

# Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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An exclusive interview with Mr. Sam Daniel



## FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the new normal!

The language of a 'new normal' is being used almost as a way to put an end to any uncertainty caused by the coronavirus. It contends that things will never be the same as they were before.

Far from describing the status quo, evoking the 'new normal' does not allow us to deal with the totality of our present reality. Therefore, the 'new normal' must not be the lens through which we examine our changed world, instead we should use this experience to forge a new paradigm.

What exactly is normal about this pandemic? Well, it is not normal for people to live in isolation, but if this is the 'new normal' then we are supposed to get used to it and have control of the situation. It is okay to admit that things are not normal. It is okay to allow ourselves to grieve or to be scared. It is okay not to be comfortable with what is going on. In fact, all of us should feel uncomfortable with our present condition because the 'new normal' describes a reality to which many do not have access. We need to accept that this morbid reality is now standard.

Allowing ourselves to cope means giving ourselves the time to truly process the change from within. Psychologists advise that it's important to identify the losses we are feeling and to honour the grief surrounding us through methods like meditation, yoga, communicating our struggle, and expressing ourselves through art.

The pandemic gives us a chance to re-imagine the world by tracing history and not forgetting it. We should revel in the discomfort of the current moment to generate a 'new paradigm', not a 'new normal'. Feeling unsettled, destabilized and alone can help us empathize with individuals who have faced systematic exclusions long-ignored by society even before the rise of COVID-19 — thus stimulating urgent action to improve their condition. For these communities, things have never been 'normal'.

While we live in times when humankind possesses the most advanced science and technology, a virus invisible to the naked eye has massively disrupted economies, healthcare, and education systems worldwide. This serves as a reminder that as we keep making progress in science and research, humanity will continue to face challenges in the future, and it is upon us to prioritise issues that are most relevant.

While there is little to gain from such a fatal cause, it is vital that we also use it to make the 'new normal' in favour of the environment and ensure that no one is left behind.

Marie Banu

## EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh  
Marie Banu

# Learned Optimism

*“We would accomplish many more things if we did not think of them as impossible.” - Vince Lombardi*

Optimism is life force energy. When we face uncertainty, the uplifting force is the capacity to invoke optimism. While many aspects are not in our control, optimism is—but are we exercising it?

### Where does optimism come from?

- Trustful anticipation that the future will be favorable
- Gratefulness
- Inclination to view situations as temporary

- Consider that there may be another way of looking at things

### Early steps to practice optimism

- Start connecting to people who are optimistic and grounded in life
- Cultivate gratitude by journaling for few minutes each day
- Accept what you can and cannot control in the situation

By employing a habit of optimism, we can take ownership to generate new options, explore solutions to “unsolvable” problems—and become healthier, have stronger relationships, do better at work, and be more resilient.

Explore your relationship with optimism. We almost always have more options than we perceive!



### Yours Energetically

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

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# THE VIRTUE OF PATIENCE



Substance abuse is more a social concern than a medical one as it completely disturbs the primary support system of an individual – the family. Addicts need help, sustained support to enable them come over the addiction physically and mentally. Every such story of struggle with self and the resultant victory is incredible and needs telling aloud to reassure that recovery is definitely possible and all one needs is determination to tread this path. Mr Louis Selva Kumar, Founder of V Can Foundation in Chennai believed so too.

Kumar's journey of de-addiction from alcohol took almost thirteen years. His recovery and relapse in between taught him two valuable lessons. "An addict misses out on beautiful family moments which has the potential to strengthen his personality. Addiction distances one from his own good self, affecting his personality and therefore self-confidence. I have been through both the situations. Trust me, it hurts when you recover and you would not want another man go through this. Which is why I decided to help others recover from alcohol addiction," says Kumar.

As a young Chennai boy, dropping out of school did not affect Kumar as his diploma in welding and other technical trainings gave him the liberty to take up multiple jobs. He worked with the telephone department and also tried a couple of small business ventures. All such endeavors came to a halt due to his alcohol addiction. His wife's death led

***"The experience and interactions at CSIM taught me the real value of patience. I realized it was the lack of patience that had led me to addiction."***

to relapse from the first episode of recovery. "The second episode is even more challenging because your body doesn't cooperate like it did before as your determination has taken a beating and you fail to see why you must give up," he admits. However, Kumar feels lucky to have succeeded the second time too, thanks to the peer support that

backed him and the timely professional assistance.

Kumar knew that such situations are not likely for all. Therefore, he decided to establish a de-addiction centre with all-round services. "No matter where you stand, life ahead is completely yours and in your hands. I was taught so too and wanted to take this message to others addicts," he adds.

V Can Foundation was initiated in 2012 as a full-fledged de-addiction centre with a capacity of 45 inmates. A strong team of volunteering doctors is the centre's biggest strength. The three-month treatment offered in the centre is tailor made to suit every individual's requirements and focuses on physical, mental and spiritual components equally. "For those whose health has deteriorated, we take more time. There is also another extreme where families want to get rid of those addicts with severe health issues because they are clueless about how they can help or adapt to their needs. In such cases, we cannot promise cure or recovery but can certainly provide support. Having seen cases of every kind and extreme, we are prepared to handle any emergency and do not give up even when patients and their families do," assures Kumar.

Kumar learnt about CSIM from his mentor and was convinced that their training was much needed for his growth. "The experience and interactions at CSIM taught me the real value of patience. I realized it was the lack of patience that had led me to

addiction. Social workers like me need to practice patience as a virtue. We need to work out all odds in order to see the change we envisage to unfold before our eyes. Else, it would be difficult for me accept challenging situations at work," he says.

Of over 1,000 cases from V Can centre, there were four deaths – in cases where families could not accept the reality. Only after the post mortem reports arrived, they accepted the truth. "Such a predicament is not because of lack of trust in us. Rather, it implies lack of awareness. Addicts may look good and healthy from outside, but nobody can see or understand what they are from inside," he explains.

It has been nine years now and Kumar feels that time waits for nobody. He quickly adds that patience always teaches the value of time. "These two values from CSIM have not only helped my work, they have enhanced my personality and changed my perspective towards life and work. I now see myself as a responsible social being and am trying to find ways to inculcate the same thought in my patients.

No matter what we dream of, everything starts from an individual. The attention and importance we give to this realization will decide the fate of our endeavours," says Kumar who was acknowledged for his work as the Best Social Worker by Globe International in 2008.

**Shanmuga Priya. T**



# CHANGING HUES: Awaken the Queen within

Reena walked with a heavy heart, her bag hanging on her shoulders. She sat on the porch with a sigh. Padma noticed Reena's silence as she was quiet for over five minutes. Reena, in her usual self, would otherwise begin her dramatic stories accompanied by giggles and animated sounds. Padma broke the silence, "Hmm... so, Reena, how has the day been? Are you coming straight from college?"

Reena mumbled, "Yes, aunty. I had a few classes since morning, and the rest was laboratory work. I didn't feel like going home, as my mind is filled with many questions, and I want to pour them out to you first. Else, if I go back home and open my repertoire, I will be letting a Pandora box open. My mom and sister will bring the roof down with their arguments. The last evening was spent in heated arguments."

Padma, smilingly asked, "What is it all about? Your sister's marriage proposal?"

Reena's eyes lit up instantly. She said, "Yes, aunty! You are a magician who knows my heart and reads my mind. Looks like after all the efforts my mother has put in, the proposal is not going to work out. The groom's family is pretty sure that my sister will have to quit her job and move to the place where the boy lives. But why should she? She is in a good job, and she loves what she is doing. She has done her research, and the place where the boy lives has minimal opportunities for her. The groom works in the marketing sector, and he can quickly relocate to my sister's place and find a new job. I can't understand what is more important – to find the right person to get married to or locate a person who is in an all-right town to marry." Reena rattled non-stop and looked relieved for sharing at the end of it.

Padma sat closer and placed her hand on Reena's shoulder and said, "Reena, it is much deeper than what you think. There are several underlying beliefs built over the years in the society."

Reena continued with the same steam, "Actually, it is the question of the girl having to go to in-laws place, which is the practice. My mother says that the groom family is expecting what is right while my sister thinks that they are stuck in their traditional mindset. I think this practice is highly patriarchal and is not relevant to today's reality at all."

Lost in thought, Padma added, "It's been a practice from times that the women are primarily homemakers and are much younger than men. The men had to earn means to live or have their lands or trade established. They would not think of changing this practice. Among kings, the women were even given as gifts with a wedding, and they maintained a harem. Most families had pride in getting their daughters married at the right age and sending them off to the in-laws' house with gifts. This pride was a part of the achievement for the parents when a daughter is born. We have moved a long way from those times, but the beliefs, practices, and habits don't change that quickly."

Let me share with you my friend Surabhi's experience. Surabhi and Srinivas

were equally accomplished. They met during a short-term course in college. They fell in love, their thoughts and perspectives matched, hence decided to get married. There was initial resistance from relatives since marriage was a family choice and not an individual choice. The marriage finally happened, with both sides agreeing. Surabhi and Srinivas went to live on their own after the wedding since they took up a two-year fellowship programs after their training. After the fellowship contract got over, Surabhi was pregnant, and they were thinking of coming back to live in the same city as her parents. Srinivas agreed it was a good idea since Surabhi was an only child, and her parents needed her support. Moreover, Srinivas had siblings who stayed with his parents and supported them.

When they shared this decision with Srinivas parents, there was a hue and cry! Srinivas's mother, aunts, and his elder sister would not agree to this, and they initially blamed Surabhi for influencing his mind. They were upset that Srinivas had taken a decision against the usual expectations. In reality, Surabhi had agreed to the proposition because she will be able to get employed easily. If they both began their entrepreneurial venture, she could help him better since it was her town, and she knew how to manage it all. Her parents wouldn't have to be alone, and they will be happy to be a part of Surabhi's growing family. It was the best win-win proposition Srinivas and Surabhi could think of.

When they arrived in Surabhi's town, initially, Surabhi's mom would tell her relatives, "Surabhi is living with me as she cannot take care of her baby all by herself. She is also pursuing her higher studies and will need my help for a while."

When Surabhi continued to live with her parents for over six months as Srinivas took up consulting with a lot of travel, most relatives and friends enquired,

"Why are you still with your parents?"

"Aren't your in-laws saying anything?"

"I knew when she married by her choice, this will happen."

"Maybe they have fought and got separated already."

"Oh, God! What will Surabhi do with a small child if the man has left her in her parents' house?"

They even blamed Surabhi and her higher education. "If girls have too much thinking and decision-making capacity, the society will go for a toss. Seeing her, the rest of the girls in the family will also demand for a husband who will live with her parents."

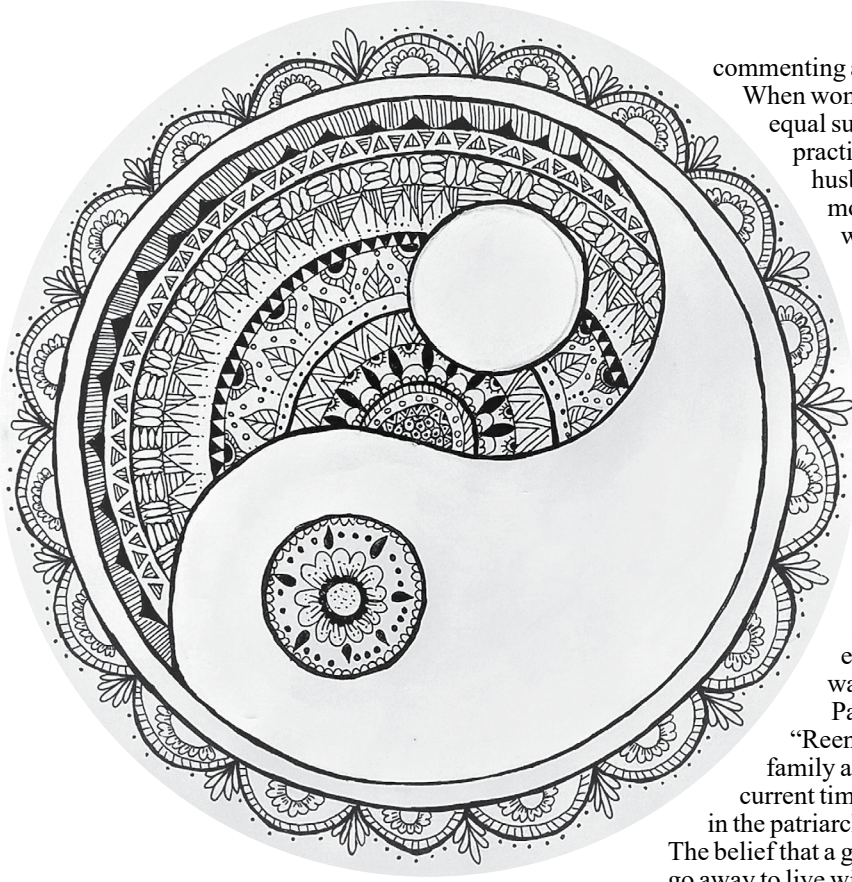
"Surabhi is with her mother because her mom can do her work without having to pay a salary. She gets all privileges free here. Maybe Srinivas is greedy to save up more money."

None could accept the fact that it was the conscious choice of Srinivas and a practical one too. Srinivas sister and Surabhi's aunt were the primary persons to object. They chided Surabhi that she took advantage of her parents and was making them baby sitters for her child. Surabhi had clarity in her mind, and Srinivas supported her decision. Else, it would have been more



*Most families had pride in getting their daughters married at the right age and sending them off to the in-laws' house with gifts.*





challenging for Surabhi. It took over a decade for her relatives and friends to appreciate her, and Srinivas's family gradually accepted his decision without much grouse. A son-in-law living with his wife's parents is not accepted in our society as it is a norm for a daughter-in-law to live with her husband's parents."

Reena sat down, contemplating and, after a few minutes of silence, commented, "Aunty, I can't understand why it should be an issue for the women in the family. I don't see men complaining or

commenting as much as the womenfolk does. When women are demanding equal rights, equal support, why is it seen as default practice for a girl to move into her husband's home after marriage? My mother only seems to be worried about what the neighbours will comment and the judgment they will pass on our family! Even how close the girl is to her own family after marriage seems to be a concern. I am not sure how much we have actually moved and changed from some of these practices. While the expectations from a woman has changed and we are acknowledging she can do much more in life than be a mere provider and homemaker, why aren't we also providing the context appropriate for it? I think these experiences makes me think I don't want to get married at all."

Padma smiled and patted Reena's back. "Reena, most youngsters prefer a nuclear family and their own privacy and space in the current times. Yet, the context of who has a say in the patriarchal family has to evolve much more. The belief that a girl born in the family will ultimately go away to live with her in-laws after marriage and a son will remain in their home forever has to change. The change has to begin with the women - right from the existing grandmothers and mothers. In the name of change and empowerment, some women do not give space for their husband's families to interact. Change is not about whose family has the right to interfere or takes priority over the other. It is to develop the ability to practically think through a win-win solution for all those concerned in the family. We need to raise above the rooted belief that a man's career, job, and position weighs more than that of a woman."



Reena nodded her head in agreement. Padma added, "We as mothers have an enormous responsibility how we raise our sons, Reena. We have thought and taught people how to raise girls differently and are seeing the results of a different generation of women evolving into the world. But, we have not focussed as much on our sons. We are expecting them to respond to new situations of dealing with empowered women on their own without working on their rooted beliefs. We also do not provide different environments to them at home, which upholds equality and sensitivity to context. Hence many issues still remain."

Reena got up from the porch and announced, "Whew! Aunty, a lot of work to be done, then. Instead of getting annoyed, let me go home and create spaces for more dialogue and clarity at home." She saw Manju going into the kitchen from the backyard and yelled, "Manju, one cup coffee, please!"

Padma smiled, listening to Manju murmur, "this girl every day makes me do more work. This is because of the lenience Madam gives her..."

**Dr. Kalpana Sampath**

*Illustration by Shreya S Gupta and Manya U Shetty (students of 10th grade)*

## Initiative



This is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody. There was an important job to be done, and Everybody was sure Somebody would do it. Somebody got angry about that, because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realised that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have.

### Explicit Learning

- A. We should learn to take initiative in life.
- B. 'Passing the buck' is an easy game to play.
- C. Doing the job is important, not waiting for others to do it.

### Introspective Learning

- A. What is the nature of 'Initiative'?
- B. Why do I pass the buck?
- C. How do I start taking initiative?



# SHOULDER TO SHOULDER



*"We are targeting to take complete educational responsibility of nearly one million children across the globe by the end of 2030."*

It is common knowledge by now that several children in India are at a natural disadvantage owing to the circumstances of their birth. After all, lesser fortunate families are part of a social structure fraught with injustice and continued prejudice. Founded in 2001, as an initiative by President Bill Clinton following a suggestion from Prime Minister Vajpayee, AIF has impacted 6.7 million of India's poor through "high-impact interventions in health, education and livelihoods."

"The American India Foundation's (AIF) education programs ensure that children in neglected regions and under-resourced schools have access to high-quality educational opportunities and gain critical life skills alongside 21st century knowledge to prepare them for success in today's globalised world," says Mathew Joseph, India Country Director at AIF.

The last 15 years have seen the

organisation's 'Learning and Migration Program' (LAMP) work with children from migrating communities. The organisation says that 139 million people migrate from villages every year in search of labor, which in turn uproots families for months and places them in hazardous work sites like salt pans, brick kilns, and sugar plantations. "Many migrant children, due to lack of parental education never enter school at all," says Mathew, "For those who do, migration often results in drop-outs."

AIF's LAMP module works with such children providing access to education, also strengthening community ownership of education through school governance. "A recent external evaluation found that there was 2.6 times improvement in science scores and 2.8 times improvement in math scores of children studying under the LAMP program. Over half a million

children in 2,279 villages across 13 states of India have benefitted from LAMP," says Mathew.

The organisation has used its Digital Equaliser (DE) program to leverage technology and erase the existing digital divide. "This makes schools dynamic places to teach and learn through collaborative, project-based learning," says Mathew, "An independent study found 66% increase in students classroom engagement, along with 96% teachers integrating ICT in their lesson plans." The organisation reports over four million children equipped with STEM learning experiences in 15,000 schools nationwide.

With 320 million school children without access to the physical school premises thanks to COVID-19, an entire generation has education on an indefinite pause. The effect has been more devastating for vulnerable children. "In



Odisha, LAMP is operating a bicycle mobile library, which means that children in remote villages can continue to access books through the pandemic," says Mathew, "Across Uttarakhand, DE is using technology to support teachers, parents, and students in government schools."

AIF works with the public and private sector to create inclusive and sustainable livelihoods with a long-term goal of equalising the informal and formal sectors to provide opportunities for everyone. AIF's Market Aligned Skills Training (MAST) program provides underprivileged youth with skills training and access to formal employment opportunities. Its Ability Based Livelihoods Empowerment (ABLE) program prepares differently abled people for the job market.

"Candidates in AIF's livelihoods programs are given both technical and soft skills training as well as life skills to navigate everyday challenges," says Mathew, "Through MAST and ABLE, over 140,000 marginalised youth and women have received skills training to be economically productive." As of today, AIF is working to rebuild lives post-COVID, and ensure the wellbeing of internal-migrant communities in India. "We're doing this through a multi-stakeholder-coordinated mechanism for their inclusion and integration," says Mathew.

While maternal mortality rates in India are high, the mortality rate for children born to these mothers is also a worrisome statistic. "For women in remote, isolated villages, knowing and accessing healthcare can be a matter of survival," says Mathew, "Designed to reduce maternal and child mortality in rural, impoverished areas, AIF's Maternal and Newborn Survival Initiative (MANSI) utilises a public-private partnership model to provide preventive, promotive and curative care for both mothers and newborns." MANSI has served 172,000 pregnant women and 134,000 newborns across 3,389 villages.

*"For women in remote, isolated villages, knowing and accessing healthcare can be a matter of survival."*

MANSI's frontline community health workers have been spreading awareness on COVID-19 including mask-wearing, hand hygiene and mask-wearing. "The influx of migrant workers returning home from different parts of the country has also added to the quantum of work handled by ASHAs," says Mathew.

AIF's radius of impact lies in education, health, and livelihoods — the three basic needs of the poor. "As a secular and apolitical platform, our strategy is to demonstrate proof of concept and work with local governments, authorities and the private sector to scale up," says Mathew

AIF has sent 500 candidates on a 10-month-long service-oriented fellowship to work with the most disadvantaged sections of society. This has built a constituency that has become a collection of ambassadors of a strong partnership between the US and India. With offices in New York and California, twelve chapters across the US, and India operations headquartered in Delhi NCR, AIF's impact is felt in 26 Indian states. The organisation is now looking to double its impact in the next five years, reaching more than 10 million Indian lives.

"We will continue to focus on education, health and livelihoods in its mission to improve the lives of India's underprivileged, with a focus on women, children, and youth," says Mathew, "However, we also recognise that COVID-19 has resulted in large-scale livelihood destruction and reverse migration leading to hunger, mass malnutrition, indebtedness, loss of assets, higher morbidity and mortality, prolonged unemployment and poor-quality livelihoods."

The focus now is to rebuild lives of migrant workers and vulnerable communities based a few objectives:

- ensure immediate and urgent needs of migrant communities are served
- ensure that migrant workers, including those who had stayed back in cities and those returning, receive rehabilitation
- make reliable data and analysis available for better evidence-based planning for migrant communities
- maximise impact of government programs to address short, medium and long-term needs of migrant communities through technical assistance to state governments

It is common knowledge that COVID-19 is unlikely to turn into a one-time battle to win. "As we can see in other countries, there would be one or more cycles of infections going up and down. So, keeping people's attention to their safety and needs is a long-term challenge," says Mathew, "Migrants who have moved back to villages, are now returning to cities without social security. If another lockdown occurs, it will affect them the same manner. Building their resilience to future shocks is very important and is challenging considering the large numbers of migrants."

AIF is aware that funding for COVID-19 is likely to reduce, considering that most donors have already spent a bulk of their funds on emergency relief. "Rebuilding lives will be a long-term initiative and needs sustained financial support for at least two to three years," says Mathew.



# SILVERGOOD - BRINGING ONLINE CHEER TO THE ELDERLY

It's a sunny Tuesday morning. Diana Sim is ready for action, with her hands on her hips and her feet apart, watching a live dance exercise video on her computer.

"My favourite is exercise. I like dancing...only K-Pop," reveals Diana with a smile, as she follows the steps being shown by a volunteer over Facebook live.

Diana is a 67-year-old retired school administrative executive. Explaining why she's eager to keep active, she shares, "I am in the early stages of Parkinson's disease and thus I have some difficulties moving around. For Parkinson's patients, we need to exercise."

## PAUSE: LIFE ON HOLD DURING COVID-19

When COVID-19 struck, many seniors in Singapore like Diana, found themselves shut off from the friends and routines they relied on to keep physically and mentally sharp.

Being more vulnerable to the virus, all seniors have been advised against leaving their homes during local lock down measures, as part of Singapore's "circuit breaker" measures to slow the spread.

"I keep in contact with my A-level classmates over WhatsApp on a daily basis. We would meet every Friday for dinner to catch up about each other's lives and spend time together. We would have so much fun. Since the circuit breaker measures started, I can no longer go out," shares Diana.

While these measures are in place to protect them, it has inevitably impacted the quality of their lives, at a stage where exercise, interaction, community, and routine are important in keeping them happy as well as physically and mentally engaged.

## PLAY: VOLUNTEERS COME TOGETHER TO CREATE GOOD

Even before the circuit breaker measures started, an initiative was underway to address the concerns the elderly were facing - an online



community project called SilverGood.

"The initial idea really was just a very simple idea: have some people come online and do something interesting on Facebook to bring some cheer to seniors," shares founder Moses Sia, a 53-year-old education-artist, who refers to himself as "part of the greying population".

Launched as a public Facebook group in late March, SilverGood's aim was to create live enrichment activities, so that the elderly could participate in them, while creating a space for conversations and communal support.

All the activities are led by volunteers who host programmes such as exercise, music, singing, as well as arts and crafts, amongst others. Moses says, "Music, craft, exercise, cooking, and of course stories as well... these are just some forms of creative arts which I think is very helpful and important as we go through a period of distress, of adjustment."

Alvin Wah, a volunteer who conducts exercise sessions, says, "We work with seniors who are frail, seniors who are socially isolated and seniors who have dementia. We do mainly exercise classes but I think the broad concept of what we believe in is... empowering seniors, empowering their ageing journey."

After her class, Diana says, "The videos are great, so everyone can learn something new from there. I would recommend to my sister the exercise and cooking videos because I think she likes those things. I would also recommend it to my classmates. Even though I've left school more than 50 years ago, I am still in contact with them."

These sessions aren't just watched by the seniors. Some, like Francis Yeo, have even hosted their own sessions.

"I am happy that people want to hear me play harmonica. Although I know I am not that good at it, you know. I spotted a lot of mistakes," beams Francis, an 84-year-old retired teacher.

"He was happy, had a good laugh watching himself," adds his daughter Anne.

"Very very happy. You just tell them that I cannot play any better," jokes Francis.

Moses points out, "Many of them are doing Facebook Live for the first time, but they have such wonderful things to share and I feel that that's really the spirit."

"It's not really about how professional or good, or things like that. It's really the sincerity, the authenticity, the spontaneity to want to share! That has been marvellous."

## FAST FORWARD: TO AN INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE FUTURE

Within a month and a half since its inception in late March 2020, SilverGood has grown to over 1,000 members, with more volunteers signing up to host sessions.

This initiative for the elderly has even led to support for other groups. "Some friends of mine who are working in the preschool sector, they saw SilverGood and they liked it and now they are doing it for preschoolers. That is quite fun," beams Moses.

He also notes that on the internet, there are no borders to spreading cheer. "When I first started it, of course my target audience was really the seniors in Singapore. Now that it is on Facebook, actually it could be anyone in the world. They could either start their own platform or they could just be part of this platform and bring cheer to anybody."

As for future plans, Moses shares, "As long as there is a need and there's a response from the community...we are behind it. And I hope that continues to make a difference. I feel whatever I am doing is meaningful, makes a difference and is...close to my heart."

Diana, for her part, is all set for the next session. "I am grateful to the people [in the SilverGood videos] teaching us folks who can only stay home, and have nothing to do," she says, "My favourites are the exercise videos. The ones by Alvin are not bad, because he speaks in both English and Mandarin and it is also suitable for our age. I really quite like his videos."

This story was created using interviews conducted through online phone and video calls, as well as footage and photos taken by people involved in the project.

*A story by Our Better World  
(the digital storytelling initiative of the  
Singapore International Foundation  
([www.ourbetterworld.org](http://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](http://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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# ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!

Women are better off today, but still far from being equal to men. Some women have a lot of access to rights, and opportunities to education, work options, healthcare facilities. But, this is not consistent. Even today, millions of women worldwide are subjected to violence and mental abuse. With constant debate and awareness, and a widely spoken topic everywhere, violence against women is now well recognised as a public health problem and human rights violation.

To ensure that adolescent girls living in extreme circumstances of adversity and violence have a safe space to grow and learn, Protsahan, an organisation based out of Delhi, took genesis in 2010 with a mission to save children from the point of extreme abuse. The organisation works with children, specifically with girls from underserved communities at high risk of abuse of any kind or direct survivors. Their aim is to give these children a beautiful childhood and equip them with education, life skills, and entrepreneurial skills thereby empowering them to be agents of change.

Sonal Kapoor, Founder of Protsahan came up with this idea after her personal encounter with a woman who had six daughters and was pregnant with her seventh child. On being asked about her circumstances, the woman narrated that she was ready to strangle her new born if it was a girl again, and spoke of sending her 8-year-old daughter to a brothel to fend for the family. Sonal was shocked hearing this and within an hour, she came up with the idea of starting a unique creative school. In three weeks' time, she conducted a feasibility study in the area, and started Protsahan a one-room creative arts and design school in one of the darkest slums in New Delhi.

Sonal quit her job and ventured into an altogether different world of helping out traumatised children using the creativity that she previously used in the advertising and communications industry for something more profoundly important.

In the earlier days of the organisation, Sonal went door-to-door in the urban slums of West Delhi, the same place where she had met the mother of six children, and asked parents to send their daughters to Protsahan to study.

From a one-room center reaching out to 19 girls in the slums, Protsahan has now reached out to over 400 girl children through two centers (Learning Center and Digital Resource Center) in the slums of West Delhi. The organisation has produced many information and education resources over the decade that are available to organizations and educators across the country to help them address the issues of child protection and child abuse in classrooms, at home, and ensure that no child has to undergo the trauma of abuse



and feel isolated at any point in time.

Protsahan functions in a unique way of designing, implementing, and advocating the interventions with the goal of not just talking about abuse but to have a far more significant impact than traditional methods of action and advocacy. So, every step they take, every campaign they run, and every child they reach out to is with the intention of leaving a lasting impact. They follow the HEART Principle (Healing, Education, Art, Recovery, & Technology) and use this model as a tool to help bring children out of their shells, and lead them into a healthy learning environment. Together, these five pillars ignite the spark of interest in young children rescued from vulnerable and abusive circumstances. By using innovative and hands-on approaches to teaching them social and educational

skills, the children start learning and adapting these skills sub-consciously, while having fun.

Protsahan adopts a ten-month-long bridge course and once a child completes the basic training, he/she is enrolled in a government school in 4th or 5th grade directly. While attending the Government school the child can choose to continue to attend Protsahan classes and learn Madhubani and Warli art, Bharatnatyam, film making, DSLR Photography, theatre arts, computers, etc.

Since inception, Protsahan has rescued and successfully mainstreamed 980 girls into formal schools by focussing holistically on their education, healthcare and justice aspect. Over the years, they have brought in awareness on social issues like child marriage, girls' access to toilets and safe

***Protsahan adopts a ten-month-long bridge course and once a child completes the basic training, he/she is enrolled in a government school in 4th or 5th grade directly.***

menstrual hygiene management practices, child sexual abuse, UNHRC and child rights, and gender violence. Protsahan's National Child Protection Programme partnered with different NGOs and worked on spreading awareness on child abuse, child marriage, child trafficking, child sexual abuse, mental abuse, etc. So far, they have reached out to 68,000 plus children by adopting a hub and spoke model.

Adding to the future plans of the organisation, Sonal says: "The next phase of plans involves partnerships with CSOs, government bodies, CSRs to make the cause of fighting Child Abuse the focal point. We are already reaching out to Parliamentarians, National Human Rights Commission, multilateral organisations, UN and SAARC bodies and receiving great reciprocation and interest to build a strong movement for children in our country. By 2030, we plan to have at least 100 partner organizations, 5,000 child rights ambassadors and over one crore children impacted directly."

In the present day pandemic, Protsahan was able to support families of more than 6000 girls in 39 different slum communities in West Delhi to tide over the hardships faced by daily wage workers brought on by the precautionary lockdown measures.

*Aatika Kouser*



# COVID-19 AFFECT ON INDIAN AGRICULTURE

Indian is home to 12 crore small and marginal farmers and agriculture provides employment opportunities to more than half of the country's population. COVID-19 have magnified already existing challenges of Indian Agriculture ecosystem. We all knew these issues but never ever all stakeholders including government were pushed to their limits to find innovative solutions. Farmers have faced various challenges in past including low rainfall, price volatility, inflation, weak infrastructure, debts and so on. This pandemic and subsequent lockdown affected all segments of population, from labourer to industry owner, from poor to rich, without leaving out anyone.

Since Independence government took various steps to improve agriculture productivity, financial access to farmers, agri-infrastructure, mechanization and much more; all this to improve farmers' income and living standard of rural households that were dependent on agriculture. It has been long understood that rural development is an important step towards achieving inclusive growth. In all these years, efforts were not translating to real growth in rural economy. In fact, Indian agriculture's contribution to GDP declined with increase in rural poverty and migratory workers.

We all know that 'Necessity leads to Invention' and 'Fittest Survives'. COVID-19, subsequent lockdowns, and global tensions in trade and border proved to be a catalyst for Indian agriculture and industry in particular. Indian government took steps which were pending since ages, and it may take a decade to perceive desired outcomes. But we have started working in right direction. On one hand rural sector is one of the neglected sectors when compared to other large GDP contributors and on the other hand global tensions left us to concentrate more on local consumption and production, leaving no other option to look upon producers, local enterprises and rural economy.

Government took proactive and calculated decisions to handle an issue which it never faced before and successfully minimised its losses. It took several steps to make supplies of essential commodities uninterrupted,

which helped balancing the demand supply matrix between urban and rural markets. Leaving initial incidents and supply chain ruptures, we were able to get milk, vegetables, eggs, meat, fruits, etc. at our door steps. Urban centres have seen crash in price of commodity, while metropolitan and satellite cities have seen price surge in essential commodities; the main reason being length of supply chain. Long supply chains faced more issues as compared to short supply chains, farmers and commodity producers took an intelligent decision and chose short supply chains to sell their produce, which minimised their losses and managed their cash flows, thereby fuelling the local rural economy.

COVID-19 struck India at the time of harvest and just before sowing of next crop. Some of the steps taken by government during this pandemic (in particular) to tackle disrupted markets and agri-ecosystem are:

## 1. The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion & Facilitation) Ordinance, 2020.

This ordinance will allow farmers to sell their produce to any trader throughout the country, helping them get best price for their produce. It is also useful for small and medium enterprises to purchase commodities directly from the producers. The step will curb profits made by middlemen and other unions in local Mandis, securing incremental income for the producer.

## 2. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance, 2020

This allows farmers to get into futures agreement with purchasers and minimise losses related to any unavoidable sudden shock due to climate, accident, pest attack etc. Futures are financial instruments which help producers/sellers to book their expected future market price, and purchasers to book commodity price in isolation with external market forces in real time. Futures are useful for farmers to minimize their losses. This Act protects farmers' interest to engage in trade with any agri-business firms, processors, wholesalers, exporters or large retailers for sales of their produce.

## 3. Essential Commodities Act (ECA), 1955 Amendment Ordinance

This amendment removed stock limits for farmers and traders on cereals, pulses, oilseeds, onions and potatoes to encourage infrastructure related investments in agriculture. The ordinance made agricultural markets more responsive to forces of demand and supply and in future will encourage investment in agri-infra specially storage for improved inventory management of agricultural produce.

COVID-19 surprised us all and provided stakeholders a Social Laboratory to test, learn and implement innovative ideas. Pandemic coincided with harvest of Rabi (winter) crop and subsequent sowing of Kharif crop. In particular, lockdown brought challenges to Indian agriculture system; these are mainly related to shortage of labour, equipments, supply chains and fragmented demand. We expected worst than ever situation, mainly due to pandemic situation, subsequent lockdowns, global tensions, trust deficit and lack of experience in handling similar issues in past. Initially, due to government announcements and improper market information households decided to secure themselves from future shocks and started storing grains. Afterwards, bumper production of cereals and oilseeds faced issues related to high-priced labour and delayed arrival in markets.

Pandemic left no choice for large enterprises (based on agriculture) than to innovate or optimally utilize available resources and infrastructure. For instance, ITC used 'E-Choupal' platform to procure agri-commodities, Government launched 'Kisan Rath' app to support farmers and transporters in locating each other, some agri start-ups delivered fresh vegetables and fruits, future group optimally utilized its already existing supply chain during this tough times, Haryana State's horticulture department brought together nearly 81 FPCs to aggregate member farmers' vegetables and fruits and sell them to end consumers.

We all know that COVID-19 crisis is temporary and problems in Indian agriculture ecosystem are not new, but this pandemic has reinstated the need of inclusive policy on rural development with agriculture and rural population at its core. In the long term, this pandemic will definitely be seen as a turning point for positive changes in the Indian agriculture space, including strong supply chains and establishment of agri-enterprises in rural and semi-urban areas.

Post COVID scenario calls for some more steps to reboot the sector, ensure its stability and growth in coming time. They are:

- Improve procurement of produce
- Access to real-time market price
- Use of IT for better supply chains
- Manage labour demand and supply
- Create safety nets for semi-skilled and skilled migrant workers
- Access to capital and credit for farmers and agriculture related SMEs
- Development of diversified local food systems
- Prepare for future shocks related to climate change

We have to admit that COVID-19 gave us an opportunity to reset things in right directions. Stakeholders should innovate and test new ideas and innovative solutions in this real-life social lab. Business environment need to see this time of redesigning and restructuring. Ideas may fail, but we should learn from these failures, something or the other will work and that will help sector to grow many folds.

**Dr. Agyeya Tripathi**  
Mentor of Change, AIM, Niti Aayog



Image Courtesy: @awaz.media



# FOR THE BETTERMENT OF THE SOCIETY



The profession of social work is an ever-evolving and dynamic process in which an individual/organisation must keep up with changing social values and cultures. It requires personal attention and high levels of commitment to those who want to bring about a notable difference in the lives of individuals and society as a whole.

One such individual is Dr. I. Veeraraja from Madurai, who single-handedly started D'Seva Foundation in 2018. His aim was to help those in need in all possible ways - by offering services, assisting the elderly and those in difficulty, taking up government projects that include social work and hosting awareness programmes.

The core target of the organisation was to ameliorate the life of differently-abled children, senior citizens, orphans and folk artists. The 'D' in D'Seva stands for different kinds of people and differently-abled, while seva means service. Veeraraja says, "I grew up in a simple household and lived a humble childhood. My father worked for 6 months in a year. He saved money to pay my one-year school fees, so I know how difficult it is for parents who cannot afford to meet their child's education expenses. My aim is to help children and provide them with good education."

Since inception, D'Seva, has conducted several awareness programmes and district rallies on importance of education with

differently-abled children and special educators. They also coordinated with the District Differently-abled Welfare offices and conducted events at district levels where free artificial limbs and scooters were donated.

Due to lack of education, many were not aware of the government schemes that favoured special children. Therefore, public awareness programs on Government schemes were conducted so that people in need can ask for help. "We have been trying our best to educate the caretakers of special children about nutrition, immunisation programmes, disaster management and safety, right to education and disability Act," says Veeraraja. D'Seva also focuses on uplifting the lives of folk dancers and theatre artists by identifying those in financial difficulty and supporting them with food and basic essentials. The aim is to build a life with theatre and dance for the folk artists.

They also offer training programs, and 4,000 folk dancers have benefited till date. "With training, these folk artists can perform in events and weddings and becomes a source of income for them. My father worked as a folk dancer earlier and I know the hard work that is required for a good performance. It seems easy but with the heavy costume and hours of rigorous training, the art of dancing is not very appreciated. That is why we wanted to help folk artists in every possible way," he says.

*Due to lack of education, many were not aware of the government schemes that favoured special children*

Veeraraja sought support from an NRI and coordinated distribution of essential food supplies to folk artists. In the last 2 years he has reached out to 543 artists.

D'Seva also started free tuition centres for children and employed 3 tutors. This was because they identified children of construction workers, masons and auto drivers who couldn't afford to pay fees in regular tuition centres. In spite of objections from other tuition centres, Veeraraja continued with his efforts and focused on giving quality education. His efforts proved to be fruitful with most students securing above 80% in their examinations. This also resulted in students moving from paid tuition centres to D'Seva's tuition centre.

For children who have been sent back

home due to non-payment of school fees, Veeraraja has taken special efforts in explaining the situation to the school authorities and convinced them to re-enrol them.

Veeraraja, having done his masters in Social work, has addressed students of several colleges on importance of education, Life skills and also given motivational talks as well. He met two other Social workers, Soundarya and Roshini who worked at the HIV Centre who encouraged him to start an NGO. That's how D'Seva came into being. He was also awarded a Doctorate in a University in Chennai, and recognised as International Star Icon, Best Social Worker, and received an award 'Best Event Coordinator' in 'Naan Veezhven Endru Ninathayo.'

"We wish to help as many people as we can in all possible ways. For example, a person could not identify a blood donor due to Covid as people were afraid to come to the hospital and donate. I spread the word around and managed to find a donor. Social work could be as simple as that," says Veeraraja.

"Due to financial crisis situation in the present time, we are unable to offer much help. But, organisations can still take up simple programs and help the needy. Without any guidance, I have come this far and want to continue doing the same," he signs off.

*Aatika Kouser*



# “There should be no colouring of news. You report as it is and let the people be the Judge.”

## Sam Daniel shares with Marie Banu his views on responsible journalism.

Sam Daniel, an award winning senior television journalist and news anchor is a household name in India and the diaspora, for credible, unbiased and ethical television news reporting. A seasoned Television Journalist with proven leadership and twenty years of reporting experience across seven countries with the premier NDTV 24 X 7 (New Delhi Television Ltd), he presently heads the bureau in Chennai. He also reports widely on NDTV's digital and new media platform.

Sam Daniel was the first to report from ground zero when the Tsunami struck India's Nagapattinam and has also reported from the US and European countries. He has interviewed a range of national and international leaders, sports champions, celebrities and newsmakers; and has addressed a Ted X meet and mentored around 50 budding journalists.

A British Chevening Scholar, International Visitor Leadership Programme Alumnus, The Media Project Fellow, and Rotary International's Group Study Exchange Scholar, he has also been chosen for several international fellowships in the US, UK, Germany, Belgium, Holland and Nepal. He is the recipient of the Excellence Leadership Award - Electronic Media in 2015 and recently won the "Global Tamils Media Icon Award".

An Alumnus of the premier Madras Christian College and University of Westminster he has a five year experience in teaching English and Journalism in colleges as well.

*In an exclusive interview, Sam Daniel shares with Marie Banu his views on responsible journalism.*

### How do you define responsible journalism?

It is very subjective as everyone may have their own definition in terms of what responsible journalism would mean to them. But I go by what is very conservative or what we call as old school of Journalism. The major task is to be a watch dog, to point out the mistakes, to alert government and expose things that are going wrong- not just huge scams or corruption cases, but also ordinary things that affect the common person. For instance, reporting on issues faced by people while getting a license or registering at the employment exchange. Such reports may not bring about immediate change though, but it would keep the issues on the spot light and bring about changes in the long run.

The role of a journalist varies or depends on the kind of media house you work for – whether it is a local neighborhood newspaper or a regional channel or national or international media. The news for a regional channel may not be news for a national channel every day. Likewise, what the national media looks at may not be interesting for regional media. There is a change in perspectives.

A journo should ask himself: “What is my contribution through my news report to my community, to my state, and to my country? “Am I serving as a watch dog? Is my work, in any way, relevant to the community who is watching this or reading this? Am I working towards a better tomorrow?” If he or she is able to answer these questions positively, then I think largely it could be termed as responsible.

I always feel that a journalist need not always be critical or reporting only on bad news. By this, you are projecting a lopsided view of the society and people may think that there is nothing good happening in our country, which is also not correct. A responsible journalist should

balance his report in such a way that he or she is able to also provide insights into the good things that are happening in the community. It can be about a social service or an achievement by an unsung hero or work done by a group of volunteers, etc. These are called inspiring stories and would actually motivate a lot of people. There is no point complaining that things are bad. Your profile could change when you cover much of ‘hard’ stories’ or ‘investigative stories’, as we call and you may become a popular reporter as a journalist. But you may not be accurately reflecting on the ground realities if you do not talk about the good things as well. It is important that you strike a balance between these two. While it is important to bring the power to account, ask tough questions and expose the wrong things; we need to also show that there are good things happening around us and there is hope in the community.

### What is the code of conduct that every journalist and media house should adopt?

Of course, a journalist ought to have a code of conduct. I always look at it at two different ways - personal level and profession level. At the professional level, a journalist ought to be seen as a balanced, neutral and objective person in all scenarios. One may belong to a particular religion or a community but that should never be a reason to exaggerate or downplay an issue. He or she should be a thorough professional and personal likes or dislikes should not have any space in one's reports. This is very important.

In this era of social media, verification of news is crucial because everybody has access to information. Gone are the days when people relied on newspapers or television alone for news. Everybody gets news on their social media. Of this huge inflow of information, what is accurate? Large number of people are also consciously peddling with fake news, and pushing inaccurate information to suit their agenda. It has become an industry. It could be a political party which would spread a particular narrative to make people think differently about them and build an opinion or it could be a private company which is doing something bad but trying to project itself in good light.

A journalist is required to report accurate and verified information, and that is very important. There is a lot of competition in the media. When A channel flashes a news, other reporters and other channels are under pressure to immediately report on that. Chances are that if you don't do your due diligence and toe the line, you may go terribly wrong. In our channel,

every report ought to be verified by two credible sources, otherwise the news will not go on air. This way we ruling out 90% probability of things getting reported wrongly. The second aspect is about balancing. For example, the opposition party levies a serious allegation against the Chief Minister or against the ruling government. As a responsible journalist, you can argue to flash this news first and take response from the other party later. But it would be perfect to quickly check with the other side on what they have

to say and then give a complete report. Otherwise it may appear as you favouring one particular side of the story and not bothering to get verified or at least getting response from the other side.

Thirdly, your accuracy should not fall victim of flashing the news first. It's okay to flash the news five minutes later after you have done the due diligence correctly. This makes you build reputation and credibility for yourself as well as for the media house you work for. Speed should not be at the cost of accuracy. Lastly, there should be no colouring of news; you report as it is; and let the people be the Judge as they are quite intelligent. Also, give a variety of views and not one perspective alone because we are in a way contributing to the process of opinion building in the country. People pay money to view a news channel or read a newspaper as they want to get different perspectives about a particular issues and take a well-informed decision or build a well-informed opinion. So, it is just not enough to talk about the government perspective. You should also mention about what the opposition party, activists, and experts have to say.

This is the era of the social media and the journalist has his personal space here. It is very important that a journalist is seen to be neutral, objective and very balanced, else people could build a wrong opinion and it could affect the way they read your report and your integrity.

### Please share your experience at the Chevening South Asia program?

This scholarship is highly rated among journalists and the training was at University of Westminster in London. 12 of us got selected – from India, Pakistan and few other South Asian countries were selected in 2012. The focus was on good governance, accountability and transparency. I was lucky to work with two channels as part of my placement - Channel 4 and ITV.

In terms of technology, Indian channels like NDTV are much far ahead. What I found useful was the levels of accountability, transparency and good governance the country was looking at. This helped me as a journalist to raise the bar in my reportage and gain new perspectives and ask more tough questions.

### Your advice for young journos?

The space for journos in mainstream media is reducing now, for two reasons. One is the technology taking over with time. Secondly, the impact of economic slowdown and now the pandemic.

Young journalists are required to be good in multi-tasking; report on camera, write for the web, shoot the video, if required, and edit as well. New media is the future and may be in 5 to 10 years' time we may not have these many news channels. People would watch much of the news online either on their phone or computers. You ought to be talented for the format required for the new media.

You should be apt at 360-degree reporting. The same TV news should be rewritten for the web, the same story ought to be told in a few words on twitter and in a paragraph in Facebook.

The technology has made it simple and there are many specialized journalism schools like the Asian School of Journalism in Chennai, Symbiosis in Pune and Manipal Academy in Karnataka. Most of these media houses prefer from these institutions as they are close to the industry's norms. It is good to have a good portfolio developed during the graduation period. Writing good stories for local newspapers and college magazines or on social media would show people your work and would help at the time of your job interview. Create opportunity to showcase your talents.

We find the youngsters not reading much. Unless you read, you would not have a wide perspective. You should make sure that you read at least two newspapers thoroughly so that unconsciously all these news come handy when you ask questions. Even when you travel, use the time to read a newspaper or listen to the radio. You should be well informed, and there is no compromise on this.

