

Conversations Today

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

The second wave is here! India has now taken the global spotlight as the worst hotspot for Covid-19. A worrying “double mutant” strain first identified in India has since been found in several other countries.

The rise in COVID-19 cases as part of India’s ‘second wave’ is a challenge for the government and public health authorities. In many ways, the concern is larger than it was last year when there were several more cases.

It is traumatic to witness the suffering of people who have succumbed to the second wave of Covid-19. It is indeed a human tragedy on a vast scale. It is also a warning, and a danger, for the world.

Many nations have been through dark times in the global pandemic; several with smaller populations still have higher death tolls. But, with hospitals running short of oxygen, our country perhaps is facing the worst-case circumstances when the virus was identified 16 months ago. The risk for the rest of the world is that the larger the pool of infections globally, the greater the risk of mutations creating more contagious or vaccine-resistant variants.

From May 1, the vaccination drive will be opened to all people over 18. This is a welcome move!

The key question for all governments (states and Centre) is what can be done to fight the pandemic all over again? The need for flexible strategies and constant improvisation has been amongst the most important learnings in the battle against the pandemic. It’s time to put it into practice.

If COVID-19 is spreading in your community, stay safe by taking some simple precautions, such as physical distancing, wearing a mask, keeping rooms well ventilated, avoiding crowds, cleaning your hands, and coughing into a bent elbow or tissue. Do it all!

Get vaccinated; stay safe!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

**Latha Suresh
Marie Banu**

Values and Ethics



In the designing of vision and mission, we need to also outline the values for the organisation. Vision and mission becomes insipid without values governing it. Vision is long term and mission is short-term with defined results.

In order to get these in place and make it a sustainable vision and mission, we require values. It is the back bone. Unless the giver and taker have mutually accepted values, sustainability of the vision and mission will not be effective.

Vision or mission is always guided by values and derived in consultation with stake holders. They should continuously keep in mind and follow it on whatever activity they perform in the field. Therefore, the impact will not only be for impact sake, but it will be permanent for the beneficiaries. It will stand off very clearly as somebody who has been impacted by a role model. Not only NGOs, but beneficiaries can also become role models.

Values can be listed as 100 or more. But, it is not possible for an NGO to follow all the 100 of them. You will have to write down the values that NGOs and beneficiaries cherish, prioritisation, and write down the top 3 values. This will serve as a guideline for the vision and mission and objectives of the organisation.

Everyone should recognize and identify themselves with the values. For instance, take ‘transparency’ as a value. The NGO should express clearly the work that they are doing with all its stakeholders so that they are all on the same page and will work together. If there is lack of transparency, then each one will be in a guessing

game on what is being told and what they mean. There will be a variance.

‘Ethics’ is another value, which means that you should do the right thing. In Sanskrit, truth is known as ‘sathyam’. Truth can be bitter and so people will run away from truth. This is a natural phenomenon. ‘Priyam’ in Sanskrit means ‘like’. Therefore, when we tell the truth, we should tell it in a manner which is palatable. To say “be truthful” people will forget. But, to see how people will consider truth as a value will enhance the impact.

The values should not only govern the organisation or beneficiaries, but the leaders and staff as well. For example, smoking. We need to correct people who are smoking in public places. We need to tell them that they are affecting the passive smokers. Of course, we are not law and cannot take legal action. Instead, we should be responsible and accountable for their actions. We can say that we are working towards eliminating smoking in the neighbourhood and try to correct their behaviour. The logic is responsive, responsible and accountable. Being accountable does not mean that you are accountable to any authority, it is being accountable to oneself and to one’s own consciousness. The basic principle to bring out these attributes is through attitude and the concept of ‘Each One, Reach One’. Each person can reach to one more person and demonstrate responsibility and accountability.

P.N. Devarajan

PARENTING COMMUNITIES FRIENDLY TO SPECIAL CHILDREN



Parenthood is a very special journey and every parent ardently tries to build a strong support system that can help children build their personalities. “I also dreamt of doing the same. However, being the mother of two special children, I had to evolve and become that support system itself. It calls for a lot out of you,” emphasises Mrs. B. Senthamizh Selvi, Founder and Principal of Kumaran Special School in Ennore, Chennai.

Selvi’s is a story of patience, perseverance and determination to help children with special needs realise empowerment. “Empowerment is a very strong feeling for children with special needs who go through so much pain and effort to accomplish their daily tasks,” she adds.

Selvi’s first son was autistic and her second son had cerebral palsy. Ignorant initially, the diagnosis got her looking for ways and means to get her children treated. “I got to know about my elder son’s autism only during my younger son’s therapy sessions. In the case of children with special needs, early diagnosis is extremely significant as it helps in shaping the right habits,” says Selvi, who also noticed the struggle of

parents like her. “I can understand the anxiety each parent goes through while travelling with their autistic children. I wanted to bring training and therapy sessions closer to their homes so that children can befriend their peers sooner and parents can focus on widening the scope of their children’s treatment,” she adds.

Selvi soon got trained as a Special Educator and in an effort to help other parents, founded the Kumaran Special School, a day care centre for special children, in 2002 to give equal social opportunities to mentally vulnerable children from poor socio economic circles. Starting with five children, the Special School now hosts 65 children from different age groups. Striving for their social integration, the Special School uses a combination of therapies and simple vocational training programmes.

Age appropriate development tasks are the first priority and as children begin to show improvement, they are engaged in a range of activities curated



to suit the capacity building of each child. “Every child is different and each therapy like yoga, music therapy, behaviour therapy, physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy is designed to promote constructive, positive behaviour in them. A mixed age group exposed to a combination of therapies calls for a meticulous monitoring system. This is where we involve both community and parents, giving the children a real life experience of being a part of the outer world,” explains Selvi.

So far, over 225 children have been trained by Kumaran Special School and those who are old and need external

support are accommodated in residential programmes through the School’s network. Pick up and drop services are also provided for the special children to make it easier for their parents. Surgeries have been supported whenever required, and accessibility to assisted technology devices like the wheel chairs for children with cerebral palsy has also been assisted.

“Kumaran Special School’s strength comes from the parents of the Special Children. They are a key resource helping us understand the needs and behaviours of their children. As associations become manifold, children find it easier to relate to the activities here and are thus, more productive too,” she shares.

“CSIM not only built my capacities but also helped me widen my perspective in visualising the future of mentally challenged children. Our community has a big role to play and engaging them from the beginning has helped both children and community understand each other better. CSIM taught me the significance of taking both these stakeholders on board. Such initial steps eventually gave me the confidence to work on vocational training,” says Selvi.

Selvi feels that equal focus on children and communities has facilitated social integration organically. “Children put in all their effort and when the community is sensitive about their development, social integration flows naturally. It is easily said than done and it takes year-long efforts. CSIM gave me this vision and this vision shows me the way ahead,” she adds.

Making candles, mats, jewellery, diyas, phenyl and packaging incense sticks are some of the vocations explored so far. Making pens is

also on the cards and Selvi’s team is finalising work on acquiring the required machinery. With financial literacy also being taught, she believes children will realise both independence and empowerment.

“With every successful child, I feel I have helped one more son. This personally gratifying experience motivates me to do more. For an organisation like ours’ it takes longer than usual to feel accomplished and identify that next significant step towards our vision. As I learnt in CSIM, I strongly believe that my children, my primary stake holders, will take me towards my goal,” smiles Selvi, hopeful of reaching out to many more Special Children.

Shanmuga Priya.T

CHANGING HUES: AWAKEN THE QUEEN WITHIN

Making a difference differently – Towards an inclusive society

Padma threw a questioning look at Reena on a summer evening as they sat on the terrace listening to the birds chirping and hurrying home. The sun was setting with a soothing orange glow on the horizon. She asked: “Reena, have you thought about the blessings that come unexpectedly and evolve you? The entire society may see that as a disadvantage or compromise or as a curse too. Nevertheless, you think it is an opportunity and a grace to become a better human being. Have you crossed this experience in life?”

Reena gave a startled smile, “Aunty, you are throwing a googly ball at me now! Did you meet someone or open a page from the past?”

Padma quickly spoke as though she was saying this to herself, “Don’t you think it is a lovely feeling to evolve with and grow accepting the difficulties in life? The movement from Panic to knowledge to understanding to acceptance and finally a better ME every day! Wah!”

Reena’s interest kindled. She got up from her chair, moved closer to Padma, held her hand and said, “Aunty, I am not getting it. You have something larger in mind. Tell me more.”

Padma loved to tickle Reena’s curiosity. She smiled and added, “Reena, last evening I met Lavanya. Do you remember her? In fact, you have met her during our office events.”

Reena’s mind got into action. “Oh, Yes. I do. She is the one with a differently-abled kid, isn’t she? A very creative and highly talented woman. So, what is the story?”

Padma adjusted herself to a more relaxed position and opened a page from memories of the past. “One late afternoon, a young 24-year old large-eyed, beautiful girl walked into my office. She wore a typical khadi cotton dress, large earrings, held an embroidered cloth bag filled with books and papers, and was bubbling to share all that was flowing out of her mind. She had come to join us as an intern for a Master’s project from the most popular design school. In less than 15 minutes, we felt like family, and in three months time, Lavanya was more than a daughter to me. She worked on edutainment and niche projects for us. I was amazed at how her mind could think and draw out-of-box solutions to design our communication materials. A strong-headed girl with definite beliefs and judgements, her identity came from being a designer, creative thinker, ambitious, engineer, learner, and an action-oriented person. Lavanya was very proud of her achievements and professional affiliations in various forums.

After three years of hectic work life and new learning every day, Lavanya agreed to an arranged marriage. She conceived and nurtured several dreams of her parenting in the role of being a cool



mother. Her daughter Sunaina, a beautiful chubby cute baby girl was born! Both the families (parent’s and in-laws) adored the baby and the mother.

Sunaina seemed a bit different in the first few months of her birth. Lavanya suspected there were milestone delays. Days were passing by, and every action and response of the child was more interpreted than understood. An informal situation revealed that Sunaina could be a child on the autism spectrum. This came as a shock, initially crashing Lavanya’s dreams of parenting. She felt unprepared and anxious. There was a denial of this truth all around her. In-laws, parents, relatives, and some friends had their own theories about child development that denied the issue than supported the case. Free bits of advice came darting at her wherever she shared the fact about the child. Lavanya felt like a lone warrior battling for Sunaina to be accepted and understood.

Lavanya told me at that time, “Padma, I don’t know what autism is. However, I have to figure it out. I do not want to be in denial and therefore become a more significant block to my child. I cannot fathom the comparisons that people throw at me when I take Sunaina to their houses. People are unwilling to have a new scale and cannot move from what they know to what they don’t know.”

Lavanya tried hard to balance her job, creative pursuits, and taking Sunaina to meet doctors and therapists combined with a myriad of religious prayers and rituals. It was not easy to take Sunaina to numerous assessments and therapy



classes for trials and tests. Nevertheless, she could not manage at a point in time, hence decided to quit her job and take care of Sunaina full time.

At that time, Lavanya had shared, “This is the most challenging decision, to prioritise and leave behind something most dear to me. I feel I am removing my identity, and I have to be re-born to don this role of a mother. I am scared as well as strong in my resolve to act and do something towards betterment.”

While I used to hear pain and agony earlier in Lavanya’s voice, I now heard confidence and decision. I realised she has begun to understand the issue and will have many new insights in her new

journey.

“Aunty, is Sunaina much better now?” intervened Reena. Padma gently knocked Reena on her head and lovingly said, “Don’t jump the gun. In the story, more than the result, listening to the journey brings a lot more learning. From the time Lavanya took the case in her hands, she paid 100 percent attention to Sunaina. Endless visits to therapy, assessments, and new materials, google searches, meeting other parents, autism forums, etc., Lavanya was on a trip, justifying that she left no stone unturned for her daughter. The little one was driven class after class, eating and sleeping in the car. Continual monitoring for changes and worrying about progress left Lavanya a emotional wreck, drained physically and an isolated soul socially. She had cocooned herself totally.

It has been almost 12 years of learning and evolving for the mother-daughter duo. The initial years had taken a massive toll on the emotional, physical, and social life of Lavanya. In search of bettering Sunaina, Lavanya had lost all her identity. The day-to-day struggles of handling Sunaina and her growth pangs were real. She could not run away from the fears of the future for the child and her safety. To cross this bridge, she needed unconditional support from family, spouse, and friends. However, most times, they threw questions, doubts, rejections and bashed her ego. Every change she attempted in the house was after a lot of convincing and arguments. The question of inclusive society remained an illusion in most places. Uncertainty, self-doubt and lack of consensus often shook her self-confidence.

Years later, one day, Lavanya called me and said in total excitement, “Padma, it was a transformation for me today. I met a therapist who was so natural, organic, and with total acceptance of Sunaina. I realised there is no need to change or normalise my child. She was always there, fine and good as who she was. I was standing behind her, trying to turn her towards me. I just had to move around and face her and lo! She is seeing me and smiling, and I need to embrace her. I knew today that Sunaina has come into my life, and I have to work with my beliefs, myths, learning and societal norms that govern me. Sunaina is not a creative project for me to handle and deliver the best results. Her success or failure does not define me. I do not have to work with her much at all.” I recognised that Lavanya’s true journey of evolution and understanding the power of the so-called ‘differently-abled child’ had begun. It was a journey of co-learning and co-evolution for both of them.

Sunaina was pure, straightforward, and clear in her choices. In dealing with Sunaina, Lavanya came face to face with the masks she wore and slowly gathered

THE DAY I WAS BORN

*I felt the gush of power
I never knew belonged
to me*

*I felt the rush of
emotions
In all its intensities*

*I met a part of my divine
Seeded deep within my
soul*

*When every pang of
pain
Matched pleasures
unknown*

*My dearest sweet child
Wonder if you'd ever
know*

*Its YOU who gave birth
to me*

The day you were born!

Remya D

the courage to drop each of them one by one. Lavanya was now aware that her earlier obsession for designing and work was now mending Sunaina. She began to get out and feel the air. Autism is a gift, a sojourn from the trap of societal standards, norms, and expectations.

Last evening she was glowing, and I asked her where she was in this journey. Lavanya confidently replied, "A lot has changed for me, Padma. I am more at peace because I do not have to work on changing things. I have to work on seeing them differently. The quality of my thought and struggles is elevated. I have also stopped waiting for approvals. I have gotten out of comparison and have higher empathy and compassion. I approach my work and people with learning from life than an intellectual gag. I draw a lot of happiness in learning, working and researching on creating an inclusive society now."

Lavanya shared a time when she went as a panellist to the design school. Her comments and evaluations of the projects were much more humanistic, fundamental, and par excellence. Her living her life and being a freelancer perhaps affected her technical know-how and updates.

The students benefitted more from her comments and recommendations to develop valuable, practical and relevant projects for society. Lavanya had added, "Padma, I realise I had mistaken my study, career and earning to be my purpose. The life with Sunaina has shown me my real purpose and the possible legacy I leave behind for people around me and myself. I have been using all my design skills to create learning material. My creativity is actually not lost. I wrote poetry last week, and I knew it is far higher in quality, depth, and language. Internally I have been growing and evolving with Sunaina. The world calls her regressed. However, I know she is the one who evolves me towards purity and honest existence. The faster the periphery understands, the stronger the centre can be and remain in balance. I think if the medical and educational systems had presented Sunaina to me the way I am seeing her now; if society was more inclusive of us, I would not have taken a decade of struggle to understand this truth."

Dr Kalpana Sampath
Illustration by Remya D and Meenu



Reflect:

- Am I seeing the world, its people, and their behaviour from my coloured eyes?
- Am I willing to learn and evolve when I meet others different from me?
- Am I willing to accept and recognise the holistic design of the Universe in my life?

Labelling



The Wemmicks were small wooden people, carved by a woodworker named Eli. Every Wemmick looked different. But they did the same thing all day. They gave each other stickers. The talented and pretty ones always got stars. But the Wemmicks with rough surfaces and chipped paint got dots, which meant they were no good.

Punchinello always got dots even though he tried hard to earn stars. Soon he started believing he was no good Wemmick.

One day he met a Wemmick called Lulia with no dots or stars. It wasn't that people didn't try to give her stickers; it was just that the stickers did not stick on her, Punchinello was curious to know how this was possible and Lulia asked him to meet Eli.

Punchinello felt very happy in Eli's company. Don't worry about your dots," he said. "After all, they are given by fellow Wemmicks. But you are special to me because I made you."

"But why don't stickers stick on Lulia," he asked.

"Because the stickers only stick if you let them to." Punchinello thought "I think Eli really means it." And at that moment a dot fell to the ground. Soon he had no stickers sticking to him and he felt good deep within.

Explicit Learning

- Nobody can have an impact on you without you letting them.
- We build our image based on what others feel about us, than our own feelings.
- When you learn to recognize your true self, you no more get worked up with what others have to say about you.

Introspective Learning

- What is the nature of 'Labelling'?
- How much do you let others' opinions have an impact on you?
- How do I deal with the labels I have accumulated so far?

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS



Striving for a “just and civil society”, the Diya Foundation has come a long way with interventions in Assam and Meghalaya. The non-profit organization has, over the course of the last few years, improved the wellbeing of under-privileged and marginalized communities through holistic development activities. Through these programmes, Diya Foundation has successfully helped such communities overcome the lack of access to resources, services and information.

Diya Foundation has identified some key thrust areas such as livelihood creation, education promotion, biodiversity conservation and the need to response to emergencies as some of the

focus points of its programmes. With a keen eye on marginalized, depressed communities, the organization has strived hard to work hand-in-hand with members of such communities for their greater good and betterment. The aim has been to rise beyond limiting factors like social deprivation; negligence and marginalization to help such communities do better for themselves.

By and large the work of the social organization has focused on two states — Assam and Meghalaya. Kamrup district in Assam and Ri-Bhoi in Meghalaya have been witness to Diya Foundation’s interventions and programmes. The organization says the key to doing good work in such

communities has remained social mobilization and the creation of a self-sustaining community and self-sustaining practices.

Serving under-served regions, building capacities and skills to make use of optimum resources, in a nutshell, exist as the mission statement of Diya Foundation. However the end-point to these facets has been integrated development.

To devote itself towards the social and economic upliftment of rural and decentralized sectors, physically and socio-economically handicapped persons or in family welfare programs, and to increase the speed of development in the field of livelihood and well-being

of the people living in rural and semi-urban areas are part and parcel of the organization’s list of objectives.

However, one objective that the Diya Foundation wants to focus on with greater emphasis is to act as a facilitator or a service provider to emergent issues for preservation and conservation, and the development of natural resources and a rich cultural heritage vis-à-vis the society or community it is involved in.

The organization hopes to do this through building partnerships, strengthening networks and working on advocacy programmes so as to achieve common goals and raise people’s voices towards a common goal or interest. Providing the necessary tools to develop

the right kind of atmosphere for students of marginalized families has also been a priority of the Diya Foundation. Helping these students increase their tech know-how and develop skills in non-formal education has also been a key interest area for the organization.

However, the social and economic uplifting of rural and de-centralized sector populations, which also includes physically and socio-economically handicapped people through family welfare programmes assumes greater importance today, as does its conscious role in acting as a facilitator to emergent issues like the preservation and conservation of natural resources and the “rich cultural heritage” of society.

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, Diya Foundation has enhanced its relief measures, including the doorstep delivery and distribution of medicines, provision of rations to tea garden workers, nutritional supplements to pregnant and lactating women, and provision of food to highway destitute people.

“The spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) is the most serious global health security threat to all human being. As the entire country is in various forms of lockdown and timelines are unpredictable, normal life of every human being is at stake at this point,” says an entry on the organization’s website.

“In addition, community people especially the small and marginal farmers, Agri entrepreneurs, livelihoods of women vendors, transportation of pregnant women and children who are due for routine check-ups at health facilities have been severely affected the entire circle, which in turn has pushed them back into misery and poverty,” it adds.

In all, nearly 1,200 households were covered through the medicine distribution programme, while nearly 80 patients were covered by way of the organization’s COVID-19 measures.

As for livelihood restoration and support to ultra-poor and families of labourers, households having pregnant and lactating mothers, Diya has secured financial assistance of the Centre of for Catalyzing Change, as it proposes to develop a nutrition garden for these communities. The main focus of the programme is to enhance health through cultivating vegetables with high-value nutritional content primarily for consumption. The programme also focuses on supporting cash-for-work, in order to benefit families who have signed up for it.

At present the Diya Foundation is looking to serve young, migrant returnees who have made it home in the midst of the first COVID-19 lockdown. On priority is the restoration of livelihoods through support that the organization hopes to lend in agriculture and allied areas of intervention.

Through the support of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the Diya Foundation intends to cover at least 100 young, migrant workers within a year across three development blocks: Chhaygaon, Chayani Barduar and Rani Development Block, in Assam.

Through the combined, synchronized execution of projects that lie within its thrust areas, and by continuing the good work that is doing in post-COVID relief, the organization hopes to go from strength to strength and make a difference to the lives of people in Assam and Meghalaya through various interventions and activities, with the sole purpose of uplifting marginalized communities and giving them a better and brighter future.



Working towards a better future



The overall aim of Adhwana is to capacitate the youth and communities to become sustainable models of development.

4. Community health and sanitation through several awareness programmes
5. Education in terms of career guidance, distribution of books, uniforms and rights from government schemes
6. Land and housing
7. Safe migration
8. Disaster management.” says Dr. J Mary John

India is a large diverse country, both demographically as well as geographically, it is almost impossible for the government alone to work in the upliftment of the poor and to support the impoverished sections of the society. This is when NGO's have stepped in to contribute in making the country grow and sustain a healthy community.

NGOs operate independently from the government, but they participate in social, economic, philanthropic and international missions. NGOs advocate for diverse social causes—it could be from caring about orphans and old aged; providing employment; addressing poverty, human rights and environmental issues, etc.

Adhwana, an NGO based out of Trivandrum, Kerala started in 2000 (officially registered in 2002) with the aim of bringing about change in the society. The initial objectives of Adhwana was to fill the gap in pre-training and post training linkages in functional, vocational training of school dropout boys and girls in Kerala. As training for skill training alone was not enough to lead them to employment or self-employment, Adhwana came up with the idea to help the youth further.

Dr. J Mary John, Chairperson of Adhwana, says that, “the overall aim of Adhwana is to capacitate the youth and

communities to become sustainable models of development. It functions as a non-profit development organisation with a general body and an elected Governing Board. The major focus of the organisation remains skill development for employment and self-employment for the youth, irrespective of caste, creed and religion. However, the perspective has broadened over the past 19 years widening itself to women empowerment and environmental conservation.”

Initially, Adhwana started as a network of NGOs in Kerala. Due to resource challenges, the organisation started working as an NGO with linkages to other local stakeholders. Presently, with the availability of resources for field implementation projects, Adhwana is now moving forward with supporting NGOs and others through consulting, research and training in social development. They have initiated their own projects for environment conservation (POOMARAM); child development (Viswas counselling) where they provide services in the area of children, youth, education, career, marriage, family, and lifestyle counselling; and education of children (Vidyadarshan) of poor widows/disabled and bedridden parents in and around Trivandrum

Adhwana works passionately to ensure social order by promoting justice, equality and freedom. The focus on sustainable development and economic empowerment through skill development and knowledge building. They organise and conduct capacity building exercises for the development practitioners associated with NGOs in Kerala and manage interventions in areas of training, community development, research, monitoring and evaluation. Over the years Adhwana has extended their purview to other deserving target groups and communities like Dalits, farmers, fishermen and their families, students, Children, migrants and other vulnerable people.

“We help our beneficiaries achieve their personal, institutional and community goals through our programmes which focus on:

1. Sustainable livelihood which helps in building skills and entrepreneurship qualities
2. Environment conservation (with special reference to coastal literacy), waste management, promotion of medicinal plants, organic farming, energy conservation
3. Gender mainstreaming, legal aid and rights,

Sharing the success story of an individual, Dr. J Mary John, says “There are many young boys and girls who have been placed in jobs with our training in technical skills and entrepreneurial motivation. Many of them were poor Dalits. One girl, named Resma from Trivandrum was provided training in health assistance and was placed in the same hospital she underwent training. She is now earning well to support herself and her family.

Adhwana has been consistently organising training programmes for women and children in areas of organic gardening, tailoring, garment making, and dealing with social issues like alcoholism, dowry, drug abuse, etc.

Signing off, Dr. J Mary John says, “We are widening our perspectives to reach out to many people, hands to help the poor for sustainable development and betterment of the society. Our vision and strategy for Adhwana is to include community mobilisation, awareness generation and training, promotion of small enterprises for income generation, leadership skill development, linkage building, etc.”

Aatika Kouser

AGE AND WELLNESS



Mr Himanshu Rath

Parents' lives have a strong impact on their children's decisions and approach towards society. Within the family ecosystem, incidents compel children to relate to many social issues; but how they choose to respond evolves into a personal journey. All along, one incredible difference lies in the way parents and children are looked at – children are growing adults while parents are ageing adults. That says it all! This perspective underlines our approach towards senior citizens. They will soon be a huge chunk of our population awaiting attention and space to live up to their abilities. "How prepared are we in accommodating the rights of senior citizens and their needs is a question we must all pay heed to, right now," warns Mr Himanshu Rath, Founder and Chairman of Agewell Foundation in New Delhi.

Himanshu's mother was a dedicated professor. Her sudden demise shocked Himanshu, who resolved to retire by forty years and live life beyond. "It is not unusual to see parents working hard all their lives and retire. By the time they turn to spend quality time with their family, their children and grand-children are busy with their own lives. This is a cycle and not anybody's fault. Old people have multiple needs and most of all, attention that will make them feel their worth. Unless we all prepare ourselves to age well, this scenario will not let old people see their worth. It all turns out to be a vicious responsibility," feels Himanshu.

As he promised to himself, Himanshu retired as a Copy Writer and founded the Agewell Foundation in 1999 to propagate the idea of ageing well and work for the welfare of elderly in every possible way. "Senior

citizens are everywhere and their rejection is near universal. I was looking for a way to reach out and support them without disturbing them in anyway. I began by writing letters to District Magistrates, Superintendents of Police, Collectors and Chief Medical Officers, requesting them to help me identify prominent people from their districts who can help me in this initiative. Their responses helped me get in touch with so many individuals who were yearning for a direction to support old people in their neighbourhood. The chain of volunteers kept growing and today, we are a team of over 80,000 volunteers spread across all 718 districts in the country," he says. The volunteers include retired bureaucrats, professors, students, doctors, educated housewives, community social workers and many other locals who always keep themselves ready to assist any old person in need.

Agewell Foundation runs a helpline service to assist elders in need through their volunteer base. Medical, social, financial, emotional, legal – every need is assessed and appropriately addressed. Retirement age in India is 60 years and a second job post retirement is a necessity for many. Elders are a huge resource base and population dynamics show that 17,000 people turn old every day in India, which is the largest in the world.

"In three years from now, we will have the highest old age population and will remain so for many years to come. At this juncture, it is only relevant that we fight for their rights and tap their potential," says Himanshu. Thus, in order to revive old people from feeling redundant, Agewell offers a second opportunity through its Employment Exchange. Elders' services have come in very handy in home tuitions, reading clubs for local kids. Over 90,000 senior citizens have been placed in different jobs and this new energy has motivated them to enjoy the changes they face in old age. "One opportunity can make them feel so positive about their lives in old age. They feel connected, occupied, respected and independent. They are ageing well, I say," points Himanshu.

As word spread, people also tried to get in touch with

Himanshu and the letters he received were overwhelming. 1,200 letters every day and each running into 50-100 pages reiterated that his focus was certainly a strong need in the society. Awareness programmes, workshops on senior citizens' rights and needs became a regular feature and Himanshu began to present his work on different platforms. With the help of volunteers, he managed to identify needs from these long letters and also addressed them immediately. The letters prompted many questions and volunteers developed questionnaires that could help study old people in a community – their characteristics, needs, challenges, etc.

Research on elderly gained momentum. So far, 37 national research papers have been published with a sample size ranging from 10,000 to 100,000. Little did Himanshu realize that these papers will be a point of reference internationally for policy deliberations on elderly. Representations at United Nations and other international conferences further added value to Agewell's advocacy programmes on rights of senior citizens.

Two decades in the field gave Agewell the visibility it needed and contributions further helped the team to contribute wheel chairs, walkers, adult diapers and food ration packets for the destitute. Himanshu leaves no stone unturned to appreciate his team of volunteers. "They are my strength

and pride. Without them, we would not have come this far," he asserts, explaining the potential role of educated housewives and retired bureaucrats in reforming policy on senior citizens in our country. As an organisation, Himanshu feels that Agewell has demonstrated the idea of ageing well and being resourceful. He hopes to see this idea become a value, strengthening intergenerational interactions and participation on different platforms. "Together, we all can build a better world for the elderly, we must!" he insists.

Shanmuga Priya.T

***Old people
have multiple
needs and most
of all, attention
that will make
them feel their
worth***

Spotted in India: Humans and leopards living in harmony



Imagine a stray cat or dog rooting through the rubbish bin in your garden for discarded food scraps. It is a mess, a nuisance, but perhaps not especially alarming.

Now imagine if something else shows up: a wild leopard, attracted by the strays that were drawn to your food scraps. And the leopard is also eyeing up your livestock or pet dog with far more interest than you'd like.

For thousands of Indians living on the edges of forests where leopards are known to dwell, these encounters are an everyday occurrence. And these encounters occasionally claim lives.

In 2020, leopards killed 35 people in the state of Maharashtra, the highest in a decade. Further north, in the state of Uttarakhand, as of October 2020, leopard attacks had claimed 24 lives, a sharp 30 per cent increase from the previous year.

These clashes often lead to leopards being killed or captured and released elsewhere away from human settlements, despite research indicating that these methods do not reduce the number of attacks. In some cases, translocation has led to increased attacks.

"The thing is that the conflict is an old one, [but] the method to treat the conflict hasn't really changed," says Sanjay Sondhi, founder of Titli Trust, a nature conservation non-profit based in Uttarakhand.

This prompted conservationists to ask: what if the focus on human-wildlife

conflict shifted from wildlife to humans?

Spotted in the backyard

India is home to more than 12,000 Indian leopards; only the African continent has more of these big cats. Even with a recent population rebound, their numbers are a tenth of what it was a century ago, due to poaching and habitat loss.

These adaptable big cats can be found all over India and can live close to villages, towns and cities with ease, preying on wildlife, livestock and stray animals alike.

Meena Devi recalls the time a leopard entered her home in Mulnow, a village in Tehri district, Uttarakhand. "Two times actually, it came into my home. One time it killed my sheep, the other time my dog," says Meena, a farmer and shop owner.

News that a leopard was in the vicinity would spark alarm. "There was a sense of fear in the village," she shares.

Incidents like these were a common issue Titli Trust came across in its work with local communities, so the Trust decided to dive deeper.

"It so happens one of our friends [is] Dr Vidya Athreya, one of the premier researchers and experts on leopards in India," shares Sanjay. "We wanted to do something that would reduce the conflict and she had the expertise, and that's how we came together to work on this issue."

A Senior Scientific Director at Wildlife Conservation Society India (WCS-India), Dr Athreya's research in Maharashtra had led her to collaborate with the state's forest department to start Mumbaikars for SGNP, a programme that sees citizens lead the way in engaging the community on learning to live safely alongside leopards.

"We were very impressed by the work, and we saw that there was no reason why we can't replicate this in our state [Uttarakhand]," says Sanjay.

Despite the long history of leopard-human conflict in Uttarakhand, Sanjay was encouraged by the findings of a survey on attitudes towards leopards, which was conducted with Dr Athreya.

"People were very tolerant towards leopards. Uttarakhand is a hill state and people have grown up with wild animals throughout their lives," he points out.

Human behaviour in the spotlight

In 2017, Titli Trust began working with Tehri Forest Division to arm the local community — with knowledge — through a programme dubbed Living with Leopards.

Supported by the Trust and Uttarakhand Forest Department, the forest officials and community stakeholders like village elders made a study trip to Mumbai to learn from their experiences there.

"The discussions post our Mumbai trip has taught us that we need to shift the focus from leopards to people," says

Dr Koko Rose from the Tehri Forest Division. "It is easier to focus on people than to focus on the leopard."

This meant reaching out to villagers to share about measures they could take to minimise the chances of a leopard encounter or attack. They include clearing bushes and overgrowth around homes to minimise hiding spaces for leopards, leaving a light on at night to deter them, and ensuring people, especially children, did not go out alone at night.

The strategies, simple as they sound, are carefully aimed at a leopard's known habits: they are shy, tend to avoid human beings, and are more active at night.

The villagers were also taught what to do when they encounter leopards — to give way to the leopard and move away calmly, and to alert the forest department immediately.

With support from the Trust, forest officials also went to schools and launched a children's ambassador programme, where children dressed up as leopards and performed for their parents plays that created more understanding of why leopards come near their homes, and how to stay safe.

These efforts, says Meena, have helped her understand the importance of being vigilant. "When we keep our surroundings clean, be alert, then we needn't be afraid. The leopards cross my shop many times, but when we do not bother them, they keep going on their own path."

In the four years before the programme started in 2017, there were 45 cases of human-leopard conflict in the Tehri area, among them 10 human deaths. In the four years after, the number of cases went down to 14, four of them involving human deaths.

“Our ancestors tell us how they have lived in the forests, grazed the animals in the forests, but the leopard has never attacked them,” says Meena. “So we too can live [with leopards], if we remain vigilant and follow the rules.”

Conservation cat-ches on

Keeping up a constant flow of communication and education with the community is a role that falls largely on the shoulders of forest division officials like Koko.

When attacks happen and people are hurt or killed, “there’s a lot of anger”, he acknowledges. “Sometimes it’s difficult to talk conservation. But we tried to tell people removing one leopard does not finish the problem. Another leopard comes and occupies that territory.”

Koko and his team did not always handle these situations with such confidence. Lacking the equipment and expertise needed to deal with reports of leopard sightings and attacks, the division was reliant on rescue teams from surrounding national parks — the closest being six hours away. Trapped animals died in distress while awaiting rescue, affecting the community’s trust in the officers’ abilities to handle their calls for help.

With Titli Trust providing training, Koko and his colleagues set up rapid response teams to better respond to calls in a way that was safe for both humans and leopards. Their success has led to invitations from other forest divisions to share their expertise.

“Titli Trust has been a very reliable partner for us. They’ve provided us access to ideas and people. They have helped us immensely, especially in the community outreach programme... taking the pain to plan and organise the awareness materials,” says Koko.

He adds: “I think they’re instrumental to the success of our story here.”

Sanjay believes that to sustain such



programmes, involving all stakeholders in the community is crucial. In another district in Uttarakhand, the programme did not see notable change in the situation, because the idea was not fully embraced by the community, he notes.

Koko is also wary of celebrating too soon. “In spite of the lower numbers of conflict that we have seen in the last four years, the fact [is] that four people died,” he says soberly. “Somebody died or somebody had to face the trauma of an animal attack.

“It gives us hope that our incidences are decreasing. But I think we still have a long way to go.”

In time, Sanjay hopes all stakeholders can come together to help other communities learn to live with wildlife harmoniously. “I think we humans forget that we are just another species, and just as we have the right to live on planet Earth, so does the leopard, so does the tiger and the ants and butterflies and moths.

“The fact is not whether we perceive them as having an ecological role. I think they have the right to live in

***With Titli Trust
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homes that have been theirs for a lot longer than ours.”

Though the idea of living with leopards may seem challenging to increasingly urbanised attitudes, Sanjay suggests that people may simply be returning to cultural roots by doing so. “In Indian culture, especially in Hindu

culture, there is a great deal of tolerance towards wildlife. There are many animals and creatures that are worshipped as lords and gods in our religion, and that makes people extremely tolerant towards wildlife.

So I think Living with Leopards programme in India is not a difficult thing for people to adopt, because culturally, that’s how all of us have been brought up.”

About Titli Trust

Titli Trust is a non-profit based in Uttarakhand, India, that advocates for nature conservation and empowers local communities to take the lead in protecting and living in harmony with nature. Its programmes range from building capacity in eco-tourism to educating communities on human-wildlife conflict.

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www.ourbetterworld.org



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

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. 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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“It is important to bring all CSR projects under the SDGs and map the outcomes through the prism of the UN 171 indicators.”

Rajiv Williams shares with Marie Banu Jindal Stainless Limited's CSR programmes

Brigadier (Retd) Rajiv Williams joined the development sector, after taking premature retirement, and currently heads CSR for the Jindal Stainless Limited Group of companies. His focus has been Corporate Community Connect through various projects initiated by him like education and skill training, integrated healthcare, women empowerment and livelihood generation, environment, rural development, business and human rights.

Rajiv Williams is a member of the CII National CSR Council and several other CII Committees like Water, Backward District and Affirmative Action Committees. He is also an advisor to advocacy groups and Academic Institutions and member Governing Council of UN Global Compact Network India (GCNI). He is a member of various boards and has been an Independent Director of CSR Committee. He is also a member of the UN Women Empowerment Principles Leadership Group, New York.

In an exclusive interview, Rajiv Williams shares with Marie Banu Jindal Stainless Limited's CSR programmes.

In what ways does Jindal Stainless Limited ensure PPP approach in its CSR programs?

CSR, by definition, has a lot to do with the 'Triple Bottom Line Accounting Framework', which incorporates three dimensions of performance: 'Social, environmental and financial', commonly referred to as the 3Ps – 'People, Planet and Profit'. When we deep dive into the rudiments of engagement, the 'Social' aspect remains central in the sustainable development agenda, because the other 2Ps- 'Planet' and 'Profit' - have a direct impact on the first 'P'-People.

At Jindal Stainless Limited (JSL), we believe that it is all about a continuing commitment to behave ethically and contribute towards the overall economic growth by improving lives of the workforce, their families, communities, and societies at large.

Can you share the key CSR Initiatives of Jindal Stainless Limited?

JSL implements its CSR programs either directly or through its Foundation or in collaboration with other implementing partners and is an enabler of sustainable community development. Through its initiatives, the Company creates an environment by providing opportunities to its employees to connect with each other and with the community at large.

JSL aims to provide a platform that empowers the community through need-based programs, making beneficiaries self-reliant through a process of direct

intervention. The Company focuses on going 'Beyond Business Responsibilities' stressing on the importance of seeing a change in lives of communities around its plant locations as well as in other geographies.

Some of the key focus areas of JSL are Education and Skill training with a strong focus on self reliance and Entrepreneurship development, Women Empowerment and Integrated Health Care. In the area of health care, we specifically focus on eradication of disease incidence from a specific target area.

About JSL's flagship Project?

One of JSL's flagship CSR projects is the Agriculture extension project, where much effort has gone into mitigating the problems being faced by farmers especially during the post demonetization period as also the current pandemic phase.

The project design, which essentially focuses on various areas – from soil testing to training by experts across geographies; from price actualization to linking farmers directly with buyers. This has resulted in a lot of interest amongst various stakeholders. Efforts have also been made towards improving the logistical nightmare being faced by the farmers and prompt payment systems through high-end IT interventions.

All of this has been championed by our implementing partner "Gram Unnati Foundation". In fact, Niti Aayog has been encouraged to adopt some of our practices.

JSL has been engaged with both the Government of Odisha and Haryana as also with some other States with relevant MoUs in place to support farmers. Gram Unnati Foundation has been given a license to procure directly from farmers and mitigate their distress sale problems.

In order to understand the needs of farmers urgently requiring agricultural inputs, we organized a major outreach campaign with Bayer Crop Sciences. Working with the local district administrations, we even delivered inputs at farmers' door steps in safe and sanitized conditions. Additionally, during the early lockdown stage we teamed up with the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board to supply 2,000 kgs of fresh vegetables daily to community kitchens serving food to the most affected by the lockdown.

What were the challenges faced by JSL in the Agricultural Extension project?

Some of the major problems encountered during the post demonetization phase was availability of liquid cash for transportation of the harvested crops. Since the backward integration with digitalization of payments was already in place, the



farmers who had joined in the project did not face much difficulties in money transfer.

The other major problem especially during the pandemic, which was faced by farmers and when the crop was ready to be harvested was very little or no labor that was available to cut the standing crop. There were other problems as well like logistical support, marketing support, availability of pesticides, fungicides and availability of seeds for planting for the next kharif crop plantation season. In addition, the limited time window that was available for such planting, etc. compounded to the challenges. While some of these challenges have since been addressed, solutions to other issues are still being worked upon to ensure farmers do not suffer due to the prevailing conditions.

About the women livelihood development initiatives?

JSL has undertaken a number of initiatives on livelihood generation and Women Empowerment with the aim of 'Entrepreneurship Development'. The projects undertaken included creating Self Help Groups and providing various activities around capacity building from activities linked projects, to sourcing and marketing initiatives. Trainings have been organized for the women in the rural areas from the usual badi, papad, achar, jam and chutney making to creating boutiques and beauty salons.

Women have also been trained in dress designing and fashion technology and finance management. In addition to empower women in the urban rural areas in states like Haryana and Odisha, JSL in partnership with Xynteo, a Norwegian organisation, and the UNDP have empowered women to work in the stainless-steel sector by imparting training to women in cutting, welding, quality check and marketing of stainless-steel products.

What efforts have been taken by JSL to align its CSR Projects to UN Sustainable Development Goals?

It is important to bring all CSR projects under the Sustainable Development Goals and map the

outcomes through the prism of the UN 171 indicators. It is in such alignment that the way forward based on data can help in accomplishment of a select pathway of growth and development. JSL intervention could be included under SDGs, 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 11 and 17, besides some other SDGs, where the process of M & E is underway.

Poverty Alleviation is addressed through interventions of providing food for the poor and the migrant workers, especially during the Covid crisis. This has been mapped under the Indicator of 1. 5. 1. Similarly, SDG 2 has been addressed through our famer intervention projects in partnership with Gram Unnati Foundation and Claro Energy and both activities have been mapped under the SDG 1 indicators 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.

SDG 3, which deals with integrated health care, has been adequately addressed through partners like Roko Cancer, besides other projects around health interventions through the Indicator 3.4.1 and so on. Then we have the Education indicators 4. 1 and 4. 5. 1 where ITES education and providing quality education to the differently abled, especially Hearing Impaired is being imparted through our partner NDS and the data is well captured.

SDG 6 i.e. Clean drinking water is also directly linked with health SDG 2. This project is being implemented by our partners Piramal Foundation and Swajal. It is also important to note that menstrual hygiene project with Sachi Saheli is a component of WASH project and is included under the same SDG. The Environment impact and sustainable cities linked to SDG 11 have benefitted communities in a positive manner as recorded under the Indicators 11. 7. 1 and 11. 2. 3. The partnership for developing parks rests with Prabhav Foundation and through their intervention the local self government wants to take the project to other locations in the State of Haryana. You will acknowledge that the partnerships listed above adequately lend toward SDG 17.