haffman, who decided to let Raghu help supply bags for his business. "Siems had just agreed to fund me 2,000 Euros, half of which was for a flight ticket to and from Amsterdam," says Raghu, "The remaining money amounted to 60,000 rupees, of which 45,000 went towards buying plastic sheets, pet bottles and procuring soft materials for bags."

When Siems gave Raghu funds to design new kinds of recycled bags for their brand, he made 10 recycled bags for which he spend most of money. Simultaneously, he developed some up-cycled (up-cycling is the process of using waste material to make something of higher value than the original product) products like advertisement hoarding bag, fire hose bag, old saree bag, old denim bag, and fire hose bag. "Siems liked all my up-cycling ideas and he tried to sell all of them. Since then, Ragbag focused only on up-cycled bags," says Raghu, "While walking back with these products, it began raining and I took shelter in a waste-paper mart. There, in a corner, I found a stack of used tea sacks. And that's when the idea hit me." Using tea sacks meant that Raghu's bags would be both up-cycled and eco-friendly.

Today, Eco Trends makes use of nearly 40,000 tea sacks in its bag-making process. Nearly 40 percent of these sacks are supplied by rag-pickers, while a significant percentage of its supply comes from agents who supply them to Thiruppanandal. When business was dull last year, Eco Trends still managed

to supply bags made from 20,000 discarded tea sacks. Each tea sack has a capacity of 50 kilograms. "I decided to give this a shot only because I care for two things: sustainability in terms of employment, and simple eco-consciousness," says Raghu, "It's not just about caring, but the intention to care. If your intention to care for the society is in the right place, you want your circle to be as large as possible."

The ecological impact of Eco Trends is also appreciably high. Every day, India generates 0.14 million tons of garbage that usually ends up in landfills. Considering a large part of this garbage consists of unused materials like these tea sacks, Eco Trends is playing a vital role in mitigating the impact of these discarded materials on the environment. In fact, there is 20 to 60 percent wastage from the up-cycling material at Eco Trends, but the company has managed to send that to a recycling plant at a cost of Rs 20,000. "It's all about ability," says Raghu, "If I believe I have it in me to carry a weight of 10 kilograms, I want to fulfil that ability and carry all those 10 kilos."

Eco Trends' workspace in Thiruppanandal comes with an equally daring, edgy and experimental feel. While not all of Raghu's ideas and designs are successful, he's willing to take risks. "I'm running a studio, not a factory," he quips, as he takes us through his centre, located just off National Highway 36. A two-storeyed building that houses his materials and work stations is the heart and soul of Eco Trends' work. "I supply my bags purely on a made-to-order basis," he says, explaining his business model.

"When an order comes in, I get down to thinking up designs, discussing them with my clients and getting down to making bags based on what we've agreed to." He continues, "My bags are not even insured, but

somehow it's all worked out for us." Apart from Ragbag, Eco-Trends also supplies to big players like Converse, which ensures that as far as big brands go, Raghu's initiative couldn't possibly put a foot wrong.

As far as future plans go, Raghu is now keen on targeting the United States to expand his business. "The reason is quite simple: the US is more like a continent than a country," he says. "Supplying there will be a huge boost to business and our attempts to ensure eco-consciousness through our products." However, the one big impediment to this plan is funding. "We need funds to expand, and we're short on that at the moment," he admits, candidly. Another goal that Eco Trends has set for itself is to expand, within. "I have wanted to grow the number of people I work with and those who work around me," says Raghu, "That way, I not only do business but I also create an environment of awareness and eco-consciousness. It's important that people realize the gravity and importance of eco-friendliness in day-to-day life."

As it heads into the future, Eco Trends will continue playing to its strengths, manufacturing shoulder bags, yoga bags, and many other similar products from old tea sacks. In doing this, Raghu's enterprise could successfully ensure that it manages to achieve both its visions: sustainability and environmental consciousness. At the end of the day, it is perhaps this realization of Raghu's dreams that will hold the company in good stead as it attempts to up-cycle in the pursuit to keep the environment clean. And it all began because a simple tea sack was used to make something bigger and better.



She can't see or hear. How does she learn?



Give her a chance like Helen Keller and she can grow up to be a parent, teacher and advocate.

My name is Bharat Pardeshi. I live in Nashik in Maharashtra, India.

I'm a father, a husband and a teacher.

I am an adult with deafblindness.

I wasn't always deafblind.

I was born deaf and diagnosed with Usher's syndrome. It was a given that I would gradually lose my vision, too.

My family first sent me to a school for the deaf and when my vision began to deteriorate I enrolled at Sense India's deafblind centre at the National Association for the Blind in Nashik. The first few days were painful. I was older than most of the children here and was grappling with slow and steady vision impairment. I felt completely out of place. I remained aloof.

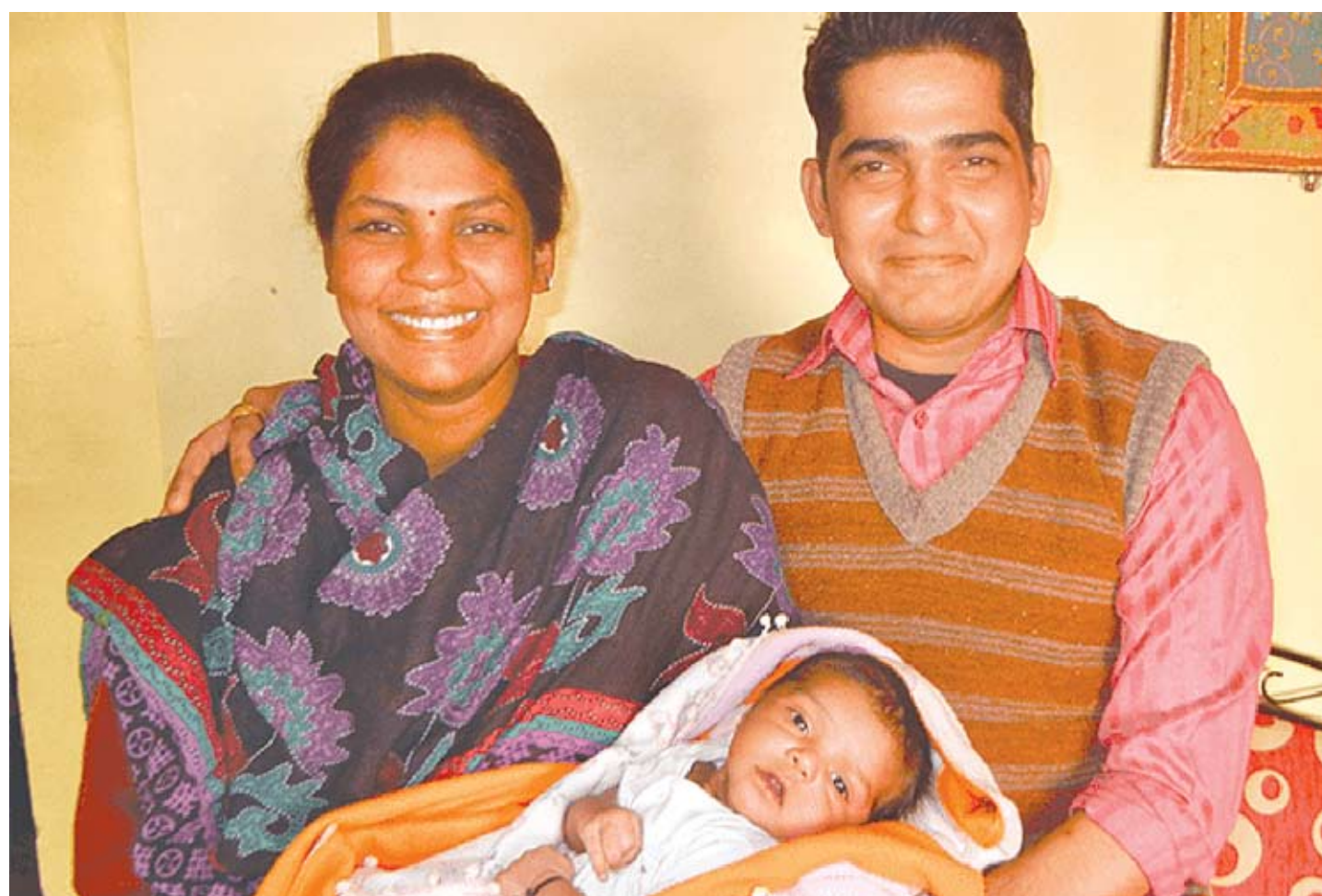
All along, my teacher, Sense India's special educator Jyoti Avadh, was observing everything I did. She felt the only way to break the ice between my classmates and me was to help me learn to communicate, so she taught me sign language.

But it didn't stop there. I was losing my vision much faster now, so she decided to send me to Mumbai to teach me Braille with whatever vision I had left. I was resistant at first, but gave in reluctantly. And am I glad I did!

In Mumbai, I made many friends. Interacting with deafblind teenagers like me made my confidence soar. I learnt to use the computer, and read and write in Braille, too!

Today, I am happily married, a father, a breadwinner and an advocate for deafblindness.

I recently convinced Mr Satish Pawar, the director of health for Maharashtra State, to issue disability



certificates to persons with deafblindness. Deafblindness is not recognized as an official disability in India.

I stated our case with utmost confidence, using sign language and other tactile forms of communication which led us to achieve our goals.

I am very fortunate to have had the support to go from a burden to my parents, to a proud father, husband, teacher and advocate for deafblindness.

Today, I play many roles but being a father is the most important one to me.

I cannot hear my baby babble or cry but when I hold it close to me, I feel its warmth, I feel like giving it my all.

—A story by *Our Better World*—the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore International Foundation (www.ourbetterworld.org)

Sense India is crowdfunding to educate 150 more deafblind children, to give them a chance to grow up to be like Bharat. You can help. Please visit <http://www.senseintindia.org/>

No gender barriers in contribution

Struggle for acceptance has been a part of every community's history. For the marginalised, this struggle has been fraught with rejection of human and civil rights, manifesting in different forms. "The transgender community's struggle is unique, for, there is an overdose of ostracism and discrimination, denying us the opportunity to explore ourselves as able individuals. The reduction of our entire identity to a sex worker is regressive and expresses the society's prejudiced assumption of our capacities & interests," says Ms Swetha Sudhakar, Founder Director of Born2Win Social Welfare Trust, Chennai, in a tempestuous tone.

A post graduate in Sociology, Swetha worked on a HIV/AIDS project for eight years. Her journey from a peer group leader to a senior programme manager forced her to look beyond usual associations, into the life of transgender persons. Questioning the prejudices that defined lives of transgender persons, Swetha felt that the community must come together to take a stand and show what they were capable of. "We had lost a lot of time in coming to terms with who we are and then, letting our families do the same. Nobody wants us around them. We do know we are different, but not any less than others. We cannot wait for acceptance. I wanted to build relatable role models from among us only to help society see us as equally efficient as others," explains Swetha.

Swetha established the Born2Win Social Welfare Trust in 2013 to realise her vision. Celebration of 'Transgender Day' through the Trans* Achiever Awards 2013 was the first event organised by the trust to recognise the achievements of transgender persons. "It was not only about transgender persons who had begun to make their mark in different fields. There were many others who were fighting the stereotypes in their own way, improving the lives of others too in the process," says Swetha. The jury included board members, advocates, writers, social activists, civil servants, media persons and other notable personalities, whose presence not only created visibility but also encouraged all the transgender persons.

According to Swetha, this event is an opportunity to show case what transgender individuals can be - musicians, teachers, doctors, auto drivers, fashion designers, beauticians, other professionals and mothers, too. Some have also formed groups to facilitate services at local temples and schools. Yet, this was a once in a year event that needed to be complemented by other efforts to keep the inspiration on. "Awards and nominations are just one part of the story. Through the Trust I wanted to identify means of supporting education and employment of other



transgender persons," says Swetha who soon launched India's first trans calendar in 2014, highlighting the contribution of awardees to society.

She laments that all her friends and colleagues had to get over the usual dismissal to be able to own up to the little contributions they made in the society. Building this confidence, she felt, was crucial to allow acceptance. The proceeds from the sale of these calendars were used to support education and employment of transgender persons, and abandoned children. In 2014, when the calendar was first launched, the proceeds were donated for the welfare of HIV infected and affected children. Swetha emphasises that empowerment is not only about self. It is important for our gestures to reflect our sense of responsibility as empowered individuals. "This was the right start," she asserts.



The following year, proceeds were donated to a trust that worked towards providing cancer treatment for economically challenged patients. During the Chennai floods in 2015, the Trust provided household items for fifty transgender persons. "Every year, such interactions made us feel responsible and capable," says Swetha. In 2015, the Trust organised the Mx. Fashion Show in an effort to popularize the gender neutral honorific "Mx." coined by the Oxford University, within the transgender community as well as the society at large. Inspired by the Trust's work, two of the Mx. Pageant winners expressed their desire to study fashion design and approached Born2Win for support. Born2Win facilitated their admission into a fashion design institute and also provided support towards tuition fees. As the Trust's revenue from calendar sales increased every year, Swetha and

team managed to do much more than what they envisaged for the year.

In 2016, six transwomen were enrolled in professional beautician courses. Two transmen have also completed their driving classes with the help of the Trust. So far, 17 transgender persons have been placed in administrative and supervisory jobs. Two others are learning Carnatic music in the city. "Born2Win tries to fulfil their desires. Every individual chooses his/her own way of survival. We wish to mainstream them in their own chosen fields. After all, every transgender person should be able to choose to be a productive, contributing individual and succeed to become a role model for the next generation. We have created role models," says a proud Swetha.

The Trust's award ceremony is in its fifth year, waiting to add 17 more to the list of 60 awardees recognised so far. Interestingly, there are also categories that recognise the efforts of individuals in promoting social acceptance of transgender persons and supporting their welfare. The Trust, according to Swetha, must grow organically. "All colleagues and friends live by the values and principles promoted by the Trust. Staffed by transgender persons, this Trust is like a unit of representatives who work to empower their community. It is the same spirit, same sensibility and same responsibility that we feel towards our society.

It is very unfortunate that people do not get to see this easily. Our contribution stories need to be told and Born2Win will continue to do that. Our gender is not a barrier to what we can be," remarks Swetha.

—Shanmuga Priya.T

Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

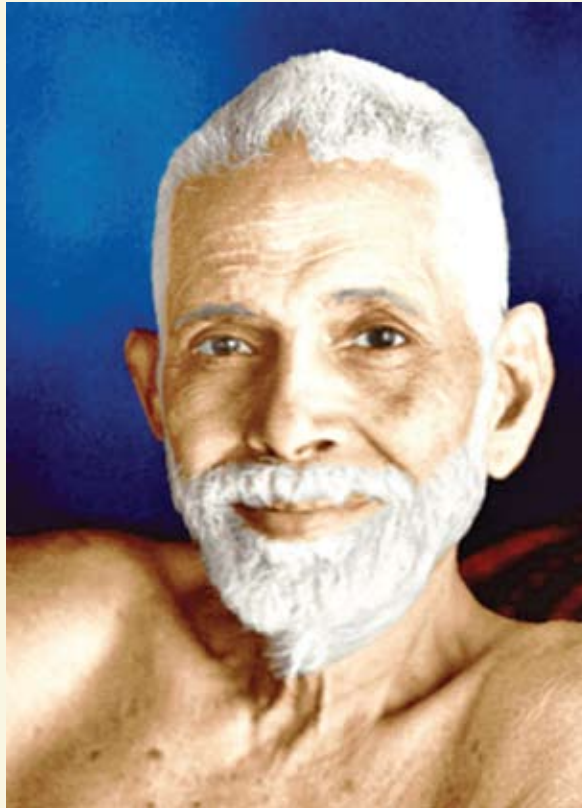
A visitor from Dindigul said: I suffer in both mind and body. From the day of my birth I have never had happiness. My mother too suffered from the time she conceived me, I hear. Why do I suffer thus? I have not sinned in this life. Is all this due to the sins of past lives?

M.: If there should be unrelieved suffering all the time, who would seek happiness? That is, if suffering be the natural state, how can the desire to be happy arise at all? However the desire does arise. So to be happy is natural; all else is unnatural. Suffering is not desired, only because it comes and goes.

The questioner repeated his complaint.

M.: You say the mind and body suffer. But do they ask the questions? Who is the questioner? Is it not the one that is beyond both mind and body?

You say the body suffers in this life; the cause of this is the previous life: its cause is the one before it, and so on. So, like the case of the seed and the sprout, there is no end to the causal series. It has to be said that all the lives have their first cause in



ignorance. That same ignorance is present even now, framing this question. That ignorance must be removed by jnanam.

“Why and to whom did this suffering come?” If you question thus you will find that the ‘I’ is separate from the mind and body, that the Self is the only eternal being, and that It is eternal bliss. That is jnanam.

D.: But why should there be suffering now?

M.: If there were no suffering how could the desire to be happy arise? If that desire did not arise how would the Quest of the Self be successful?

D.: Then is all suffering good?

M.: Quite so. What is happiness? Is it a healthy and handsome body, timely meals, and the like? Even an emperor has troubles without end though he may be healthy. So all suffering is due to the false notion “I am the body”. Getting rid of it is jnanam.

Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi

Sincerity



A ship stopped at a remote island for a day and the Bishop went along the shore for a stroll. He met three fishermen, who announced in pidgin English that they were Christians. The impressed Bishop asked them if they knew the Lord's Prayer, but they had never heard of it. The Bishop was now shocked and wanted to know what they said when praying. They said, “We lift eyes to heaven, and say, “we are three, you are three, have mercy on us.” The Bishop spent the entire day teaching them the Lord's Prayer. By the time the ship sailed the next day, the fishermen had memorised the words. The Bishop went away satisfied.

Some months later, his ship happened to pass that same island. As the Bishop was recalling with pleasure the service he had rendered to the three fishermen, he saw a spot of light approaching the ship. As it came nearer, he spotted the three fishermen walking on water. He was awestruck, and when they were near enough, they said, “Bishop, we sorry we forgot prayer. Teach us again.” The chastened Bishop replied, “Go back home my friends, continue to say your old prayer.”

Explicit Learning

- A. Sincerity in whatever we do yields results.
- B. It calls for a lot of energy to be sincere in whatever we do.
- C. It is the sincerity with which we do something that pays, and not the sheer act.

Introspective Learning

- A. How do I respond to those who are sincere?
- B. What is the nature of 'Sincerity'?
- C. What prevents me from being sincere in my efforts?

Nruthya Bodhini – Musings of an Artiste

08 – Finding Identity – confused soul

Amma, amma, ammaaaaa....
Listen to me... I have something to tell you..."
Sadhana bounced excitedly into the house after dance class. Amma looked up knowingly at her ever-excited enthusiastic bubbly daughter who was full of life. "Amma, I need to quickly make a number of applications to the art and culture department and submit them. After my arengetram, they'll give me regular opportunities to perform. Teacher told us to go and meet the officials and apply. See, I made a list of other institutions and forums too. Next week I am going to all these places. God! I am going to be on stage many more times now! You better be ready to leave your job and become my manager!" Amma smiled while she silently prayed in for her daughter's enthusiasm to last for the rest of her life. Sadhana skipped to her room, blissfully humming a tune.

When the journey of a social entrepreneur begins, opportunities to intervene in society and its issues and the euphoria of initial successes take over. Initially, every opportunity to showcase your ability becomes important and there is a surge of hope that makes the possibilities seem endless. The list goes on and the journey seems exciting. However, it is important to grasp and understand that the possibilities are still only ideas that need to be nurtured into reality.

Sadhana wrote out her resume with great gusto, listing her capabilities and competence in the field of dance. She attached photographs from her performances and put it all together in a beautiful folder. She skipped college and went to meet the officers at the art and culture department to submit her applications. However, she was quickly disappointed when she saw the nonchalant attitude the department had. "What is this application? Oh! Dance exponent!! Well, leave it here with me. I will file it." The clerk pushed her application aside. Sadhana lingered hesitantly, wondering if she should ask him when she will hear from them. Sadhana's friend stepped up and asked the question for her. "Oh! You want to know about stage programs? Well, we already have applications pending from the past couple of years so we'll get to yours



when we can," said the clerk, dismissing them. He saw Sadhana's face fall and asked, "Do you know anyone at the higher official level? If you have a strong recommendation, maybe your application will take some precedence." Sadhana's friend quickly added "What about merit, Sir?" He grinned and said "You're new to the arts, you will understand." Sadhana walked back to the parking lot with a heavy heart. She was beginning to realize the messy world of the art industry and she had a lurking fear of what was going to come. The next few days went in making calls and walking into different forums and institutions that promoted dance. The usual well-rehearsed answer was "Do send in your application. We will get back to you if there is an opportunity." Both her mother and her teacher weren't surprised when Sadhana shared her concerns. They seemed to know this messy world that Sadhana was just beginning to discover. Six months flew by with no answer or encouragement from the institutes she had applied to.

The journey of a social entrepreneur is similar. The hype and euphoria of the beginning and the possibility of opportunities is overwhelming. Social media, people, supporters, philanthropists and bloggers are advocates. But everything is serving a need and a cause. The real issue that is fought for is used as a means to ensure

at the temple by her house, shows at her college and family functions. One of her elderly neighbours introduced her to forums that had gatherings for religious purposes where she had a few performances; but none of these truly brought out her talent or her competence and didn't challenge her capacity either. They were just 10 to 20 minutes opportunities which kept Sadhana going - not that they excited her but it gave her hope for bigger opportunities.

"Who knows if things will ever change?" Sadhana thought to herself as she looked out at the dark night sky. *Am I doing what I should be doing? Should I focus on dance as my life path or should I just make it my hobby and focus on my studies? I am one of the best students in my class. Academics and communication seems second nature to me. But why am I still yearning for that stage and the happiness I get in being with myself when I dance, as though I am one integrated piece? Why is the studying or the high scores I get in class, popularity I enjoy, not giving me the same joy? What is my life path? What is my true purpose in life?*

Every social entrepreneur standing at the edge of self-sustainability has this question to answer – what's the life purpose and if the chosen path is truly fulfilling the purpose. Though there are several people willing to support and appreciate the cause, in reality, it is a lonely journey. Every life is actually a lonely journey that has to answer the question of purpose and align the path and the purpose. There is always the fear of slipping into the comfort of path that is laid out for you. But that is also exactly the place to hold onto the possibilities you see for yourself and your purpose. Not just hold on, but hold on with an undying hope in your heart. Channel your thoughts to the positive energising space and move from self-preservation to purpose driven life. To be continued....stay connected...

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath



their work progresses rather than promote and gain sponsorship to further the cause. For every great venture, finance and law is vital. If either one of these is lacking, motivation can only last so long. When daily maintenance of the organization becomes an issue, serious questions about sustenance begin to arise. There comes a time when the social entrepreneur begins to question the path and possibilities. This is a tough, hurtful phase. Every small opportunity offered seems like an oasis in the middle of the desert.

Sadhana felt desolated. She found tiny opportunities to display her talent



“Every time I see my life scale going up and then down and starting from zero again.”

Karthikeyan Balaraman shares with **Marie Banu** the concept of Poojyam and how his life has revolved around it.

Karthikeyan Balaraman is a former student of College of Fine Arts Chennai and a post-graduate from National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. He was trained at the institute by some of the industry's greatest and foremost designers. His journey in art started from a job in a silk industry, to heading an arts shop in UK, becoming an empanelled designer for Ministry of Handicrafts and being a faculty at National Institute of Fashion Design.

Karthikeyan has been fascinated by the indefinable Poojyam (*meaning zero in Tamil*) and has created a series of paintings to explore the concept of the infinite void which in itself is nothing but, created everything within itself.

In an exclusive interview Karthikeyan Balaraman shares with Marie Banu the concept of Poojyam and how his life has revolved around it.

When did you realize your interest in Arts?

When I dropped out from school, many asked me what I was going to do. This was a big question! I actually did not know as I had tried whatever was possible and somehow was considered to be not worthy.

I had a teacher Mr. K. Seshadri who was good in Art. He motivated me to visit art exhibitions and I accompanied him for competitions. This is the time I realized that I have something else that a normal school going child does not. Every time I drew, I felt happy! If you gave me more colors, I would enjoy!

Once I sketched my Grandfather. It was on the back of a greeting card and my first portrait. It resembled exactly him and he was so happy that he gifted me a color cake (water colors). Immediately the thought that came to my mind was: “Yes, I can do Art!” From there, everything else started!

Your education and work experience?

I joined the five-year course in College of Arts in 1992 and chose textile design for my specialization. I pursued my Post Graduation Diploma in Textile Design at National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad. If there is something that I learnt from College of Arts—it is Art! Moving to NID was like understanding design in terms of Art. I feel that Art is important for a designer. Skill and Knowledge has to complement each other.

Today, I see that there was an Artist inside me which was not making me understand design as one needs to think about—what people like and what market needs are. This is where NID turned me towards

design and enhanced my artistic skills to develop better designs.

While at NID, my graduation project was with Xylum, Delhi. This company deals with handmade paper and my project was to apply textile sensibilities on handmade paper. I explored dyeing, weaving, printing, stitching, and embroidery on paper. At that point in time, there was an exhibition in Delhi where I was given a 10 feet by 18 feet space to create a mood board. I explored with paper and worked on a collage. My boss, who usually does not appreciate, said: “You are reminding me of Shri. Darshak Patel.” That was a big compliment! Darshak works usually with collage and with whatever materials he finds locally.

After NID, I joined a company in Bangalore called Bharat Tissue where I practiced textile designing for the European market. I left the company after three years and went to UK where I launched my boutique in Louise called ‘Coconut’ along with a partner. I returned to India in 2005 and worked with the Development Commissioner of Handicrafts Export Promotion Council. I am also one of the empaneled designers for Ministry of Handicrafts.

I came to a point that I was not doing something what a regular person does. That was again a ‘Zero Point’. I realised that I needed some kind of discipline. Being a consultant or a contract designer, I had my own time to work. Hence, I joined National Institute of Fashion Design in 2009 in the Textile Design department. I found a big vacuum as there were no industry experts invited for lectures.

Every time I see my life scale going up and then down and starting from zero again!

About the concept of Poojyam?

It all started when I recently visited Australia. During my entire trip, I was seeing dots everywhere. I clicked a series of photographs where I saw—from signages to grippers to blind people to be in the shape of dots. Also, the aboriginal art is amazing as they use only dots. I got my inspiration from these paintings.

At college, I was taught that every line you draw starts with a dot. The dot is an important point as everything starts there. I see a dot, I feel happy! It can be in any form. A child seeing his mother wearing a bindi, makes him focus immediately on it and tries to pick it up. Otherwise, the focus goes to the eye.

Somehow the round shape has something to do with attention. There is a philosophy on illusion and one of the important point of the human body—the eye—is in the shape of a dot.

I have been thinking from a designer point of view. You need an identity, inspiration, concept, and a theme to start working. Unlike many artists who say that this is my style or my identity, I wanted to have a theme and have people relate my work with my theme.

I therefore chose Poojyam as it is relevant to me and has been important at every moment in my life.

When I returned to India, I convinced my seniors that I am starting my career as an Artist and mentioned about my theme to them. I told them that I am just exploring to see how far this dot would take me. They accepted it and never cross questioned me. That was my starting point!

Initially, it started as *Shunya*. People used to comment that my work resembled that of Raza's. It was just a coincidence as his colors and style are different. I like Raza's paintings and have a lot of respect for him. It was a challenge to break that myth. I started exploring with dots and was careful not to imitate Raza.

About your recent Art Exhibition for a cause?

I created a series of paintings on the theme ‘Poojyam’. Saraswathi Educational Charitable Trust organized my exhibition at Lalit Kala Akademi and even sponsored the materials that were required for the paintings.

During the exhibition, I interacted with all the guests to gain their feedback and understand their perception of the paintings. It was amazing to learn that some saw a spiritual connection. One referred to a single dot to be a third eye, and the nine dots to mean *navagraha*.

I am happy that the exhibition went off well, and that we raised around 5 lakh rupees for a cause. I donated the entire funds raised to the Trust on one condition—to assist needy children who are pursuing art and design.

I realise that life is all about giving and not keeping everything to yourself. Yes, you have to save something for the next level, but on a process, give away some for others to enjoy.

Your future plans?

I wanted to break the illusions, and hence moved from dots to lines. This was a movement for me to explore something different. I have certain likings of colors and started using silver, gold, and bronze in my paintings which is usually considered not to be used by a painter.

I wish in the coming future that 50 percent of the Chennaites will have at least one of my paintings.

It has been a wonderful journey! My scale has been up, down, and up!

