

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Our emotions have never been so mixed. These are the confusing days of the COVID Time, an era that began few months ago, around the first few days of 2020. has ravaged our country and brought our entire economy to a standstill. Uncertainty is a given, with a pandemic that spreads rapidly, no certified vaccine or cure, and a morbid appetite for the lives of the elderly and the unwell.

Fears about illness and death weigh heavily on the minds of many. We fear what we don't understand; what we fear, we seek to control. We have read about panic buying and the shortage of supplies. It is time for us to stop and think; to ask ourselves the purpose of our lives and be accountable for our actions.

A first-century B.C. Roman poet and philosopher, Lucretius was worried that our fear of death could lead to irrational beliefs and actions that could harm society. He said, "When there is no immediate danger of dying, people are less afraid of death. But when illness or danger strike, people get scared and begin to think of what comes after death."

The quarantine days has taught us life's lessons in a hard way and we seem to be surviving the tides of life. Ultimately, the most important thing to do is not to panic, because panic is a killer. Fear is okay; fear is natural. But, let not the fear control you. You'll probably have to live with it for a while yet.

The World Health Organization has a series of simple tips on its website that anyone can follow. Wash your hands more often, and practice not touching your face. Practice social distancing, even at your home.

Be INFORMED
Be PREPARED
Be SMART
Be SAFE
Be KIND & support one another

Let us come together and invest equally in rebuilding the world together. It is also time we think of a holistic healing process.

This too shall pass!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

A MINDSET OF ABUNDANCE: EXPANDING ONESELF

"The key to abundance is meeting *limited* circumstances with *unlimited* thoughts."

MARIANNE WILLIAMSON

Transcending limitations of the mind, requires creativity and creativity is linked to experiencing oneself as whole. The experience of wholeness comes from tuning into abundance. This is an abundance of hope and possibilities.

Abundance is in being grateful for what is currently available and not engaging with the voice of futility. "It's hopeless, I'm helpless. Nothing will change or ever get better" is a mindset of futility.

In my mind, abundance translates as expansion, expansion of thoughts towards solutions, expansion of energy to create joy and expansion of aware actions that beat inertia.

While scarcity focuses on what we don't have, abundant thinking is an attitude and mindset that focuses on what we do have. It allows us to see possibility rather than limits and can shift our perspective.

It can help us lead more resilient and creative lives.

The external environment has become "combative", and to face these times, one needs to expand in thoughts, energy and ideas. Reacting to the combat will only bring stress and it will in turn cause contraction. Cultivating abundance will help us embrace the new normal and step out, not with lack but with endurance.

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.

REMODELLING REHABILITATION FOR THE DIFFERENTLY ABLED

Social welfare is a very comprehensive term often understood within a specific context. “That is the reason behind the range of programmes and services that civil society strives to offer different groups of beneficiaries. It allows us to focus on needs at a micro level and resolve challenges from a local perspective,” says Mr Shankar Matam, Founder and Director of Sahara Social Development Organisation in Telangana. Having been on both sides of providing and receiving social welfare, his work experience strongly urges the need to bring the last citizens to the fore. “Putting the last first, as Robert Chambers said,” he smiles.

Coming from a farmer family in Wadagama village (Sangareddy District), Shankar was well aware of the gap between resources and aspirations. “I studied in a Government Social Welfare Residential School. Unable to pursue Medicine, I decided to pursue my graduation in Physiotherapy. I started practice soon after but was hit by a striking reality that physiotherapy was just one block in the maze of rehabilitation for the differently abled. There were both minor and chronic issues that demanded different levels of attention – physically, socially and psychologically. Several incidents pushed me to look further, raising many questions,” says Shankar, who gradually understood that disability rehabilitation was not only clinical and therapeutic, but also a function of social and economic factors. “Hence the need to remove every barrier and promote community participation,” he adds.

Shankar personally feels that transport is a big barrier that prevents differently abled from accessing many services. Closely followed by financial barriers, these two set of factors almost dictate the level of professional help any differently abled individual is able to access. “The consequent unavailability of therapists in remote areas further adds to the woes,” he laments. While trying to figure out the family of factors that determine the welfare of differently abled, Shankar also realised that medicines and specialists were available only in specific hospitals.

Having listed down all relevant indicators, Shankar came up with a model to address every concern that has so far kept the differently abled from accessing professional services.

A significant strategy to promote complete rehabilitation of differently abled was to educate mothers as rehabilitation activists (MARA). “MARA was our first programme a key step forward because mothers were the best source of information to enlighten us about community level barriers, to resolve them and most importantly, they become an interface allowing us to identify the differently abled and convince parents to access medical help without giving in to wrong social assumptions or irrational beliefs,” explains Shankar. Equipping



A social audit revealed that only 21 mothers out of every 100 actually practiced the exercises that were taught at the rehabilitation centre.

himself with two Master's Degrees - in Public Health and Psychology – did not suffice. He admits that his experience with mothers was eye opening, urging him to focus on building social and human capital at the community level. “Mothers were battling different barriers at the family level. In the beginning we trained 2500 mothers living in four districts of Telangana. A social audit revealed that only 21 mothers out of every 100 actually practiced the exercises that were taught at the rehabilitation centre. Although this was a disappointment, it helped us look into the need for skilled interventions on a daily basis. The more we understood, the

more challenging it became and I was persistent,” he reassures.

Then came the Sahara Disability Rehabilitation Centre where mothers were enrolled in a residential rehabilitation programme with their children but this proved to be a complete failure as mothers' attention was forced to remain with one child. Training and consultation were scheduled for fifteen days in the first month and two days every month thereafter, for every beneficiary. “This also yielded very limited success because mothers were not only responsible for their differently abled child, but also for their other children and routine household chores. Inviting them to the centre was like adding more

responsibilities on their shoulders,” he adds. Taking his lessons from the first two programmes seriously, Shankar founded Primary Rehabilitation Centre in 2015 to address all the aforesaid barriers at a micro level. The regular medical camps in villages took experts to the people and introduction of electric autos removed transport barriers and ensured regular follow ups. With the help of a government scheme (Prime Minister Bharateeya Jan Aushadi Kendra), generic medicines were also made available at the village level.

With 13 centres in 3 districts of Telangana – Hyderabad, Sangareddy and Mahboobnagar, a structured programme was introduced to ensure continuous monitoring of every child throughout the year. A singular point of contact where mothers were educated at the time of their child's consultation visits proved to be an acceptable approach from all sides. With transport services also introduced, this proved to be a very successful model.

From a grassroots worker who has been trying tirelessly to connect the dots pertaining to complete and successful rehabilitation of differently abled, Shankar has grown to be a reputed resource person in this field. “My education enabled me to ask the right questions. My questions helped me to connect the dots. CSIM happened just at the right time, encouraging me to put back those dots within the larger frame of social welfare. CSIM helped me use my domain expertise to build the local context into a model that can evolve organically, embracing new responsibilities and challenges,” shares Shankar, who is a noted Member of the Advisory Board for Disability Rehabilitation to Government of Telangana.

Shanmuga Priya.T

COVID EFFECT ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

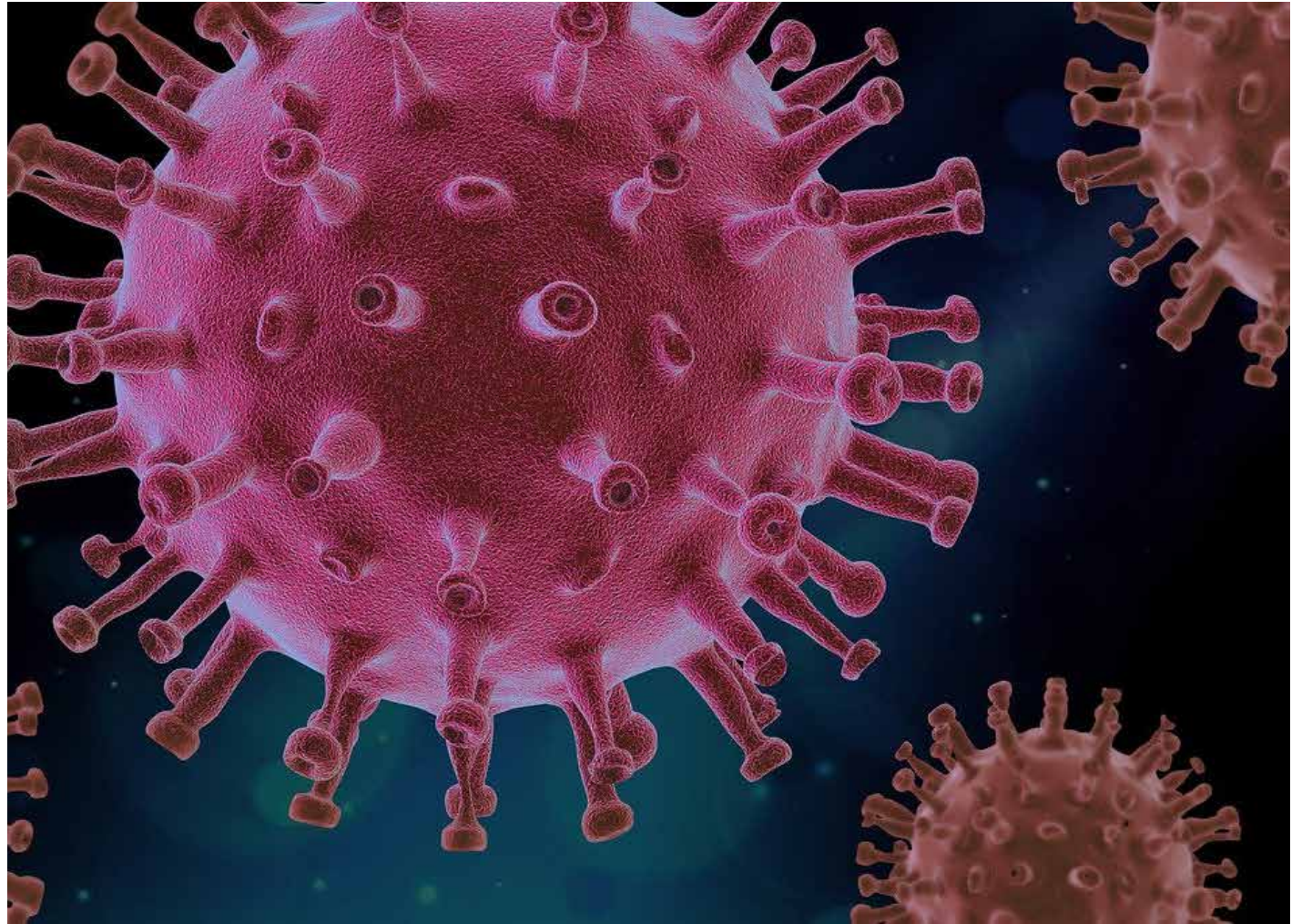
Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Vigyan in these dark days when COVID-19 Pandemic is embracing the whole world, gives a ray of hope to all. Role of Jawan is played by all policemen, paramilitary forces and volunteers who are supporting administrative responsibilities and making LOCKDOWN decision effective in our country. The role of Kisan is important as a producer, supporting our countrywide kitchens and supporting regular supplies from farm to fork in real sense. Role of Vigyan (Science) is at the core of this Pandemic, doctors, nurses, support staff and health extension individuals (SHG members, crew members of airlines, etc.) are at the forefront to deal with this deadly virus.

Without getting into the details, what COVID-19 is and how it started or became pandemic, this article will focus more on virus effect on social sector, some positives, our strengths, some lessons to be learnt and some weakness to work upon.

On 22nd March 2020, our Honorable Prime Minister. Shri Narendra Modi called for 14-hour voluntary public curfew (Janta-Curfew), after two days on 24th March a 21-day lockdown was announced, when confirmed cases of Corona virus infected individuals reached approximately 550 in the country. This decision brought country at stand still, no one planned for this. In one stroke large segment of society became helpless, and those in vulnerable state, including daily wage laborers, migrants, maid-servants and individuals working in operations department of any company, became vulnerable.

COVID-19 pandemic brought whole world to an uncertain but equal state. The living condition of all became similar in some sense; including living with minimal resources, traveling less, more time at home with family, keeping distance with your neighbors, etc. and made most of us socially equal. It is expected that in short term this all will hold similar impact on many, but situation may change to large extent with each passing day in long term. As economy cannot stand still for long time, it should walk if not allowed to run. Imagine a situation when farmers are not able to harvest their crops in April, due to non-availability of migrant labor.

Researchers are expecting that uncertainty about normalization will negatively affect economic growth, where sharp decline can be observed from start of second quarter in 2020. Sectors dependent upon travel, labor and entertainment can expect loss in short term. Lock down of public transportation will affect tourism, oil & gas, aviation & maritime and hospitality industry. Social distancing will affect manufacturing unit engaged in producing non-essential items, labor dependent organized & unorganized sectors, construction & real estate and other essential services in semi-urban and urban areas. Domestic demand will see a slow down due to decrease in purchasing power and job loss in various sectors as mentioned above. Other sectors like cement, steel & iron will see slow down due to non-availability of labor for construction and



buyers of property during this period, effecting production and hence the man power required in factories producing raw material for real estate.

Some studies have come out with list of sectors which will gain during this pandemic and named those as winners, including agriculture, e-commerce, ICT, personal & healthcare, food processing & retail and medical supply & services. On the other hand, sectors facing negative sign during these tough times are tourism & leisure, airline & maritime, automobiles, construction & real estate, manufacturing, financial services, education and oil & gas. Well this observation is only based on demand and supply theory of economics, leaving out the other internal and external factors.

Let's have a close look at some livelihood options and sectors.

AGRICULTURE SECTOR

The time when lockdown was imposed in India, farmers were about to harvest their crops. This crop in field today is our food in coming months. Social distancing triggered reverse migration in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. Large farmers who are commercial producer of crops are facing issues related to non-availability of labors to harvest their field, those having mechanized options do have some edge but they also require labor at some point in grading, sorting, packaging etc.

As per government statement, India's reserve for agriculture produce is sufficient

enough to feed the whole country; but for how long and what if proper measures are not devised to properly harvest and store the current standing crops? Small farmers who do not have mechanized farming are not facing competition of labor availability from other farmers in their area, which is expected to increase labor cost and hence the overall cost of produce. Marginal farmers on the other side, have lot of opportunities nearby and are able to convert their physical strength into economic resources, despite social distancing. Landless labourers who work on other farms for their livelihood, get their income in the form of share of produce or cash. Other than large farmers, who enjoy better market linkages, the rest are facing challenges in getting better price for their produce. While the cost of production is now going up, farmers are not able to negotiate with their wholesale purchasers. Having said so, government decision to allow farm machine movements, produce movements, purchase of produce at farm by whole-sellers, etc. are commendable.

Another area of concern is lease and rent of large and medium sized agri-machines used for harvesting, sorting, packaging and transporting of agri-produce. Due to non-availability of labors in various states, the demand of these machines is expected to rise, with increase in its rent and transferring this cost to production. The number of these machines with government department, private owners and brokers are not sufficient enough to cater to the need of any district or state as a whole. Large and medium farmers may reduce their loss by hiring these

machines at higher prices, but what is the prospective plan for small farmers and those living in remote areas, where providing these machines is not a cost effective option?

One more issue faced by agriculture today is limited availability of storage facility at local level. Small and landless farmers are equipped with storage facility at household level, as they do it every year for their own consumption. Medium and large farmers are not used to store their produce at local level, as in most of the cases the responsibility lies with the purchaser.

Situation is positive for farmers who came together in recent times and became part of mainstream institution; or started a Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) or built their market linkages and developed infrastructure at local level. FPCs are at cutting edge as they are facing this crisis in a collective and more united way; this makes the negative impact less effective to each household, sharing the loss and risks in this difficult time.

There is one more segment which remains unnoticed, those who came back from towns and cities, working as a construction workers, in factories as labors, in urban homes as domestic servants and in other unorganized sectors. They come under the category of skilled and semi-skilled workers; their expectations of income are high and they have some savings to sustain their families in this critical situation. Steps taken by Government to support these migrant workers in host and native states are also providing relief, but

awareness and literacy level plays an important role in this area. Government's safety nets are weak, in some cases these are not present, and enough measures are required to handle these migrant workers in an efficient way.

MICROFINANCE

In last section we have understood the issues faced by farmers themselves, so the income remains badly affected by this pandemic, which will definitely slow down or bring negative growth in rural financing sector. In this section, I want to emphasize more on the finance sector itself.

NBFCs, MFIs, Cooperative banks and other rural financial institutions have large agriculture portfolios with them. These institution works on a model called 'Hub and Spoke Model' or business correspondent (BC) and business facilitator (BF), where physical branch office is not established at each and every place. Large financial institutions appoint BCs to expand rural portfolio. The operations of these financial institutions involve a critical role played by their field staff, sometimes named as field loan officer, livelihood support assistant, field executive, etc. In standard terms these individuals are those who provide banking and financial services at door step, called business facilitators. Financial services include opening of account, consumption loan, small term loan, individual loans, remittance service, insurance products, recurring saving scheme, fixed deposit scheme, etc. depending upon the legal status of financial service provider or the business correspondent agency.

COVID-19 brought in social distancing, where field staffs are facing issues in collecting loan repayments from door-to-door and at group level. In the absence of group meeting, group leaders and other members have postponed their weekly and monthly meetings. Term loans taken from financial institutions with an obligation of weekly, fortnightly or monthly repayment are now facing risks. Households have taken loan for income generating activity, whether agriculture, agri-allied or other

activity in unorganized sector. Lockdown made things standstill with no scope of income generation for these debtors. Although the step taken by government to feed daily wage/income earner through established Public Distribution System is commendable, this requires more precision to avoid hoarding of cereals, rice and other free items at each household level.

Reserve Bank of India on 27th March '20 announced 'Three-month Moratorium on EMIs for all term loans during March 1 to May 31' will be offered after lockdown. This announcement gave liberty to banks and financial institutions to extend three months moratorium to its customer, subject to request of individual borrower. Some banks who are lenders to MFIs are still in ambiguity, whether or not this moratorium period is applicable to MFIs themselves, and if it is not applicable to institution, then the question is how to keep MFIs carry on its operations. A plea was made in Supreme Court during the third week of lockdown, mentioning the long term effect of COVID-19 pandemic and its after-effect on jobs, income generation activity, agriculture, small businesses, etc. It was represented by financial institutions having large portfolio in rural and semi-urban sector, on-lenders for large financial institutions and those who possess less liquidity. These institutions have asked for a separate package to fund their operations with three more months of moratorium period, as the client base is relatively more affected from this crisis.

Adding to this, microfinance sector in India have already faced crisis in 2010 and is now again facing similar or even worse situation, unless proper policy from Central Government or effective corrective action is taken by Reserve Bank of India. Microfinance customers in many cases have seen the waive-off strategy from state governments in crisis situation, institutions need to take special measure for not letting this happen.

RURAL ENTERPRISES

The present government have taken

various steps to trigger rural development, most importantly promotion of rural SMEs and Rural Entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs and their enterprises have taken credit from government under various schemes for establishing, transforming or expanding their businesses. Rural enterprises are dependent on rural areas for natural resources available within the community, which gets added value when sold in urban or semi-urban market. This value chain in broader terms convert the natural resources into economic resources, giving opportunity to rural households, vendors and market players to earn more improve their living conditions, completing the circle of rural prosperity. The COVID-19 brought in critical issues on both sides of the value chain—the supply side and the demand side. Lockdown if imposed longer, the chances of failing out of these small rural enterprises are higher.

Rural enterprises need regular labor, timely supply of raw materials, standard quality of production, retailers and transporters for operations at production level. On the other hand, they also require customers to purchase the products or services produced, and with increasing uncertainty demand is expected to see a sharp decline. This will affect all value chain enablers, including middlemen, retailers, whole-sellers, suppliers etc. The situation will be different for enterprises involved in production of essential items.

Entrepreneurs of any scale have received some relief from government's financial department in the form of increased moratorium period, but liquidity crunch will affect wage earners and salaried employees, giving sharp increase in unemployment rates.

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETIES ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs) & VOLUNTEERS

Despite negativity, there is a silver lining for a sector which will make the country stronger and make its own place much relevant in coming years. The government machinery can make a policy, administration

department can implement the policy and make sure that systems should run to help the needy, but who is going to work on field? One cannot imagine the solution without civil society organizations and volunteers.

A large responsibility of local administration, social cohesion and development is not possible without support from this fourth and very important pillar of society, the other three being The Executive, The Legislative and The Judiciary. Also, social sector plays an important role in association of resources with the benefits underlying beneath, bringing private and public sector together for the benefit of the underprivileged section of society.

COVID-19 crisis requires large amount of resources to be deployed for its prevention, protection and cure. Neither resources with large private institutions, nor the manpower available with large public institution is enough to handle this crisis situation. The way out is involvement of CSOs in a planned and effective way.

Recently we have seen that SHG members are producing masks, FPCs are inviting large companies to buy produce from local office at village level, several SMEs are producing toilet cleaners, sanitizers, liquid soaps and other essential items, innovative entrepreneurs are coming out with low cost ventilators, etc. Private sector organizations are now diverting their funds for effective management of this crisis.

The crisis brought together all the three sectors together again with more focused deliverables and objectives. To make India a stronger country we should learn managing its human resources. Post COVID-19, government must promote volunteering at private sector organizations, capacity building of CSOs/volunteers in disaster management, individual mapping with livelihood and location, SME mapping with primary and secondary production line, special status for CSOs at the time of crisis and better resource mapping with the help of technology.

Dr. Agyeya Tripathi



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS). 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, visit 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).

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GROW TO LEARN



Poverty has been the one big impediment that the Indian growth story has been afflicted with despite major progress in the last couple of decades. However things are set to change, especially given that rural education, empowerment and contribution to the country’s development are areas that are seeing much focus since some time now.

“Most children in rural areas can only afford Government run schools”, says Prabhu Loganathan, Senior Fund Raising Coordinator, Isha Vidhya. “With these schools lacking basic facilities, facing teacher shortage, having unmotivated or frequently absent teachers and a pedagogy heavily focused on exams through rote memorisation (rather than learning), even those who eventually make it through twelve years of school, lack basic skills, making it difficult for them to seek gainful employment or pursue higher education.”

In fact, the 2019 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) revealed several unenviable realities of the nation’s education system: it said that 68 % of rural students in Class 3 in Tamil Nadu are unable to read text books at the required level. It also revealed that 66 % of these students cannot perform double-digit addition, and 81%, double-digit subtraction.

Thankfully, most of that is set to change in the context of Isha Vidhya’s initiatives in academics. “Isha Vidhya’s English medium schools open the door for rural children to prepare for higher studies and to join the workforce,” he says adding that “The holistic, activity-based approach of Isha Vidhya’s educational system nurtures children’s development beyond just academics, ensuring that students realize their full potential and learn in a joyful manner.”

In a nutshell, Isha Vidhya provides to children from rural areas, high quality school education, affording or accessing which, would be impossible on their own. The organization is also making commendable progress in upgrading teaching methodologies in Government run schools, having adopted close to thirty-four of them in Coimbatore, Tirupur, Salem and Kanchipuram districts.

Various initiatives have been started to improve the quality of education in these schools. The Government has created the school infrastructure. Isha Vidhya’s experience can be leveraged to transform the methodology and teaching environment in these schools. This includes hiring of extra teaching hands to help slow learners who constitute nearly 20 to 25 percent of the total strength of a class.

These teachers are trained and equipped with learning aids, worksheets, etc. The classes happen simultaneously with the main classes and are held in extra classrooms or corridors, thus helping the slow learners learn at their own pace and get mainstreamed over a period of time.

A programme titled ‘Special English’, a language intervention (more commonly and fondly called ‘Magic English’) has been designed to teach English more effectively, and is supported by and implemented in each school. This program is extended to all children of classes 6 to 8 and will help them become confident in English comprehension, reading and speaking.

A child’s holistic development through sports, yoga, arts, craft, health and environmental education, along with career guidance programmes, results in a school experience that is interesting and fully engaging. Above all, it impacts multiple variables crucial for all-round development in the formative years, and facilitates the natural blossoming of potential.

“Even nominal fees are too much for some rural families. Recognizing this challenge, Isha Vidhya provides scholarships which cover students’ tuition fee, notebooks and textbooks,” says Prabhu, “This empowers children who would otherwise only be able to study in Government run schools, to get high quality education in Isha Vidhya schools.”

An Isha Vidhya programme that has won acclaim from far and wide, is its Scholarship initiative. Scholarships and fee subsidies are provided to deserving students, selected through a comprehensive allocation process that makes sure that only students truly in need receive this help. Sponsors are matched with specific students and receive regular updates with photographs, letters and progress reports. The sponsor is encouraged to support a student through the entire tenure of education at Isha Vidhya.

The NGO has sought contributions from citizens to be able to continue making quality education available to students from rural India. Today there are ten rural schools in the districts of Coimbatore, Erode, Nagercoil, Tuticorin, Villupuram, Salem, Cuddalore, Dharmapuri and Karur in Tamil Nadu, and in the Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh. The first seven schools currently have classes from Kindergarten to Class 12, while the Chittoor School, which started in June 2012, and Dharmapuri, which started in 2013-14, have classes from LKG to Classes 10 and 11 respectively. Karur School, which started in June 2019, has classes from LKG to Class 6. The schools have a total of 8,523 students, many of who are first-generation learners from financially disadvantaged homes. About 60 percent are supported on full scholarship, while the remaining pay a nominal fee.

As part of its expansion strategy, Isha Vidhya is looking to boost its presence in other districts within Tamil Nadu, subject to funds coming through and being allotted for capital expenditure and corpus fund for scholarship support for 10 years, which several corporate entities and philanthropists can commit to. There is no plan as of now to open schools in other states, due to limited bandwidth.

“Despite the success of increased enrolment in Govt. schools, we see absence of quality education in the villages,” says Prabhu, “We are hardly seeing progress in this area, nor is there any progress towards digital learning.” However, given the current challenge with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, that could soon change too, especially given the focus on digital learning.

“Post COVID-19, there will be more focus on digital learning, and we should be equipped to provide infrastructure like student tablets with internet connections, to cope with the situation,” says Prabhu, “We continue looking forward to forging new partnerships.”



CORONA SLAYER IN GOD'S OWN COUNTRY



A small, emerald-green strip on the southern coast of India called Kerala, where an ancient spice trade has always connected it with the Middle East. Today, tourists flock to this state for its swaying palm beaches and backwaters steeped in religious and cultural history. Its tourism tagline, God's Own Country, seemed to ring true...until the coronavirus pandemic.

The first COVID-19 cases in India were detected in Kerala, when a 48-year-

old man tested positive after returning from Dubai. Since then this state, with the highest expatriate population from UAE, and the most number of COVID cases, has been at the forefront of the battle against the virus in India.

A bespectacled lady, swaddled in a saree, Kerala Health and Social Welfare Minister KK Shailaja, a former teacher, leads the way. Her scientific approach is legendary. She tackled the Nipah virus outbreak in 2018, with enough drama to

pack into a blockbuster Malayalam film titled Virus!

Shailaja Teacher has been fondly renamed Corona Slayer, for her brand of firm leadership, with a healing touch. Her first concern was the many students from Kerala studying in Wuhan, China. She set up 18 committees. They report to her every day. Her daily press conferences conveyed the severity in a calm manner with a clear message: break the chain. The government of Kerala has tested the

highest number of samples for the coronavirus in India, followed by contact tracing and route maps.

But more remarkable, despite the insistence on physical distancing, has been an emphasis on social unity – mid-day meals delivered to students' homes, after schools were closed, so they are not left hungry; prisoners asked to pitch in by stitching medical masks; and sanitiser formulas manufactured in public companies. Kerala has always been a state with very high social indices of education and health compared to the rest of India, but this crisis has also shown us the power of feminine politics.

I live outside my home state Kerala, but even from afar I can see that it is a beacon of hope and public welfare to the rest of the nation by offering migrants incentives to stay. Contrast this to the mass exodus of migrants walking back to their distant village on foot, and raising the spectre of a humanitarian crisis and the threat of infection.

As we each pray for a miracle in God's own country, it makes me especially proud that a former teacher is delivering the most important lessons in compassionate leadership.

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

Obsession



A little boy was heartbroken to find his pet turtle lying on its back, lifeless and still, beside the pond. His father did his best to console him: "Don't cry, son. We'll arrange a lovely funeral for Mr. Turtle. We'll make him a little coffin all lined in silk and get the undertaker to make a headstone for his grave, with Mr. Turtle's name carved on it. Then we'll have fresh flowers placed on the grave each day and make a little picket fence to go all around it."

The little boy dried his eyes and became enthusiastic about the project. When all was ready, a cortege was formed - father, mother, maid and child as chief mourner - and began to move solemnly towards the pond to bring in the body. But the body had vanished! Suddenly they spied Mr. Turtle emerging from the depths of the pond merrily. The little boy stared at his friend in bitter disappointment and cried out "Let's kill him!"

 Explicit Learning

- Your obsession makes you inhuman.
- Kill your obsession, not the turtle.
- The little boy got obsessed with the project.

 Introspective Learning

- Why do I get obsessed?
- How do I deal with my obsession?
- What is the nature of 'Obsession'?

PRODUCTIVE CHILDREN, FUNCTIONING ADULTS

Every day in India, 5,500 adolescents try tobacco for the first time. That is 19,80,000 minors in just a year's time. We all know that there is going to be a second and a third time, with a high likelihood of continued use. While it might seem that this alarming statistic indicates a high prevalence of smoking, the bigger culprit is chewable tobacco, consumed in the form of gutka, khaini, mawa and mishri, to name a few. Gutka, sold in flashy plastic sachets for merely Rs. 5 in just about every street-side stall, is easy for kids to buy at will and even to hide their habit for a long time until they are addicted. Though banned in many states now, gutka can still be found in others. A hunger suppressant, continued tobacco use leads to malnourishment, sub-optimal brain development and poor academic outcomes. It is one of the leading reasons why children tend to drop out of schooling.

It was this chilling realisation that led Padmini Somani to set up Salaam Bombay Foundation- an organisation that helps children, especially those in economically disadvantaged situations, to live tobacco-free lives. She started her journey in 2002, working with children in Mumbai slums. She set out to empower children to make the right choices for their health, education and livelihood by committing them to stay in school.

"Many think that tobacco-use is the problem, but it is just a symptom and one of the triggers of secondary school dropout," says Dipanwita, the Communications Manager of Salaam Bombay Foundation, "Living in poverty and desolation can amplify the addiction and put kids in a vicious cycle of self-destruction. Our programmes are a response to the various triggers of secondary school dropouts."

Salaam Bombay Foundation works within the existing government school system. They do not run their own schools but approach the government to conduct their programmes in municipal and government-aided schools. The In-School Preventive Health Programme is present in Mumbai, Jaipur, Kolkata, Pune and Bengaluru, to engage children in tobacco control, leadership and good nutrition. The programme is delivered through trained facilitators who use child-friendly, age appropriate teaching methods such as role play, interactive games and storytelling. Government teachers are also sensitised to the issue of tobacco abuse and trained to deliver these modules, so that they might branch out and carry the message forward in remote areas.

The National Skill Development Corporation through its accredited partners provides a certificate in vocational skills, to students in the Salaam Bombay Vocational Skill Development Programme. Aarifa learnt threading, waxing, mehndi application and hair styling through this programme. Creating exquisite mehndi motifs, her reputation as a hardworking,



focussed and talented beautician makes her the go-to person for make-up during any festivities in her locality. She is also a regular teaching assistant at the academy.

Salaam Bombay's Academy of the Arts, Sports Academy and Media Academy provide a three-year intensive programme each. When Saakshi enrolled into the Theatre programme, she was not sure what it would mean for her future. Living in an 11-member family in a small hut, she was quiet and mostly kept to herself. At the academy, she learnt all about facial expressions, body language, improvisation and voice modulation. In her very first performance at the National Centre for the performing arts (NCPA), she won the best actress award. That motivated her to keep going, in spite of opposition at home and competition outside. Sakshi has been featured in the local newspapers since and she also auditions for movie roles from time to time.

There are several other stories of children going through massive transformation with just a little handholding and lots of skill development. Samirul Shaikh, a once shy, diffident child, enrolled in the cricket academy and underwent professional training in the sport. "Cricket led him on a pathway to self-discovery", says Dipanwita. Along with great bowling skills, Samirul's innate qualities of leadership, discipline, focus and time management also came to be realized. One time he was given the task of assisting 21 students from the under-14 age group, to travel across the city for their matches. Not only did he ensure his team's safety in the crowded local trains of Mumbai, but kept all the parents updated about their

whereabouts, every step of the way. When asked what he would like to be when he grows up, he says, "I would like to be a cricket coach, a bike repairs person or an English tutor, whichever works best for me, but most of all, I want to become a good human being." Profound words indeed.

What are some of the challenges Salaam Bombay faces today? "Attracting and retaining skilled personnel has been one of our biggest challenges. Even when you do find professionally qualified people, our focus doesn't rank high in their list of global problems" says Dipanwita, ruefully. Second comes the challenge of getting the general public, the potential donors, to understand the severity of the problem. "India is the oral cancer capital of the world. A whopping 86% of oral cancer cases are related to tobacco. Showing the problem to be the epidemic that it is, has been a real challenge" she says. "Our academies attract great teaching talent and all these coaches are remunerated by the Foundation. Students do not have to spend a penny. This comes at a huge cost to the Foundation. Despite growing research on the importance of arts, sports and alternate courses like media, we constantly find ourselves having to prove their role in the holistic development of the child. We also need the co-operation of corporates to place our alumni in paid internships so they may practice the skills they have learnt. Since our adolescents are less than 18 years of age, a lot of effort is spent towards educating potential supporters and assuring them that no law is being violated and that their as well as the adolescents' interests are well protected".



Salaam Bombay has had a deep impact on its communities. It has been found that 92% of the alumni since 2012-13 are still pursuing age appropriate education. Additionally, the full-year school attendance in 2017-18 of Salaam Bombay adolescents was 85% against merely 72% for those outside the programme.

Salaam Bombay is passionately lobbying for better implementation of the COTPA (Cigarette and Other Tobacco Products Act, 2003). Higher taxes, bland packaging, stricter fines and more awareness campaigns are what will bring about long term change, at a systemic level. They are currently working on forming a tight network of stakeholders that encourages sharing of best practices in the fight against tobacco, and are expanding their presence in the cities they are already operating in.

When discussing plans for the future, Dipanwita says, "Salaam Bombay believes that a child in school has a future. We hope to continue to equip them with tools to say 'no' to the triggers and 'yes' to the chances of improving their health, education and livelihoods so that they might move towards brighter futures."

Archanaa Ramesh

CUSTOMISING CARE

Society and its norms prepare an individual to plan his or her life after retirement. Such thoughts have built a strong foundation for insurance business. However, families are seldom prepared or groomed to plan their growth with their ageing members. Liberalisation, urbanisation, increased job opportunities for men and women have had a lasting impact on the care for elderly, who are left to take care of themselves. “While young, couples may aspire to do many things in old age. But the fact is, ageing also brings in natural degeneration of bodily functions and pertinent challenges are a real concern. Elders need support round the clock and this responsibility has, traditionally, rested with their children,” says Ms. Suchint Murali, Co-Founder of Sakhi4life in Chennai.

Personal experiences forced Suchint to think about elderly parents, whose children for different reasons, did not live with them. “I began to seriously think about elders whose children have migrated to different places due to job demands. Can someone provide the complete spectrum of services this heterogeneous population requires? I was enthused by the need for such an enterprise and the market potential,” she remarks. Suchint left her 28 years long corporate career to do something different. For the passionate driver she is, Suchint also tried to register with Uber to drive women and children to workplaces and schools. “My parents’ health issues and the introspection thereafter led me to work on Sakhi4life,” she adds.

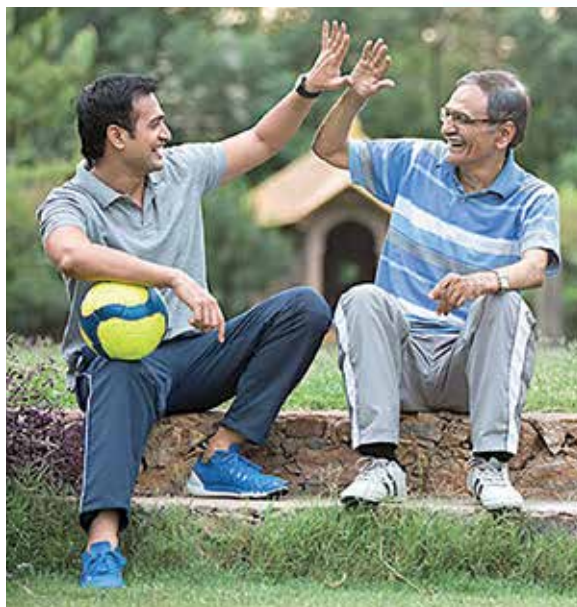
Sakhi4life was incorporated as a company in December 2019 and today the client base consists of 30 customers, most of whom are over 80 years of age. Sakhi4life provides a wide range of services to help the elderly feel safe, connected, supported and empowered. “Empowerment is a very strong feeling, especially in old age. With little support, when they are able to do what they wish to do, they feel delighted. Many families are unable to provide this little support for elders,” says Suchint. The spectrum of services offered by Sakhi4life include health care assistance (diagnosis, home nursing, delivering medicines, record maintenance, managing doctor appointments, pick up and drop services for hospital appointments, etc), daily care (installations and repairs, arranging domestic help, routine grocery/provision shopping, training in use of internet and smart devices, laundry services, pest control, etc), payment care (paying utility bills and managing medical emergency fund),

emergency care assistance (medical and non-medical), leisure care (organising family events, library/temple visits, other wellness activities as desired) and other care services like banking, property management, religious needs, passport/visa/ticketing services, etc.

Quite comprehensive it sounds. “All for the sake of our clients. We wish to support them with anything they need. One of our clients was unable to comprehend the fraud with duplicate share certificates for his shares in a company. His son lived abroad, and we attended to that. Elderly is a heterogeneous population and we better be prepared to handle every type of their need. We also have clients who just need some company to talk to over a walk. Our counsellors fill the shoes. By doing so we do not intend to replace any family member. The idea is to make things easier for elders. We have another client who suffers from dementia. The time that our counsellor spends with her is the only time during the day her daughter gets to manage household work and her kid’s study,” shares Suchint.

So how easy has it been for her clients to accept Sakhi4life? She smiles wryly. Suchint understands that trust is a very critical factor here. Old age is difficult and

Sakhi4life provides a wide range of services to help the elderly feel safe, connected, supported and empowered.



accepting this is a necessary precursor to be able to consider such services. While children of elders feel happy that Sakhi4life is here, elders do not accept them easily. “While some feel grateful for our presence, there are also others who do not relate to our services yet. We literally take over the house in some cases. We understand it is a big step for families, but the reality is, we are at your service. We are just a call away whenever you need us,” she assures,

adding that her office in Alwarpet is equipped to handle calls 24 by 7.

Suchint also feels that the trust factor is the reason why newspaper commercials may not help them in reaching out to a wider clientele, in spite of the huge untapped market in the city. Online marketing worked for them as friends and family shared their details with others whom they felt might benefit from Sakhi4life’s services. Such references soon followed by references by clients and that made a lot of difference. “Service users are the best medium to market our services and they do so without being told to do so. This chain of communication

happens only because there is need. There are elders out there who need support of Sakhi4life. We are just a call away,” she smiles reassuringly.

Shanmuga Priya.T

**You may reach Sakhi4life at
+91 9952091968 or write to
contact@sakhi4life.com**

CSIM XVIII CONVOCATION

CSIM Chennai organised its XVIII Convocation event on 7th March 2020 at MOP Vaishnav College for Women, Chennai.

Dr. Santosh Babu IAS, Principal Secretary/ Chairman & Managing Director, Tamil Nadu Handicrafts Development Corporation was the Chief Guest and **Dr. Uthira Vice Principal, MOP Vaishnav College for Women** was the Guest of Honor for the event.

61 candidates who pursued the one-year PG Diploma in Social Initiative and Management; 84 participants of Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme, and 22 participants of Social Entrepreneurship and De-Addiction treatment techniques received their diplomas and certificates. 49 Students of SSS Shasun Jain also underwent the Social Connect programme last year. Best Outstanding Student Awards and Best Field Worker Awards were also presented to each batch of students.

Smt. Latha Suresh, Trustee, Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani, presented CSIM's Annual Report 2019 and Dr. Santhosh Babu IAS released '[Prajyoth](#)' - CSIM's Annual Newsletter.

PND PATHFINDER AWARDS

The **PND Pathfinder Distinguished Alumnus Awards** are presented each year to those CSIM Alumnae for having launched their pioneering and innovative social change ideas on completion of the CSIM course they attended.

These Pathfinders are role models and trailblazers — aspiring social entrepreneurs who are using, and have used, the knowledge acquired at CSIM in a variety of ways. Each pathfinder receives a plaque and a cash award of Rs.7,500/-

Dr. Santosh Babu IAS conferred Shri P. N Devarajan Pathfinder Distinguished Alumnus Awards – 2020 to the following persons:

Mrs. Bharati Natesan had completed PGDSIM in (year) at CSIM Alapakkam centre. She has launched Goodwill Trust in (year) and is committed to render services to the poor children and destitute women. She is also the State General Seceratory (Womens Wing) Bharath Human Rights Council Of Tamilnadu In Puduchery and serves as Joint Secretary Of All India Mahila Sangh. She has over 17 years of social work experience. She conducts educational activities and offers various training programs for Children and Women.

Mr. E. Arokiadas, an Alumnus of CSIM, founded 'Snegithan' in 2003. The major focus of Snegithan is offering counselling services to the differently abled and providing them with aids and appliances, educational and medical support, employment referrals and coordinating self-employment projects.

Ms. Ka. Manu is the Managing Trustee of Vanavil Foundation and her objective is to uplift the transgender community. She is the 18th batch PGDSIM student of CSIM. She has worked as a News presenter in Sathiyam TV and has also co-directed a documentary film titled "Inenatha kaikal". She is also a researcher and a theatre artist.

The **PND Pathfinder Distinguished Faculty Award** was presented to CSIM visiting faculty **Mr. Thenpandian** for having inspired, motivated and mentored the prospective social change agents.

Shri. S. Pandian is the Founder Secretary of People for Human Rights Forum (PFHR) and a member of Campaign for Custodial Justice. He is also a member of Amnesty International and a Senior Asoka Fellow. Thenpandian is spearheading a widespread movement in India to demand humane treatment for people subjected to police custodial care and interrogation.



“Charity literally begins at home, and we need to help our artisans first.”

Dr. Santhosh Babu IAS shares with Marie Banu his initiatives for empowering artisans in Tamil Nadu.

Dr. Santhosh Babu is a Medical Doctor turned Indian Administrative Service (IAS) Officer of the 1995 batch, of the Tamil Nadu cadre. He is an alumnus of the Government Medical College, Trivandrum. He is also a Chevening Gurukul Scholar from the London School of Economics and Political Science and an LKY Fellow and MPM Degree holder from the National University of Singapore and the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

His abiding passion has been to transform governance within his jurisdiction to world-class levels, using modern management practices and tools that information technology provides. He has about 250 plus transformational initiatives and innovations to his credit, including installing ERP driven “anytime, anywhere” Government offices, developing and implementing numerous web based application software, establishing India’s first Rural BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) units etc.

A few recognitions have come his way, like The Best Collector Award of the Government of Tamil Nadu for child labour eradication. In 2017, Poompuhar won the National e-Governance Award and the Skoch Smart Governance Platinum Award under his leadership.

He has spoken at numerous fora including TEDx IIT Chennai, TEDx Hindustan University Chennai and TEDx SVCE Chennai. His best moment so far has been when, the former President of India Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, quoted his work under the heading “Committed Leadership” in his speech on the occasion of the 7th National Civil Services Day, 21st April 2012, at New Delhi.

He is currently the Principal Secretary/CMD, the Tamil Nadu Handicrafts Development Corporation. Earlier, he was the Principal Secretary to Government, Information Technology Department.

In an exclusive interview, Santhosh Babu shares with Marie Banu his initiatives for empowering artisans in Tamil Nadu.

What are the challenges the artisans face and what measures are being planned to address them?

We have seven production centres and 15 showrooms. Unfortunately, we had to lock them all down due to Covid. There are about 80 artisans who work with us directly, and are paid on a monthly basis. It is the 70 thousand plus artisan families outside in the unorganised sector, who are facing challenges in marketing their



products as no one would want to buy their products at this point in time. The State Government is now working on a package for them and once that is done, we shall ensure that all these families are offered support.

While there are many artisans who are well off, many of them are poor and depend on the sale of their products to meet their day-to-day needs. They sell their products at cost plus a percentage. Those artisans who market their products through Poompuhar make a decent profit. But those who do so through middlemen, stand to lose.

Poompuhar is a completely online organisation. Every aspect of administration, marketing, design and production, are online. This helps the artisan indirectly, in a big way. We will be shortly launching India’s first Virtual Reality Handicrafts Showroom.

Do you think it is the right time we introduce Fairtrade concept into our system?

Yes. I am also in touch with Mr. Panchaksharam of Fair Trade India on this. We need to ensure that the artisans get the right price for their product. We are only a 130-people organisation and hence need the time and the skills to understand and implement the concept in order to help our artisans.

Obviously a market also may require middlemen, but it is they who make most of the money. It is precisely to get over this problem that we have created an e-Repository for Artisans, www.tnartisaan.com; about 20,000 artisans have registered themselves on this portal.

Once registered, the artisan can enter the portal using his mobile number as ID and OTP as password. He/she can upload good quality, preferably high density photographs of their products and keep changing it. We have linked our e-Commerce site www.tnpoompuhar.org to this site so that people across the world can buy products made by Tamil Nadu artisans. The world is their market and they can have a better price than before!

Most of the artisans are illiterate and do not own a smartphone. Some upload their own pictures instead of their product picture. My biggest challenge has been to promote the site and educate the artisans on how to make use of it to their advantage. We would welcome the support of the NGO sector in achieving this.

What are the traits of a good leader?

My philosophy of leadership is concisely written down in my personal website www.santhoshbabu.org.

Leadership is tested only during times of crisis. The current pandemic has seen many leaders disappearing and many emerging out of nowhere. For me, a leader is one who is the first to come into crisis and the last to go out of the crisis.

The only resource God has given to every human being irrespective of differences, is “time”. The 24-hour capsule that constitutes a day has to be budgeted so that we have time for everything and everybody. A leader will not waste the time of others.

He is good listener, an enabler and one who allows people to grow. He empowers people and makes them realize their potential. He shares his power and builds

confidence and self-esteem. He does not hurt anyone with his words, deeds, look or thought.

Essentially, all people are the same. It is the circumstances that makes them different. We need to understand the value of each person and be non-judgmental. Then, we will have a different perspective to dealing with people and ensure that they come out with their best.

What is your philosophy of giving back to society?

According to me, there are only 2 phases in our life. One, when you are a taker, that is when you are not on your economic feet. You take love, affection, money, ideas, thoughts etc. from your near and dear. You are being prepared to become a giver. Once you are on your economic feet, you will realize that 90% of your waking time is actually spent for others. Actually, our life is meant to serve others. If you can take the “me” out of the self and start thinking about the living conditions of our less fortunate brethren, then we also manage to take the stress out of us. Being self-less and stress-less together.

When this lockdown is finally lifted, and our planet is up and about, we can also contribute in our own small ways to our poor artisans, by buying their products and embellishing our homes. My request is, kindly patronize our artisans, before thinking of buying that item from abroad. Poompuhar will be at your service on this. By buying a lamp or keeping a Tanjore or Kalamkari painting or a bronze idol, we are actually helping an indigent artisan. This should be a purposeful thought and we should be aware of it. Thus, charity literally begins at home!

About the recent Fight Corona IDEathon and its plans?

I was part of the Grand Jury of the “Fight CORONA IDEathon” promoted by Forge, a Coimbatore based Incubator, recently. We had 5000 plus entries of students, educators and innovators and professionals and startups. It was a completely online exercise, for the participants as well as for the jury. This is probably the first time that a completely online hackathon has been conceived and it was a huge hit and an instant success!

What I realized during the jury process via Zoom with my co-jury members and the participants, was the amazing thought process of our young students, on how they can contribute to fight this deadly pandemic in their own ways. There were some extremely brilliant thoughts. Technology is a tool that can offer solutions to most of our problems. We should unleash the intellectual potential of our creative young people, to think world class and with a scientific bend of mind.

I have joined with 3 other like-minded individuals, to develop a Covid health related app, that we think will have a huge impact. The app is fully developed. We are currently awaiting the approval from Google Playstore for its installation.