

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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An exclusive interview with Ms. Poonam Natarajan, Founder of Vidya Sagar, formerly known as Spastics Society of India

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

An estimated 240 million children worldwide live with disabilities. Children with special needs need quality education to develop their skills and realise their full potential. Identifying and enabling educational settings in light of their needs is the only way to ensure that they become independent and productive individuals within the societies they live in.

There has been increasing consideration and deliberation about how to best educate children with special needs. Competing paradigms of special education and inclusive education have been developed, disseminated and discussed at length over the years. These discussions have focused primarily on effectively educating learners with different types and severities of special educational needs and disabilities, who are living in either developing or developed countries.

The Government of India has over the last five decades worked towards providing a variety of services for education of children with special needs. In 1974, the centrally sponsored scheme for Integrated education for disabled children (IEDC) was introduced to give equal opportunities to children with disabilities in general schools. Nation Educational Policy, 1986, (NPE) put forward a goal, to integrate or combine the disabled with the general section or group at all levels as equal companions, to prepare them for normal development and to allow them to face life with courage, boldness and confidence. The success of inclusive education is highly dependent on the collective and active participation of teachers, administrators, parents, peers, and the special children.

Inclusive education values diversity and the unique contribution that each child brings to the classroom. In a truly inclusive setting, every child feels safe and has a sense of belongingness.

Covid-19 has exasperated the disparities in everything from healthcare to education for those with special needs. Therefore, children with special needs require advocates and champions who ensure their needs are considered first and accommodations and services continue regardless of environmental barriers.

One such champion is Ms. Poonam Natarajan, a pioneer in disability and development activities in India. *Conversations Team* salutes her for her noble efforts and is proud to have her featured in this issue.

Read, be inspired!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

BRINGING THE FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO INDONESIA'S VILLAGES

Through its "School of Women" programme, KPS2K empowers women with the skills to claim their rights and forge their own futures.

“As my parents put it, with bandeng (milkfish), the older they are, the more valuable they get. But for young girls, the older they get, the more worthless they become.”

Lilik Indrawati from East Java, Indonesia, shares this as she recalls how she was married at 19 years old. “I was not ready. But what can I say?” she says.

At the time, she was working in a factory, earning US\$1 for a full day's work. “In my mind, a married woman would no longer be her parents' burden.”

Girls at risk

In Indonesia, one in nine women were married before they turned 18. Although efforts to create awareness on the issue has led to a modest decline in numbers, girls, especially those in rural areas, remain vulnerable.

Until recently, girls in Indonesia could be married at age 16 with their parents' permission. The laws were amended in 2019 to raise the minimum age for marriage to 19.

Child marriage not only robs children of their childhood, it also threatens girls' lives as adolescent pregnancies carry more health risks. Girls who marry before they are 18 are also four times less likely to go beyond high school education, and more likely to experience domestic violence.

A 'School of Women'

“It is as if they are not acknowledged as human beings,” says Iva Hasanah, founder, Kelompok Perempuan dan Sumber-sumber Kehidupan (KPS2K)

In 2014, Iva Hasanah started KPS2K to reach out to women from rural areas. Her goal? To equip them with the tools to claim more authority in their own lives, be it inside the home or out in their communities.

Although women from low-income backgrounds are often the topic of discussion when it comes to rural development, their voices are typically left out of these conversations, notes Iva.

“When they were children, their parents had authority over them. When they married, the authority fell to the man who became their husband,” she says.

“If they're never seen, never visible, they will probably experience prolonged acute poverty all throughout their life,” she adds.

Enter Sekolah Perempuan, or “School of Women” is in Bahasa Indonesia. Over 10 sessions, the programme brings together women to learn about gender biases and inequality, and how to advocate for themselves.

The sessions are designed to be interactive, using role play and simulation exercises. For example, the women play a game called “visiting a newborn”, through which they see how the gender of the newborn creates differences when selecting gifts.

In movement classes, the women use dance as a means to understand how society denies them authority over their bodies. “The way she walked, the way she saw things, and what she listened to, were controlled,” explains Iva. “Through dance, they are able to reclaim ownership of their bodies.”

Developing lifelong critical awareness of their circumstances is what KPS2K aims to instill. “So that they will always question their situation, and maybe go beyond themselves and broaden their horizons,” says Iva.



Though Lilik, Ivani, and Eli have completed the programme, they continue to advocate for women

Since 2014, KPS2K, which is funded by donations, has educated about 1,300 women and girls in villages around Indonesia.

A voice for their community

Lilik, Yulita Ivani and Ellis Setiawati are among the numerous women whose lives have been changed by KPS2K.

Ivani, who married at 19, shares: “I am a farmer who dropped out from school and had to experience injustices. Now, I am the chief editor for Sekolah Perempuan's newspaper. This is like a dream!”

Ellis, who married at 17, thought child marriage was “normal”, until she joined Sekolah Perempuan. “Women have so many problems that we've been normalising all this time, but in that training, I learnt that all of us are facing the same problems,” she says.

With her newfound confidence, Ellis attended a leadership training programme. Today, she is an elected representative on her village consultative body. “All this time, we only had our husbands and children in our minds, and we forgot our own interests. If we do not fight for our rights, or are too scared to make a decision, who will change us?” she asks.

Lilik, who now runs a small business selling herbal drinks, agrees. “After we understood about gender injustices, starting from the discrimination that is happening in our society, we realised that numerous issues need to be dealt with,” she says.

All three continue to organise Sekolah Perempuan activities for women in their community. Says Ivani: “From personal to district-wide issues, we can resolve them collaboratively. That is why Sekolah Perempuan is so special.” She added: “My hope for myself is to continue to learn, and fight for women's voices, especially for women at the grassroots level. That's it!”

ABOUT KPS2K

KPS2K, or Kelompok Perempuan dan Sumber-sumber Kehidupan, is an NGO in Indonesia, that seeks to engage women and girls in rural communities on gender inequality, and help them develop the awareness and skills needed to advocate for their rights. It runs a programme called Sekolah Perempuan, which educates women on the issue through interactive activities. It has supported some 1,300 women and girls since its inception.

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

REALISE, RECOVER, REMAIN CLEAN

Alcoholism is as much a social issue as it is a neuro-psychological disease. Often, the social manifestation is easily ridiculed and criticised, but the disease as such is not looked at with perspective. “Alcoholism changes a person’s behaviour, mannerism unlike other diseases like diabetes and blood pressure. Therefore, people easily recognise the social aspect of this disease but fail to help alcoholics access treatment. By the time a family realises the consequences of the disease, the person affected would have moved from pre-alcoholic stage (drinking whenever they feel bad/hurt/angry about something) to the last stage where drinking alcohol becomes the only motive and priority over everything else in life,” laments Mr. Pramod Kumar Panicker, founder of Pranav De-addiction cum Rehabilitation Centre in Thakkolam village, Arakkonam district, Tamil Nadu.

Coming from a comfortably settled family in Ooty, Pramod followed his ancestors’ steps and studied Astrology at a Gurukulam in Kerala. He also graduated in Psychology through distance education. Starting his own practice as an astrologer at the age of 21 years, he tasted success early and with no financial commitments or purpose to save, alcohol came in easily. “It started off very easily, effortlessly; eventually I lost 14 years of my life to alcoholism. I wanted to come out of it and tried many times but failed. I thought I couldn’t control my own habits and that this was not about self-control or obedience. This was the very nature of this disease. My recovery started only after I realised this,” recalls Pramod.

Pramod sought help from an institution that stood by him through those arduous times and the struggles he faced in recovery helped him understand the disease with all its layers. “One’s ability to digest alcohol varies with every individual. The guilt from the behaviour shown and the pressure it builds in us to show ourselves as better persons intensifies the situation by pushing us to drink again. Mentally and physically, alcoholics are caught unawares. We need doctors and psychiatrists under one roof,” he asserts. Learning from his experience, Pramod developed an urge to learn about alcoholism and study every aspect of this disease. He wanted to make the journey less arduous and doable for other alcoholics.

After his recovery and introspection, he came to know about CSIM from a friend and enrolled himself in the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme - De-addiction Treatment Techniques Course. “I loved the content,” exclaims Pramod who was inspired by his batchmates who shared about their organisations and was determined to start his own organisation soon. The sessions on family therapy convinced him about the need to sustain motivation and therefore the need for psychological intervention along with physiological attention in overcoming alcoholism. Soon after the course, Pramod founded the Pranav De-addiction cum Rehabilitation Centre in 2021. “My learnings from the course was my investment, my knowledge capital later helped me pool in other resources like human and physical capital. The primary focus of the centre was on community mobilisation and awareness programmes because unless we all respond to persons affected by alcoholism, they may not realise that they are affected by a disease and the need for intervention. This is the formative and the most crucial step. The



course convinced me to follow this community approach,” he adds.

The awareness drive covered 18 villages and reactions from communities surprised Pramod. He is still unable to comprehend why people could not relate to alcoholism as a disease. “How can this habit be a disease?” asked a community member in one of his meetings.

Alongside awareness campaigns, he also brought together a team of doctors who shared his vision. Soon the rehabilitation centre was up and running, with the help of resources mobilised from personal investments and a friend who was also his batch mate at CSIM. 35 alcoholics have recovered so far and remain sober. The communication pathways at Pranav De-addiction cum Rehabilitation Centre are kept active and open to maintain regular follow up calls so that relapse cases can be checked immediately. At present, 20 inmates are recovering at the centre and Pramod’s team introduces a wide variety of community activities as an interface to help inmates and community members see what each other is trying to

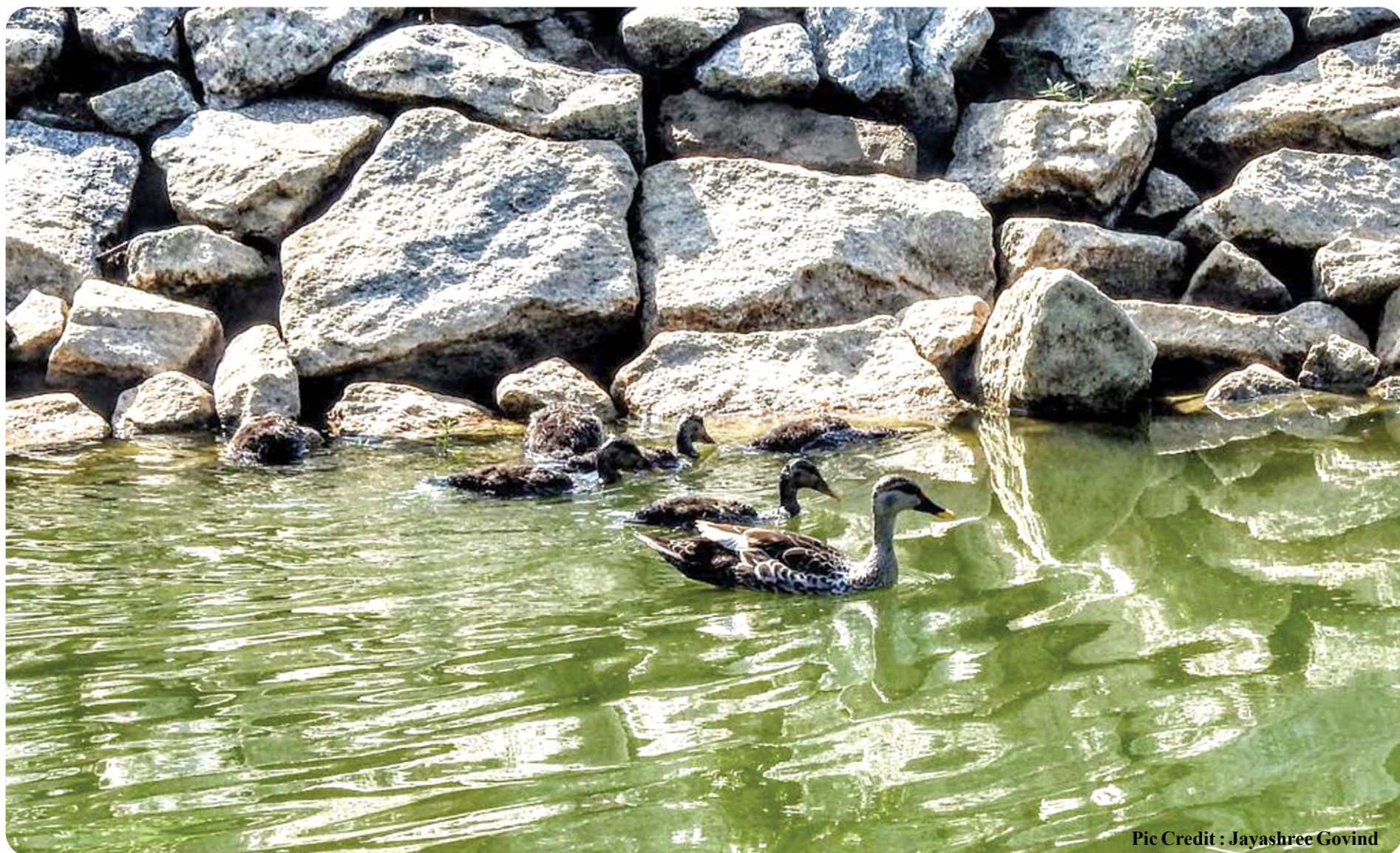


do and help in the recovery process.

The strength of this community approach, he feels, lies in processing the thoughts of every individual who may influence an addict’s recovery in a constructive manner. “A social problem needs a solution that is social and long-lived. Therefore, preparing a community to be aware of this disease and also educating communities about the treatment available is equally important,” says Pramod, who also conducts the 12-step spiritual soul clearing program to help addicts find an inner drive to remain clean.

Shanmuga Priya.T

PUTTENAHALLI NEIGHBOURHOOD LAKE IMPROVEMENT TRUST: THE PERSEVERANT LAKE CUSTODIAN OF BANGALORE



Pic Credit : Jayashree Govind

On a pleasant morning in early April, a soft breeze gently rustled the leaves on the trees along the banks of Puttakere, sweet bird song filled the air... little groups of purple moor hens foraged quietly in the shallow waters, as did the black-winged stilts from lands far away... up, on a perch, a cormorant stretched its dark wings out to dry, still and meditative, unmindful of the noisy sun-birds hovering in excitement over honeysuckle blooms, tiger butterflies flitted about hurriedly seeking sweet nectar of their choice... Nature, in all her glory, seemed to be miraculously thriving amidst South Bangalore's high-rises and dense traffic.

Until over a decade ago, the 13-acre Puttenahalli lake was one of the many hundreds of dying lakes in the city as rapid urbanization, a population surge and unplanned construction took a toll on the city's famous waterbodies. When Usha Rajagopalan, Co-founder of Puttenahalli Neighbourhood Lake Improvement Trust (PNLIT), moved

into the neighbourhood in 2006, the view from her home left her deeply disturbed - she saw a dry lake-bed strewn with trash and construction debris, puddles of sewage water, little greenery and a well populated slum on the embankment. "I knew very little about how a lake could be revived at that time," she says.

Usha was driven by her personal belief that citizens are responsible for safeguarding the environment by taking ownership. She took the first big step by mooted a campaign for lake rejuvenation and removal of the encroachment with the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) - Bangalore's Municipal Corporation. With the help of influential members in the community, she was able to get Puttenahalli Lake included in the list of lakes that the BBMP was considering for revival at that time.

Three-way partnership

As the BBMP proceeded to plan and

carry out civil works at Puttakere, Usha was able to garner support from a small team of environment enthusiasts from the neighbourhood, to closely monitor and report on the revival activities and remain regularly engaged with the civic body. "The Chief Engineer at the helm of affairs at that time was open to listening to citizens, and that made a lot of difference," says Usha. She soon realized that lake rejuvenation and long-term maintenance would require organised and sustained efforts, and could only be carried out in partnership with the BBMP and with active participation of local resident communities. Thus, in 2010, she decided to set up and register PNLIT to drive all lake improvement efforts, with three other residents joining her as trustees.

PNLIT: Assuming the role of a lake custodian

Soon after, a cash-strapped BBMP took a landmark decision to hand over the maintenance of 13 lakes to

committed non-governmental organization (NGOs) and signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with each of them. The list included Puttenahalli Lake and, with that, PNLIT officially became one of the first citizen custodians of a lake. The terms of the MoU clearly stated that the Trust would be responsible for lake maintenance and would meet all related expenses. It emphasised that the NGO would also not conduct any commercial activity at the lake.

PNLIT's comprehensive efforts over the past decade have been directed towards water replenishment, vigilant monitoring of water quality, identifying and cutting off sources of pollution, developing the bio-diversity around the lake scientifically and increasing community involvement.

Water replenishment initiatives: Tapping multiple sources

In the first year after revival, about fifty-percent of the lake got filled up

with rain water. The Trust found that the surface water run-off from a nearby avenue could be used for replenishment. The careful laying of pipes to redirect the storm water was carried out by the BBMP under the directives of the Chief Engineer. "Once this was done, water gushed into the lake. The residents from the neighbourhood were thrilled to see this," says Usha, who believes that such passion and excitement for a community cause gets generated by sharing information and knowledge and by encouraging participation. The redirection of the storm water also helped in controlling flooding of the nearby residential apartment complexes. Another major initiative to augment lake water was to bring in surplus treated waste water from the Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) of one of the large residential apartment complexes in the area.

Keeping the lake water clean is a continuous effort. In what is seen as an innovative measure, PNLIT created artificial islands using PVC pipes and plastic bottles and spread nets over them to hold bio-filter plants in place. These plants have free-floating roots which capture water pollutants. The quality of water, which is tested regularly by volunteers, saw a marked improvement. However, incidents of sewage water seepage are recurrent and require enormous efforts to trace and block the source with the help of the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB).

Community participation: Sharing expertise, time and resources

Beginning with a very successful tree plantation drive on Earth Day back in 2010, where local residents donated generously and planted the 125 saplings provided by the BBMP, PNLIT has consistently involved residents in its activities, drawing on their passion for the cause, knowledge, expertise, and desire to volunteer. The annual lake maintenance expenses have been met entirely through donations from residents so far. "This shows the faith the residents have in us and the transparency and accountability expected from us" says Usha. PNLIT has been organizing a variety of interesting events like nature



Pic Credit : Jayashree Govind

walks, story-telling sessions and musical evenings, making the lake the centre for community gatherings and activities, thus increasing footfalls to its green-canopied surroundings.

Bio-diversity: Of trees, birds and insects

Over the years, PNLIT has sought help from experts for identifying trees to plant around the periphery of the lake and also for dealing with invasive species. In 2010, 125 saplings were planted on the lake shores – the number of trees has since gone up to 475, with most of them being native species. Common flowering trees at the lake like Honge mara (Indian Beech Tree), Poo-arasu (Portia Tree), Silk Cotton, Palash (Flame of the forest Tree) and bushes like honey-suckle, passion flower and many others attract butterflies and birds – sun-birds, prinias, parakeets, flower peckers and others.

The clean water and fish have attracted a number of aquatic birds – including some migratory birds like wagtails, storks, whistling ducks, and sand pipers. Some have made the lake their home - a spot-billed duck recently laid eggs and hatched them at the lake,

and the mother and her chicks have been a delight to watch. Naturalists have spotted a wide variety of insects at the lake – a rare and colourful spider with iridescent stripes was spotted recently by a resident photographer at the lake, perched atop a garden lizard.

The rich bio-diversity of Puttenahalli Lake is reflected in the fact that 208 species of diverse plants and animals seen at the lake have been recorded on the inaturalist app and 132 bird species have been uploaded by birding enthusiasts on the ebird app.

To get adults and children residing in the neighbourhood to understand and enjoy nature, PNLIT has been organizing nature walks guided by experts. A bio-blitz was conducted last year by a resident naturalist in which a small group of participants learnt to identify and document their observations of the species of birds, insects, flowers and plants they had seen.

PNLIT's optimism against challenges

PNLIT has confronted several challenges over the years, from trees being cut down by local miscreants to sudden seepage of sewage water, and of

course, the long-drawn-out issue of removal and rehabilitation of the slum encroachment. In its exemplary journey as a lake custodian the Trust has worked towards resolving many challenges with the BBMP's support with an understanding of the pressures and constraints the civic body faced. "To work with the BBMP there has to be a lot of mutual trust and give & take. They know well that we have no vested interest," says Usha. PNLIT nominated BBMP for Earth Day Network India's Star Municipal Leadership Award in 2021 which BBMP won for rejuvenating 18 lakes in the city and initiating work on 7 more.

At present, there are concerns related to the renewal of the civic body's MoUs with NGOs, after a high-court ruling on a PIL filed by the Citizens Action Group stalling the agreements with corporates. Since the ruling does not mention NGOs, lake groups have made representations to the BBMP Commissioner and have approached the court seeking clarifications on the order.

In the meanwhile, PNLIT continues its efforts optimistically, relying heavily on the community funding support for lake maintenance which it has carefully nurtured. Its future plans include developing the lake as an avian habitat, launching a learning program for children, scientific data gathering on bio-diversity and conducting regular events to promote community gatherings.

When more and more folks come over to Puttakere from the neighbourhood, they may spot the red-eared slider turtle somewhere along the banks or simply stop to admire pretty water lilies in bloom or, with a sharp, trained eye, even catch the Brahminy kite feed its little one on a tree branch....

(For guidance on lake revival & rejuvenation and for opportunities to participate in PNLIT's activities, you may write to Ms. Usha Rajagopalan, Co-founder Puttenahalli Neighbourhood Lake Improvement Trust. Email: Puttenahalli.lake@gmail.com)

Usha Ravi

With inputs from Jayashree Govind



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 is an overseas chapter of Social Audit Network, UK covering India and Middle East.)

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TECH PLUS TOUCH



In 2008, Aparna Hegde founded ARMMAN with the singular purpose of “addressing systemic problems affecting maternal and child health by leveraging technology and existing health infrastructure to create scalable, cost-effective and evidence-based solutions”. In fact, the provision of critical preventive care information to women during pregnancy and infancy, through the work of the NGO, enables them to seek and demand better healthcare for both — themselves and their children.

Today, programmes implemented by ARMMAN have reached over 27 million women and their children, not to mention the 235,705 frontline health workers across 19 states who have received training via their interventions. “We are currently implementing the largest mobile-based maternal messaging program (Kilkari) and the

largest mobile-based health worker training program in the world (Mobile Academy) in partnership with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare,” says Aparna, who is the Founder and Managing Trustee of ARMMAN. “Three women die every hour in India because of pregnancy-related complications and for every woman who dies, 20 more suffer lifelong ailments,” she adds, “Although 27 million children are born annually in India - a potential demographic dividend - 2 children under the age of five die every minute. Widespread issues like low birth weight, malnutrition and stunting lead to complications that prevent children from realising their potential.”

In fact, long before she founded ARMMAN, Aparna experienced “pervasive systemic gaps” first hand when she was a medical resident in Mumbai. Recounting how

these gaps led to maternal and child mortality that could have been prevented, she narrates the plight of patients that she witnessed: “Women would reach the hospital in a critical condition, often at a late stage. The only way things could improve was when effort was concentrated at a community level.”

The immediate solution was to design interventions at scale in a manner that would not see their impact diluted. This could rely on the exponential rise of mobile phone usage in the country, which would go on to make Health an “exciting solution”, and would go on to make ARMMAN a reality in 2008. The full benefit of the model though was realized in early 2020 when COVID-19 struck.

“ARMMAN adapted its extensive technology platform and expertise and within a week, launched 4



COVID-19 interventions to support pregnant women, children and health workers with access to critical information and services in rural and urban areas,” recounts Aparna. “Our Pan-India free Virtual OPD (virtual clinic) has provided over 28,000 pregnant women and mothers consultations with obstetricians and paediatricians.”

In all, 300,000 pregnant women and mothers of children up to age one, living in urban slums in Mumbai were sent weekly automated voice calls and texts on critical COVID-19 related information, on their mobile phones and in the local language. “Free call-centre support along with a data repository linked over 61,000 pregnant women & children with essential health services and facilities,” says Aparna, “We also set-up a Rapid Response System to send critical information through calls and texts to 800,000 health workers, in partnership with the government and also supported them in their door-to-door COVID-19 vaccination campaign.”

Over time, ARMMAN has partnered with the Telangana Government to implement an integrated approach to improve identification, tracking and end-to-end management of high-risk pregnancies in the state. The Integrated High-Risk Pregnancy Management (IHRPM) project

trains Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs), Medical Officers (MOs) and Specialists in High-Risk pregnancy management protocols, supported by the Learning and Tracking App.

“Our tech-plus-touch approach leverages the existing frontline health worker network of the government and partner NGOs and combines it with the ubiquity of the mobile phone, to scale cost-effectively without duplicating efforts,” explains Aparna, “This enables limited human resource requirement in spite of multiple touch points, leading to nonlinear growth at extremely low cost.”

In fact, these costs go as low as just \$9 to make calls to a woman covering pregnancy and infancy, and train ASHA (frontline health worker) through the Mobile Academy. “We partner with the national and state governments, 97 hospitals and 41 on-ground NGOs,” says Aparna, “We also leverage the existing frontline health worker network of the government and partner NGOs without creating parallel structures.”

ARMMAN has successfully combined its tech-enabled weekly interface with the beneficiary or health worker through a human interface provided by the call centre. This in turn has enabled human resource requirements that have resulted in non-linear growth at extremely low costs. “mHealth-based programs also have the advantage of program upgradation without additional investment as beneficiaries automatically upgrade phones,” says Aparna. “With increased mobile penetration and cheap data, ARMMAN’s mHealth-based interventions come with the promise of sustainability.”

ARMMAN plans on strengthening and scaling its interventions and launching new ones over the next few years. It hopes to scale across the country and reach 45 million women and their children, even as it trains over a million healthcare workers and launch a ‘fit for purpose approach’ whereby women and children with high-risk conditions and those encumbered



by issues of equity, will be supported with targeted content and multimedia approaches.

“We have successful pilots including AI or predictive analytics with Google Research India being tested in the mMitra sandbox that we hope to scale via Kilkari, to reach a larger number of women and children,” says Aparna, “We will also focus on the creation of a technology platform with backend data integration with AI across programs for monitoring and tracking high-risk beneficiaries with planned targeted interventions.”

Ultimately, ARMMAN dreams of a world where every mother is empowered and every child, healthy. “We see the development of an empowered ecosystem, characterised by well-informed women health-seekers and a cadre of empowered health workers, who have the potential to become effective women leaders in their community,” says Aparna. In the meanwhile, an efficiently working primary healthcare system, she hopes, will ensure early identification and management of high risk-factors in women and children, even as an effective referral system lets those with high-risk factors get referred to tertiary care facilities. “Ultimately, we hope that there is a reduction in late or complicated referrals, thereby reducing the load on their already overstretched facilities and staff, which will in turn improve the efficiency of the overall health system, and reduce maternal and child mortality,” she signs off.



MISSION INCLUSION

Children are mankind's future. What we build for them is what we will be leaving for all those who will be born in the years to come. So, what should we actually build or create?

Development, technology and other advancements in science have evolved with emerging needs. So has the society's ability to think and act for vulnerable sections. Also, the idea of inclusion has evolved into a holistic vision for many individuals and organisations like Satya Special School (SSS) in Pondicherry.

The way society treats or views differently abled children has changed progressively, but children with intellectual disability face a challenging life and their dependence on parents or guardians restricts them from many things. In poor families, where survival itself is a real struggle, these children's needs and priorities are not catered to and often are abused, physically and sexually. Ms. Chitra Shah, Founder of Satya Special School came to learn about such incidences while working with special children. When she probed about a child with Down Syndrome whose follow up was missed more than once, she was shocked to learn that the child was left tied inside her locked house. "Her mother was a single parent as her father had abandoned them. She was out there for anybody to abuse/abduct and later when we got to know that she was sexually abused more than once, it was not a surprise. What actually shocked our founder was the absence of a secure space or a set up where working parents, especially single mothers where they could leave their special children when they went for work. That is when she decided to start a school for special children," shares Ms. Meera Rajagopalan, Manager - Communications at Satya Special School.

From 20 children in 2003, the school today attends to 1,200 children, both boys and girls, with varied development disorders. Beginning with a school, the organization today administers 10 village rehabilitation centers (including five in rural areas) and mobile therapy units have reached out to 44 villages. With over a hundred staff, the family of service providers and the circle of beneficiaries reached by Satya Special School grew really fast, underlining the need that was not addressed for so long.

For early identification, New Born High Risk Clinic was inaugurated with JIPMER in Pondicherry and over 125 infants are screened every month for risk of intellectual and development disabilities. One of the most successful projects of SSS, this intervention helps in leading mothers with special children to village rehabilitation centers where they can soon adapt to an expert-advised routine, in the best interest of the child. "This worked very well because the sooner you identify, the earlier you treat and rehabilitate the children. It becomes easier and less stressful for both parents



and children," adds Meera.

Genetic counselling for parents-to-be is provided here to help new parents understand and manage preventable disabilities. For those in remote villages, who cannot access the village rehabilitation centers or satellite centers run by local residents in close association with SSS, their Mobile Therapy Unit comes to service. With a physiotherapist, a speech therapist and a special educator, the mobile unit reaches out to those older, undiagnosed special children, those who have not accessed any therapy so far and helps them with activities of daily living (ADL). Once they begin to manage ADL themselves, they are sent to the centers for further therapy and education.

Interestingly, SSS also focusses on the livelihood of its children's families. Over 65% of the children are supported by single mothers. These mothers are also given vocational training and financially supported to initiate small businesses. Youth, on the other hand, are given vocational training, then placed in SSS' sheltered workshops (where youth make mats, cups, bakery products, quilled ornaments, etc) and some are also mainstreamed into open employment through their connections in the industry. "While SSS took every effort to improve the lives of special children, it was equally conscious about the future envisaged for them. How long will mainstreaming remain a struggle? How long will the struggle always be from their side? How, as a society, we all can adapt to and accept having individuals with special needs



amidst us?" asks Meera. As she soon points out, inclusion is the only way and SSS had embarked on interesting experiments to demonstrate why inclusion must be a common vision.

50 students with special needs and disabilities have been mainstreamed in various schools across Pondicherry. Also, 50 youth have been trained in various skills such as housekeeping, graphic designing, hardware/software, BPO operations, etc. Encouraged by this success, SSS attempts to scale up prospects by establishing model inclusive schools. In partnership with the Department of Education, Government of Pondicherry, SSS is working to build schools with inclusive infrastructure like playgrounds, ability specific labs, special educators, etc., in five schools. The initiative also attempts to build an enabling atmosphere where children with special needs and those without any disability can come together and interact freely as mates.

Launched in 2017, the Alternative

Inclusive Center for Education (AICE) is a successful experiment where children with special needs study together with children from difficult circumstances like children of sex workers, children of prisoners, street children, orphans, etc. "Here children see each other as children, that is all their identity is. There is no judgement, no prejudice, no intimidation. Children really feel free here, in true sense of the word. We realise that inclusion starts from here; children teach us about inclusion," shares Meera.

With an ability specific (not age specific) curriculum, visual and practical learning methods are used. And since the focus is on what they can learn, assessments are based on learning ability and social behaviour. Having reached 125 children in four years, AICE also encourages children interested in sports. One of their students with intellectual disability won the gold medal at Thailand Special Olympics – Asia Pacific Unified Badminton Championship 2019.

SSS' incredible journey has been rewarded by many groups. United Way Chennai honored SSS with the 360 Degree Award for the best program for disability. SSS also won the Model of Excellence Award for Early Childhood Care by the University of Oregon, US and the 2018 World Cerebral Palsy Day Award for medical intervention for its Mobile Therapy Unit. With a definite focus on inclusion SSS feels positive and assured about its vision.

Shanmuga Priya.T

BARRIERS, SOFTENED WITH HOPE



Love, gratitude and honesty – are the three words that are repeated often over the course of this conversation. Sripriya, founder of Gold Heart Foundation, exudes these with every fibre of her being. This is the story of how she came to be a mother figure to hundreds of children and counting, coming from some of the bleakest sections of society.

Sripriya is first and foremost, a teacher. Born to parents who were also teachers, she took to this profession as her natural choice. She took on additional charge of tutoring, mentoring children outside of school hours, through her volunteer work at Chinmaya Mission. A deeply spiritual person, she was often haunted by the question: What is my purpose?

A friend/mentor, indulging her spiritual curiosity, introduced Sripriya to a school in an impoverished area in Chennai. Reality hit Sripriya harder than she expected. She says, “I saw children with torn clothes, dirt all over their clothing, ruffled hair. It was far worse than what I’d seen in my career. I couldn’t believe my eyes. My first thought was, unfairly, that the parents of these kids were willfully neglecting them. That first day, I couldn’t wait to get out of that school.”

Out of respect for her friend, she went back to the school one more time. And another. And Another. She recalls, “The next time I went back, I had some questions for the children. I needed to know things about them. That’s when the stories unraveled, one after another. Each child narrated a problem in their life- a problem which, until that day I, an adult, had not endured,” she says adding, “Each child’s problem was so deeply entrenched, that it affected every other aspect of their life.”

This was 2007-2008. Sripriya decided to share the stories of these children and talk about the barriers they faced, with just about anyone who would listen. She didn’t know exactly what she needed to do, but she knew she had to get some help. Soon enough, a group of friends who grew up together joined her and made a volunteer team. These volunteers would tutor children studying in class 10, and side by side, they mobilized more volunteers from nearby schools and colleges. NSS volunteers joined in and provided some tutoring. Interested individuals sponsored the occasional lunches and dinners, so that the children may not go home

hungry. The initiative was still too small to accommodate much in the way of giving.

Another friend of Sripriya’s advised her to start a registered NGO and suggested that it be named ‘Gold Heart Foundation’, because of all the people who would put their hearts and souls into it. Thus, the journey began. One of their core programs today is ‘Kalvi Pattarai’, a centre for tutoring, mentoring kids, grooming them to bring the very best out of them. A steady group of volunteers has remained with the foundation since its inception and they make sure to provide the necessary guidance to the children.

As soon as word spread, a lot of government orphanages began to approach Sripriya, asking for volunteers to tutor children in their orphanages. The education material would be provided by the government; they merely lacked the human resources.

The organisation soon realised that increasingly they had children who were ageing out of this process and still were not in any way independent or thriving. That is when they came up with ‘Siragugal’, a program to provide financial and non-monetary assistance to older children who were on the verge of dropping out of school, or had just completed school and needed help with higher education and/or career guidance.

As things started to flow, the lesson plans got more streamlined and out came another program- ‘Gurukulam’ where the children are sorted into different groups according to standardised learning levels. English Language communication, Computer skills, Accounting are some of the featured subjects in these programs. Interestingly enough, even before the pandemic forced everybody to get online, Gold Heart Foundation started offering these programs completely online, via dedicated WhatsApp groups.

These days, the volunteers leading these programs are typically corporate professionals, and they conduct their respective sessions during weekends. To demonstrate just how hands-on these sessions are, Sripriya takes the example of Accountancy training. She says that during the training, they practically hand over the NGO’s actual accounts to the children.

Sripriya recalls with great fondness how a girl, one of five sisters, came to Gold Heart Foundation seeking help to study further, as her parents couldn’t afford it.

Sripriya and her team taught her accounting, and encouraged her to take over the foundation’s accounting for a few months. When the pandemic started, the same girl went for a job interview. The company gave her a few tests which she passed with flying colours and landed the job as part of their accounting team. “When I feel a little low, I get these little surprise calls and messages, that recharge my spirit all over again” says Sripriya, with a smile.

Once a year, Gold Heart Foundation conducts ‘Thithikkum Diwali’. Children, the institutionalised ones as well as those living with their families, are treated to a full day of entertainment, presents, and pampering from the Gold Heart team. On this day, buses are arranged to take them to a large event venue, where, upon arrival, a traditional welcome (Arati) is given. Artistes from the film industry are invited to entertain them. On that day, there is no talk of education, hard work and all the tough, inspirational stuff. Instead, the children are given trinkets gifts, books, games – just the kind that make them happy. “For 12 years we’ve carried on this tradition” beams Sripriya.

The Gold Heart Foundation currently runs a girls shelter, in partnership with the Child Welfare Committee. 35 girl children are being cared for, in a government allotted shelter home in Venkateswara Nagar, Adyar. These are children rescued from the streets. More remotely, in a tribal settlement near Thiruvallur, the foundation has also set up a small school and daycare centre for children from scheduled tribes in the area. The Mahatma Gandhi Vidyashramam, currently a one-room centre, is trying to provide access to basic nutrition, hygiene and education to the tribal children, because they have no easy route to get to their nearby schools.

“As we look to expand our work further, we need people who can do some CSR work for us. We need someone who can represent us at outside forums, funding agencies and corporate partners. We currently have individual donors, but we also need regular revenue” says Sripriya, looking onward to the future.

Archanaa Ramesh

WOES TO WOWS : THE DOOR CREAKED OPEN!

Sharada had always been a large burly rough lady as long as the apartment dwellers have known her. A bit brusque in her interactions, it was a tall order to get a smile from her. She had moved into this apartment with two teenage daughters a decade back. They grew, studied well, and moved on to work in different countries. Sharada remained back. Sharada had lost her husband to a freak accident when the girls were 18 and 16 years old. Life had changed for her overnight. She moved from their independent house to a smaller apartment. The rental income, the insurance money she got from her husband, plus support from her brother had seen her through the months. But, the shock, loneliness and anxiety to protect her daughters had left an already introverted Sharada socially awkward into a rough and a no-nonsense person. For an entire day, she would go about her life and work without saying a word to anyone. Over the years, Sharada became 'Sharadamma' to the apartment dwellers, especially the maids, security guards, and admin managers.

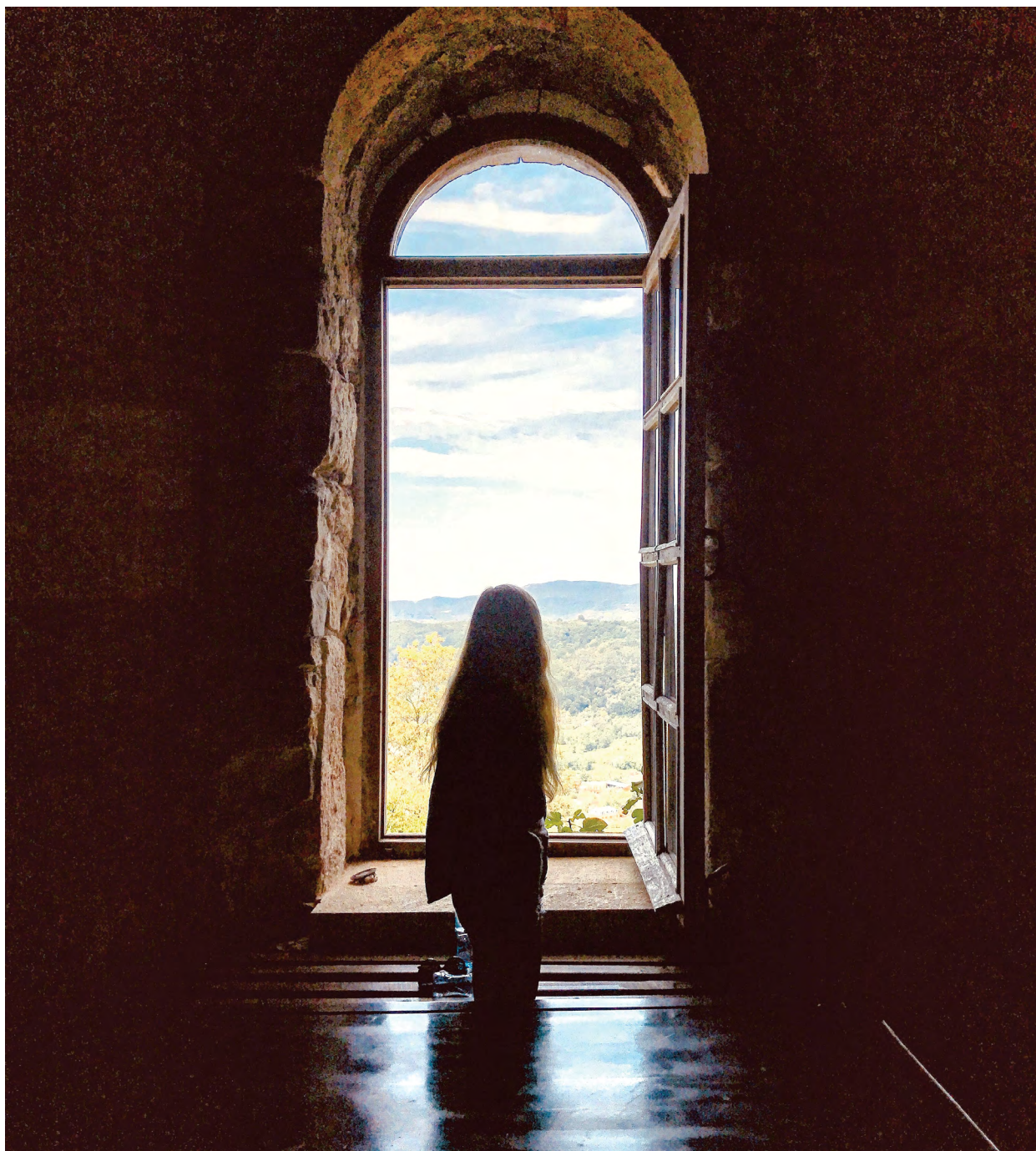
Covid and lockdown struck Bangalore quite severely as it did to the whole world. The thriving Jayanagar and Gandhi Bazar market wore a deserted look. The apartments in Jayanagar were all quiet. Not a single tea stall or the usually crowded Darshini hotel were open. Sharadamma, whose favorite was to have the mid-morning and afternoon tea by looking at the busy street and roadside sellers near the apartment, felt even more lonelier as she stared at the deserted street. She searched for a crow or a small bird to visit the large tree nearby. But, even that seemed a rare sight. She lived on the ground floor above stilt car park overlooking the porch on one side and the street on the other side. Her daughters living in Singapore and USA had taken turns to visit her once in eight months initially, but now it looked like a long haul. She had avoided any talks that invited her to move with them as she preferred to live alone in India.

It was a lovely bright sunny afternoon, and Sharadamma needed to buy groceries and vegetables. She wore her mask, covered her head and ears with a scarf, and decided to make a trip to the nearby supermarket before it closed at 4 pm. It was a quick buy, and as she reached the apartment, she noticed Kaala and Somu, the two indie dogs looking weak and hungry, resting next to the gate. "Sidhappa, why are the dogs looking sick? I don't hear them bark much these days?" she quickly questioned the security guard.

Sidhappa, who was taking a short nap sitting in his chair, was startled at the curt voice and woke up. Collecting himself and standing up he said, "Namsakara. No, no, they are fine. They are just hungry and bored. They don't get their usual biscuits, and not many feed them. There are no children to play with or pet them, so they are bored and not barking. They are fine, Amma."

Sharadamma gave one more look at Kaala and Somu. Without a word and a quick nod, she moved towards the stairs. While Sidhappa settled back in his blue security chair, he saw Sharadamma come back with a Parle biscuit packet in her hand. She quickly opened it and threw a few biscuits near Kaala and Somu. The dogs lazily opened their eyes and quickly smelling the biscuits got up on their feet, gently wagging their tails. They gobbled it up fast and lifted their heads to see who the Good Samaritan was. Sharadamma's lips very subtly curved into a tiny smile, and without a word, she walked back to her house. Sidhappa watched all this in utter amazement. Perhaps this was the first time he saw her paying attention to those dogs or interacting with them.

In the next five days that followed, Sharadamma, with



her mask and a scarf covering her face except for her eyes, would walk down at 11 am and 4 pm and offer biscuits to Kaala and Somu. They began looking up with gentle, loving eyes and were waiting for her looking at the tiny staircase landing expectantly. On Monday next, Sharadamma went with her little bag for vegetables and returned with a loaf of bread for Kaala and Somu! The smell was too enticing, and both jumped up to receive their special treat. She gently patted their head. She had surprised herself that evening by touching them. Her smile had subtly broadened, and the eyes seemed a bit gentler to Sidhappa. He drew some courage and commented, "Lucky dogs, Amma! They get biscuits and now bread from you. With all shops closed, we haven't had tea for the last two months since I came to work." He was afraid of annoying her and mumbled the last few words. Sharadamma gave him a quick look and walked away.

There was a massive battle between Sharadamma's head and heart. She felt terrible for Sidhappa, who sat

the entire day guarding the apartment but with no facility at all for food and tea. She had seen him eat in a canteen down the lane during lunchtime and have tea twice a day. Like him, the vast apartment complex had eight security guards, and they were not supposed to meet and talk in groups due to the pandemic restrictions. The maids who came from outside to work in the complex were banned, and no one knew what had happened to their life and economic status. That night Sharadamma couldn't speak much over the phone with her daughter or watch the television that was blaring with Covid news on every channel. She felt a sadness descend within the guarded stone of her heart. At 4 pm the following day, when she made a cup of tea for herself, she prepared an extra cup. She took the biscuit packet and the tea and walked towards the security gate. She said "Sidhappa, take this. Drink tea, take two biscuits and give the rest to Kaala and Somu. At 4 pm tomorrow, come to my balcony side, and you and other guards can have your afternoon tea." Without even

meeting his eyes, she quickly turned back and left. Sidhappa was stunned and could hear his own deep voice within saying, “thank you.”

The following day Sidhappa walked to the balcony side at 4 pm. Sharadamma quietly handed over a tray with 8 cups of tea and a biscuit packet. The smile had turned to hello, and Sidhappa had gathered enough courage to say ‘thank you’ loudly. Sharadamma soon learned they had only one meal a day, and with no food carts or canteen being open, they couldn’t buy food anywhere. In the house on the first floor was a live-in maid Roja who took full-time care of an elderly couple. She watched from the balcony above that Sharadamma had started giving tea to the security. One morning while Roja was walking down the stairs to pick up the Dunzo packet left at the gate, she smiled at Sharadamma. She said, “Amma, nice of you to give them tea every day. If you need any help, let me know. I am free from 3 pm till 6 pm.” Perhaps this is the first time Roja spoke so much in the last five years of her acquaintance with Sharadamma. The words felt choked in her throat, and Sharadamma struggled to answer. Gathering herself, she replied, “Come to my house tomorrow at 3 pm, and I will tell you. But seek permission from the elderly couple first”. The first stone for the idea of Sharadamma’s Canteen was laid at that moment. The ‘once upon a time’ great cook that Sharadamma was, got enlivened, and the door to her heart creaked open.

In the following weeks, Sharadamma prepared a rice packet for all the eight security guards in the morning and chapati and sabzi (wheat flour bread and vegetables) packets for dinner. Roja enthusiastically helped Sharadamma roll the chapatti and pack them, Sidhappa was very happy to collect them from the balcony and distribute them. From the third week, the security guards collected a small amount as a

contribution and gave them to Sharadamma to buy the groceries and vegetables. In a month, Anshu and Sahana from the fourth floor invited Sharadamma to help supply meals to a migrant workers group they were supporting. Sharadamma’s house door was opened several times to let neighbours come and give her grocery and packing help. The home was filled with laughter and smiles. Her home became a mini canteen. Roja and two of her friends helped her do the dishes. Sharadamma became so busy that her daughters had to fix a schedule for phone and video calls.

Sharadamma’s face changed; sharing of her stories from school days and marriage slowly became a part of the conversations. She enjoyed listening to the chatter of Roja and Sahana. The tough, terse, long-faced Sharadamma looked more like an elderly guiding leader now to others. There was no time for her to feel lonely or even think about it. A new purpose had formed. She had moved to become Annapoorneshwari (Goddess of food and nourishment) to them.

In seven months, lockdown gradually opened, but none were ready to let go of Sharadamma’s yummy food. Sharadamma, too, was toying with continuing the canteen to serve the labourers in the community with good food at an affordable price. The enterprising Anshu and Sahana became her partners and went ahead and fixed a garage in the same lane for the canteen. Sharadamma’s elder daughter pitched in to support buying kitchen utensils. Sharadamma’s Adda was opened! Sidhappa joined them to become the supplier at the counter. Roja brought her two sisters to work in the kitchen. A new family had formed, and Sharadamma’s daughters smiled at the renewed energy of their mother after a decade.

Dr. Kalpana Sampath



CONVERSATIONS WITH SHRI RAMANA MAHARISHI

A young man asked: I try to cultivate will-power but do not succeed. How should I do it?

M.: (No answer)

D.: I came here three years ago and Sri Bhagavan said that will-power is necessary for strength of mind. Since then I have been desiring to cultivate it but without success.

M.: (No answer)

D.: During these years I have had 4 or 5 reverses. They upset me considerably. There is always the fear of failure haunting my attempts. This results in want of faith in myself which certainly foredooms my efforts to failure. Nothing in fact succeeds like success; and also nothing foils one’s attempts like failure. Hence my question.

M.: (No answer).

D.: Is not will-power necessary for success? It should ensure success and also rule out failure.

M.: (No answer)

D.: I try to gain will-power. After these years I find myself only where I began. There is no progress.

M.: (No answer)

D.: What are the means for gaining will-power?

M.: Your idea of will-power is success insured. Will-power should be understood to be the strength of mind which makes it capable for meeting success or failure with equanimity. It is not synonymous with certain success. Why should one’s attempts be always attended with success? Success develops arrogance and the



man’s spiritual progress is thus arrested. Failure on the other hand is beneficial, inasmuch as it opens the eyes of the man to his limitations and prepares him to surrender himself. Self-surrender is synonymous with eternal happiness. Therefore one should try to gain the equipoise of mind under all circumstances. That is will-power. Again, success and failure are the results of prarabdha and not of will-power. A man may be doing only good and noble actions and yet prove a failure. Another may do otherwise and yet be uniformly

successful. This does not mean that the will-power is present in the one and not in the other.

D.: Is it not said in the book Truth Revealed (Ulladu Narpadu) that the world is a product of the mind?

M.: Yes.

D.: Does it not follow that the mind grown strong brings the world under control?

M.: The mind in its external activities gives rise to the world. Such activities fritter away the strength of the mind. Its strength lies in being confined to itself with the external activities arrested.

D.: There is an idiot who cannot count up to ten. His mind does not certainly wander as does that of a thinker. Is the former a better man than the latter?

M.: Who says that he is an idiot? Your mind in its wandering says so.

D.: Is will-power gained by divesting oneself of thoughts?

M.: Rather by confining oneself to a single thought. Ultimately this will also disappear, leaving Pure Consciousness behind. Concentration helps one to it.

D.: So then, it is gained by directing the mind and concentrating it. The personality has nothing to do with it.

M.: Personality is the root-cause of external activities. It must sink for gaining the highest good.

Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi

"Parents of special children can empower themselves by understanding about the condition of their child."

Poonam Natarajan shares with Marie Banu her journey in the disability sector

Ms. Poonam Natarajan is one of the pioneers of disability and development activities in India. In 1985, she founded the Spastics Society of India, Chennai presently known as Vidya Sagar. It is a well-known and reputed service delivery organisation with a range of services over the lifespan of the disabled. She has co-authored a book on Management of Cerebral Palsy: A Trans disciplinary Approach.

She took over as Chairperson of the National Trust in 2006 at the Ministry of Social Justice and empowerment, was engaged in making disability policies, legislation, and rights-based and people-centred programmes. She has pioneered a range of programmes for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the area of health insurance, livelihoods and assisted living. She also served as a member of the "New Law Committee" which was formed to harmonise national legislation with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Poonam was among the 10 people from the Asia-Pacific region to be honoured with the Asia-Pacific Disability Rights Champions Award in 2012 by the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

She also has received a multitude of awards for her outstanding achievement and contribution to the field of disability, research and advisory services.

In an exclusive interview, Poonam Natarajan shares with Marie Banu her journey in the disability sector.

About your childhood, education?

I was born in Amritsar, Punjab. In fact, I grew up all over the country, because my father was in the army and my family kept moving every two or three years. My childhood was fun and my parents were liberal. I completed my schooling in Delhi, went to Miranda House College, Delhi University for my graduation, and to JNU for MA and MPhil in Regional Development. It was JNU that really built my perspective and passion.

What was the inspiration to launch Vidya Sagar?

My son Ishoo was born with multiple special needs. In those days, it was a difficult task to unravel the condition. The doctors did not really de-mystify and advice on next steps. We shopped for treatment both in Delhi and Mumbai, and discovered Spastics Society of India there.

I fell in love with the Spastics Society school in Mumbai. It was a happy place and that was the kind of place I wanted

for my son. They had advertised for the Teacher Training course and I decided to get trained in special education.

My professor and my father tried to convince me to complete my Ph.D, instead of enrolling for the Teacher Training course. However, I had set my heart to it. I loved the course and decided that this would be my field.

Our experience in looking for answers for our son made me want to work with parents and families of special children to support them in understanding the condition of developmental disabilities. This is important because there is no medical cure, and training the child should begin as early as possible. Parents of special children can empower themselves by understanding about the condition of their child. It is a task that parents have to take on instead of running from one hospital to another.

The early years of Vidya Sagar?

Setting up a centre requires entrepreneurial skills and creative thinking. Dr. Mithu Alur, the Founder-Chairperson of The Spastics Society of India, offered to provide technical support and we became a branch of the Mumbai centre.

I started in the garage in our home. Setting up a dynamic team and raising funds for the centre became a big adventure. I visited all the Special Schools in Chennai and also met leading doctors. We started in quite an original way, with our friends Chandralekha and Sadanand Menon doing a poster workshop for our new centre. This activity brought together many people who became friends of the centre and supported our fundraising activities in the later years.

I had decided that we will not choose the students who come to our centre, but enrol on a first-come-first basis. Initially, the Parent Training project aimed to take about 20 families at a time; each visiting the centre once a week. However, the entire model changed because we were flooded with children with special needs and their families. I had to therefore re-think on how to deliver our services. Most people had said that parents will not be interested in training and would be only looking for services for their special children. But, this was not true. In fact, parents were keen to empower themselves with the knowledge.

Putting together a team was an encouraging experience, because some excellent therapists, teachers and social workers joined. This happened both by the reputation we were gaining and our good luck. The entire team was very happy to share their knowledge and transfer their skills to parents. That made



all the difference!

The first one to join was Asha Palanikumar, a speech therapist who had worked at the Mumbai centre; Abha Ranjan was an occupational therapist at the Child Trust Hospital, Sreekala Sitaraman a special educator, Ishrath a social worker, and Suguna, a therapy aide. Girija, and Prema were in charge of administration and fundraising. They were all part of the first dynamic team which evolved strategies to train parents who belonged to varied classes, professions and literacy levels.

About the awareness, therapy, and opportunities for the disabled available in our country? Has the perception and attitudes changed in our country for the better?

I think it has grown a lot! I have been working for the last 40 years in this sector and I think that things have changed. There is much more awareness. Governments are aware, schemes and support systems are coming up. The main problem in the disability sector is that each disability is separate and each one does its own advocacy. To bring them together and fight for our rights together is a huge task. Mr. Javed Abidi was one person who tried to bring all the disabled groups together so that we lobby together. I became the Chairperson to the National Trust as a nominee of the disability sector. If we can join hands, and not work in an isolation only for own disabilities, I think we can achieve much more.

All of us in the disability sector are working towards inclusion at all levels. It is however a slippery slope because we achieve a bit and then we seem to lose it. In 2000, with the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, we really pushed for inclusive education. In the first seven years, many exciting things were happening.

Somewhere along the way, we find that it has stagnated and special needs children are almost invisible in government schools. Perhaps this is due to changes in State Government policies and the amendment of the Right to Education ACT in 2010. Inclusion in employment and other areas of participation has been an uphill task. Now, with more attention to accessibility, the possibilities of inclusion seem brighter.

Your current projects at Vidya Sagar?

The National Trust Act was passed to solve the major issue of families having a child with intellectual or developmental disabilities, which is "What would happen to my child after I am gone?" The National Trust was therefore giving legal guardianship. In my years there, I somehow felt that we have not really solved the issue. I was very keen to work at the micro level on an action based research project which might point to some solutions of support systems in the community. I therefore came back to Vidya Sagar to work on this issue and have initiated a project named BLISS – Begin to live inter-dependently with support systems. This project has nine pillars.

At the moment, we are also involved in designing and setting up a demonstration centre on accessible technology on the campus of the office of the Commissioner of Disability. This is being called the "Museum of Possibilities". Much of its design and thinking has come from my experience with BLISS. It is divided into three parts – live, work and play. We show the possibilities of accessibilities for all disabilities in an accessible home, workplace, and at leisure places through this project.