

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

The immense love and affection one has for his or her country is known as patriotism. Patriotism is a virtue! It is a beautiful feeling that pushes the citizens to work for their country devotedly and selflessly.

True patriots are the backbone of the country. They are known for their unconditional love for their country and feel proud to be its citizens. They have a sense of alliance with other citizens, which can be on the basis of the same values or many other aspects – cultural, political or historical, or related to one's own homeland.

In the past, particularly during the British rule over India, many people served our country and even laid their lives for it. True patriotic leaders like Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, Bhagat Singh and many other such eminent personalities are the reason for our country to gain independence. Still, there are many such people who continue to serve their country with as much devotion and are ready to lay down their lives for protecting their homeland from intruders and invaders.

Patriotism is required for the growth of a nation. The patriotism of a person is tested during difficult times like the sudden outbreak of a pandemic, a war, during national disasters or national emergencies.

Since 2020, we have been facing several challenges due to Covid-19. Many Indians lost their lives and jobs, schools were closed. No transportation facilities were provided to migrant workers and farmers, and hospitals were rushed with patients who were infected by the coronavirus. This was the time true patriotism was shown by many people which included front line workers and many philanthropists. From providing meals to the underprivileged and offering transport facilities for standard laborers to help them get back to their hometown, many patriots did their best to mitigate the issue.

Peace and harmony can be maintained through patriotism. The future of the country depends on our youth. When citizens have the spirit of brotherhood, they will support one another and make the country more harmonious. We, as parents, mentors, or teachers, must make an effort to instil the spirit of patriotism in the coming generations.

Jai Hind!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

INTEGRATION, CENTEREDNESS AND ONENESS

At times, we all experience moments of perfect harmony, moments when everything around us and inside us, align so well to create joy, a joy not triggered by external reasons, a joy so deep and intense, that we cannot even explain it.

Similarly, some tunes seem to directly reach our heart; tunes of unexplainable melody, touching any heart. At other times, we walk into nature and find the beauty of God's creation in all its glory. Everything feels centered, they all seem to be in their due place in the larger scheme of the universe, and there is a calming comfort in their presence. All this makes us wonder – what makes these moments, tunes, settings, so centered?

When all the elements of a composition, be it a tune, delicacy, or person, are balanced and integrated, then it seems so natural and joyful. Every human being has multiple energy dimensions to themselves – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Much like the earth that rotates on its own axis as well revolves around the sun, each energy dimension needs to be centered in itself and seamlessly integrated with all the other energy dimensions. When all four energy dimensions are integrated, then the person is centered within.

A centered person enjoys immense completeness with oneself and everything around.

Such a person stops seeking things outside one self. Such people live in alignment with what matters to them and their true self and purpose. This true self and purpose then becomes the pivot on which everything else in their life rests and rotates - with ease and grace. And what is miraculous is that when one is centered, actions and people that no longer serve them, belief systems and habits that no longer aid in the fulfilment of their purpose – all exit their life.

A centered person radiates calm, expansiveness and has an aura that brings others also calmness in their presence.

In the spiritual path there are multiple rituals and practices that enable a person achieve a state of centeredness. Meditation is one such practice – regular meditation is an essential practice in this journey. Given here is a meditation that activates, balances, and integrates all the energy dimensions in a person, leading them towards centeredness.

Integration Meditation (from The four levels of Healing, by Shakti Gawain)

This meditation helps you integrate all four dimensions of energy.

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes and relax. Take a deep breath and as you exhale let go of everything you don't need to focus on right

now. Take another deep breath and as you exhale let your awareness move deep inside. Keep breathing slowly and fully and allow your attention to move deeper and deeper inside. Move deeper than your body, mind or emotions until you come to a quiet place inside.

In this quiet place, open to feeling and experiencing your spiritual essence. Whether or not you feel anything in particular, just assume it's there. Know that it is always with you every moment of your life.

Now move slowly to the mental level. Imagine yourself very mentally clear and alert. Imagine that you believe in yourself, you have a confidence in your power to create and manifest whatever you want in

your life. You believe that life is supporting you in every way.

Now check in with yourself on the emotional level. How are you feeling right now? Can you accept and be with your feelings? Imagine you are feeling comfortable with your emotions. Know that as human beings we have many deep feelings that are gifts to help us take care of ourselves, to teach about life. So imagine yourself respecting and honoring all your feelings and learning to express them appropriately and constructively.

Become aware of your physical body and begin to sense how it feels. Give your body the love and

appreciation it needs and deserves. Imagine that you are learning to listen to your body and pay attention to what it needs and feels. You take good care of it, and as a result it feels healthy, fit, alive and beautiful. Imagine feeling comfortable and happy in your body.

Now expand that feeling to your surroundings. Imagine yourself feeling comfortable and confident in the physical world, able to take good care of yourself and handle the practical aspects of life easily and efficiently.

When you feel complete with this, slowly open your eyes, stretch gently and go about your life.

Have a wonderful journey!

While integrating the four energy dimensions is a way to experience centeredness, spiritual centeredness is the master key. This is the place where one lives life connected to spiritual energy and not to one's ego. Such a shift clears up the space for magnificence at physical, emotional and mental levels.

Let this article and the meditation give you the experience of stillness, because in it you will discover Oneness.

— Dr. Bhulakshmi V & Ms. Bhuvaneshwari Ravi



Yours Energetically

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

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

STIGMA - A MULTIFACETED PHENOMENON

Social Work has been a very intriguing profession to many. Beyond all the curiosity and fascination, one begins to sense the need for professionalism and resource management in dealing with real human problems. "Health, for example, is an outstanding example. Social Workers are instrumental in ensuring that required services meet the needy at just the right time. A dedicated official is thus needed to ensure that services reach the desired patients. We build an interface where both sides can come together and this has not only saved but also changed lives," asserts Mr Senthil, Founder of Child Trust in Chennai.

Hailing from Sozhavandan village in Madurai district, Senthil was driven by thoughts of community well-being. His parents' lives influenced him to see the benefits of thinking from a community perspective. "In a village, one gets to see why this is important. One family's decision could easily affect another family and therefore such a perspective engages younger generation in understanding community interests and work for common good. So, it was only natural that I developed interest in community development," he shares.

Soon after his MSW, Senthil came to Chennai in search of a job. Accustomed to notice and engage the capacities of friends from village, he recognised his interest in human resources. His job with Chennai City Corporation's HIV/AIDS counselling unit exposed him to the struggles that children of HIV/AIDS infected and affected parents faced. "Two decades ago, the stigma and anxiety were on a different level. A child of HIV/AIDS infected parent/s became easily rejected. I could not take in the fact that a child could become so unimportant. Why aren't people ready to check facts and work out options for the child? Why is abandoning a child so easy in our society?" wondered Senthil.

After two years of counselling, Senthil felt so connected with children and joined a Residential Home for Children to work for their welfare. This home prepared him to learn the operating modalities and approaches to handle children emotionally. "This is the real task and challenge. Children knew that they have been rejected by their own family, hence bringing them out of this emotional bubble is extremely important. When one child breaks down, there is a ripple effect. This is also the case when one child tries to support another. The Home had to be equipped to manage all these social and emotional upheavals. It is literally their Home!" he explains.

Senthil kept himself open to new ideas and thoughts while also exploring the needs of abandoned children. As a Field Worker with Family Planning Association of India, he worked with migrant labourers to educate them about HIV/AIDS. "This was the experience that helped me relate to what I learnt at CSIM. I knew about CSIM soon after coming to Chennai and decided to join the course before taking up a full time job. I listened to entrepreneurs and social workers shared their experiences. My mind was a clean page and all that went into it started coming to life as my career graph expanded. Most importantly, I could easily accept that a situation could be understood and approached from different perspectives. For a social worker, this acceptance must happen at the earliest so that he or she can see ahead while planning programmes for a target group," he urges.

Stigma is a multifaceted phenomenon but unfortunately we are all accustomed to see the negativity associated. In the context of HIV/AIDS, Senthil feels that stigma defined strategies and programmes. It was stigma that helped design awareness programmes and materials. The fact that



stigma exists is in itself a helping factor because had we not acknowledged the same, it would have taken years to see what distanced HIV infected and affected people from accessing help. "The psychology of stigma allows you to identify specific factors that must be addressed to bring about the desired behavioural change in the target group. Observation is the key," smiles Senthil.

This positivity, he explains, touches you at CSIM. "Every individual's effort is thoroughly discussed to help beginners relate to needs at all points in time. You begin to see a situation from a cause-effect plane and then build the multi-factor ecosystem around it. You master the situation you want to improve. This meticulous thought process is the key to design and influence change. CSIM takes you through this effortlessly," he adds.

Senthil founded Child Trust in 2005 to support children of HIV/AIDS infected and affected parents. A residential centre for such children was always in mind but Senthil's experience helped him refine simple aspects so that children could easily adapt and accept their new identities. He began with three boys and now the home's strength is 22.

"35 boys have passed out and are in different jobs. Every child is capable of coming out in flying colors. They only need their space," he says. Apart from

residential care, Child also focussed on building a network of HIV parents. They initiated this in 2015 and has now reached out to more than 600 families allowing the team to understand decision dynamics in HIV/AIDS affected families. This led them to see the plight of HIV orphaned girls from around 2000 families in Thiruvallur district. Soon, 'I support a girl child' program was launched and 128 girls have benefitted so far.

The idea of one donor for one child not only made things transparent, but it also helped focus on specific interests of the child. The team could see beyond basic needs and work on the child's aspirations. Complementing all this is the life skills and career guidance programme regularly organised to keep the children motivated. The successful reach of these initiatives has encouraged the team to establish a skill training centre for girls. Explaining the efforts in this direction so far Senthil tries to throw light on why such efforts are always relatable and significant. "I have seen the work from Chennai City Corporation. I have seen the dynamics in operating from an NGO. There are gaps everywhere because of the enormity of the situation. I honestly feel that small efforts like mine complement the whole picture. In a populous country like ours, with diverse levels of education, awareness and prejudices, such small efforts not only give results but also help the population relate to facts and learn the better way out".

Still a HR consultant, Senthil has carved his own way out and is quite content with his career graph. "I am 44 years old now. My work and passion have all fallen in place at just the right time. I feel more happy and accomplished when my children graduate, achieve new things in their professional. As they build their own identities, I not only feel elated but also useful," says an insightful Senthil.

Shanmuga Priya.T

CHANGING HUES: AWAKEN THE QUEEN WITHIN

Transformation and Acceptance – embracing the soul

When the going gets tough, the tough get going – Joseph P Kennedy
The comeback is always stronger than the setback – author unknown
When life gives you lemons, make lemonade – author unknown

All these are quotes to motivate, no doubt; however, when the adversity truly hits, there is pain, frustration, difficulty until we accept and put efforts to emerge stronger.

It was a lazy Sunday afternoon after a good bisibelebath lunch, a famous Karnataka dish made with rice, dal and vegetables. Reena and Padma sat on the cool floor in the living room. Reena was watching some YouTube videos, and casually asked, "Aunty, have you associated with transgenders in your work? What's your understanding of their life?"

Padma, sat with eyes half-closed and mumbled, "Why do you ask this now?"

Reena, still looking at her phone, mumbled, "I was watching an interview of a transgender person, an educated professional, sharing about the stigma they still face in the community. Why should they go through so much struggle to prove they are good and have equal capabilities?"

"Hmm... true. But, I am thinking something else altogether. I am thinking about my friend Prema."

Reena gave a puzzled look. Padma comfortably stretched herself and continued "Prema is a very successful, energetic professional who is a great mentor and coach now. She was a hard-core technical person from the beginning and very good at work. She has a transgender child. I am thinking about her journey and how she stood through the societal and emotional backlashes, while continuing to be efficient in her work."

"Tell me more," said Reena with curiosity written all over her face.

Prema was very excited and happy when she conceived and had her first child. A handsome, cute baby was born who was adored by every person who visited her home. Uttam was a joy for the parents too. The second baby boy soon followed. She somehow managed her family by taking some career breaks. However, that did not suit Prema's character. When children went to primary school, she took up a full-time job and pursued her career ambitions. Prema managed the children and home requirements with the help of maid servants and day-care facilities.

Initially, dressing up the boys as a girl and photographing them was fun for the family. She noticed something unique in Uttam's interest in her junk jewellery, dupattas, and skirts. He was not much of an outdoor person. He had many friends who were girls and loved to play by himself most of the time. He also had a sweet voice that did not show signs of



breaking. Initially, all this was construed as a shy boy who is excellent in studies and needed a push to get out and become roughened. As usual, Prema was blamed that she wasn't taking efforts to make him feel and look like a boy!

The teenager times saw new dimensions in Uttam. He got constantly bullied in school for his thin, lean body, thin voice, and introvert personality. He rarely shared his woes to anyone other than his mother.

Prema's second son was an outgoing, active boy. However, he was hardly paid any attention as correcting and taking care of the elder son was given priority at home. The teachers and family interpreted the peer group behavior as bullying a nerd or a studious school student. Prema was stressed. Most times, the elder child would be the bone of contention for all arguments! When the work-life balance slipped even a few notches, Prema was immediately blamed using the children's personality as a black dot. The saving grace was that they were both brilliant, good at academics, and received much appreciation from their teachers for their

grades and projects.

When Uttam moved into 11th grade, he had bouts of anxiety. His father encouraged him to play sports, socialize and meet people. But, he cocooned himself and wished to be alone most of the time. There seemed minimum interaction between the siblings since they had accepted each other and their personalities. Prema had a gnawing feeling that Uttam was not happy. But she couldn't find the reason though. At times, he attempted self-harming, resulting in high drama, crying, and tensions for Prema. The helplessness was killing her, and stress was unsurmountable. On the contrary, relatives found Uttam to be a very soft, good-looking ectomorph boy with high academic grades, absolutely adorable and what more Prema should ask for in life!

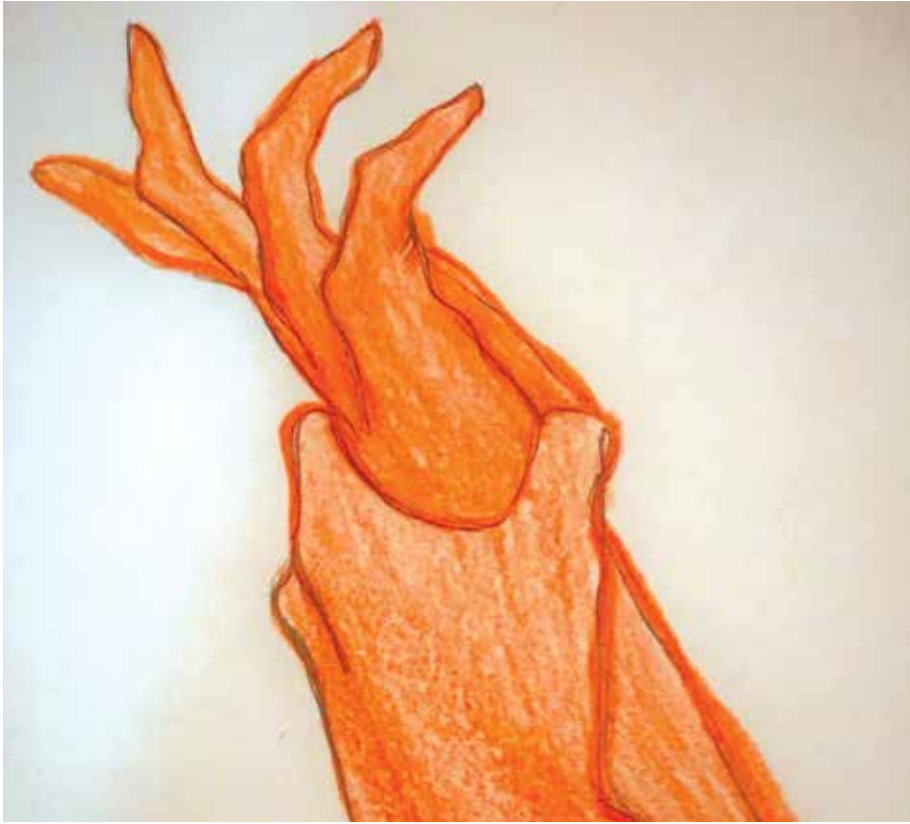
Some instances made Prema wonder about Uttam. He had many posters of famous and popular male actors in his room. He used to find good-looking, handsome men attractive. He was an enigma for her to understand.

Once Prema had shared with Padma: "I have wondered if my son was gay! But, I had never dared to speak much about this to him. When I first conceived, I prayed to God that my child should be a healthy baby. I read a lot about disabilities and differently-abled persons. I am a person who usually reads a lot and gathers information to prepare myself to face life. Now I started to read about gay relationships and prepared myself to accept the same in case Uttam is one."

The real shock came when Prema's son joined the medicine stream after 12th and within a year declared that she was a transgender woman. She lived with the wrong gender in his body! Prema couldn't digest this at all. She shared with Padma, "I had prepared myself with every possible health and mental issue concerning my child. But I had never considered her to be a transgender. Now, I have a Daughter! God, this was something that wouldn't just go into my system. I was unprepared. Initially, the thought was whom to blame? Did I do something wrong in nurturing my children? Why did I not take any of her behavior seriously? What is it that I do not understand? Anger, guilt, remorse, and fear – all at once attacked me. Imagine the entire society and community, in education, sociology, and engineering, or anywhere else – no one prepares us to handle transgender women. No one even speaks of them as a part of our society. We see them only ostracised, living in fear, demanding money near the traffic signals, etc. I was clueless. I felt something strange and unknown had hit me."

Prema's new daughter, declared that she would go through the complete gender transition process to become a woman. The transition process would mean several medical surgeries and hormone treatments that will change the way they look and how people will see and treat them to become the gender they feel on the inside. It also involved changing names and other preferences.

Again Prema was the target. She had to convince the family and relatives about this issue. By then, she had lost her parents, and had no siblings. She had felt orphaned in front of her in-laws' large conservative family. Prema shared, "The worse situation was when I was blamed for my ignorance by my own daughter. She said I had never understood her trials and tribulations in life and that I was an incapacitated mother not knowing she could have been a transgender woman. It hurt the most when your own flesh and blood doesn't believe you were clueless and had been continually trying to figure it all out over the past 15 years." Prema felt doomed and wished the earth would open up and gobble her.



But, this was not for long. One day something in her rose like an invincible power. She decided to stand and support her daughter. She put away her tears, decided to go through the next two years of all the transition processes, including family therapy. She drew the courage to convince her husband and in-laws about this issue. Day and night, she spent understanding the transgender issues pouring over all kinds of literature from

history to new age. She began to speak about it. Her organization selected her as the Inclusion Champion, and she worked to spread the awareness about Transgender issues. She journaled her challenges, struggles, and triumphs. She ensured this became a topic of interest, respect, and acceptance in all her circles that interacted with her daughter. It was one of the most uphill tasks for Prema to work within and outside continually. Her organization stood by her, and she

anchored in her work achievements to go through this ordeal.

Every effort bears fruit! After nearly a year, Prema named her daughter as Shree and took her along for events and family functions. When parents are happy and accept the situation, the outside world loses its courage to gossip.

With a realization shining in her eyes, Reena said, *"Aunty, this leaves me speechless. You have opened an inner eye for me. How could we have been so careless and callous, not understanding the fact that the transgenders are just like any of us? Aunty Prema's agony is mainly because of our society's ignorance and apathy towards them. Coming to think of it, there is nothing wrong with them. They are as intelligent, capable, and smart as any of us. How does it matter what gender they choose to be in their life? As long as they are happy, comfortable, and productive in their professions, it shouldn't matter."*

Padma got up, and hugged Reena. "Reena, coming to think of it, there is a lot needed in that area for all of us to work. While Prema's daughter, Shree is a successful professional and in the limelight for her bold decision she had taken, I think we should applaud my friend Prema equally. In the last two and half decades of motherhood, she has emerged stronger and set an example for many parents to face this issue in their families." *(Names have been changed to protect privacy and identity).*

Dr Kalpana Sampath
Illustrations by Pratiksha P



Reflect:

- When life throws adversities, and the going is tough, where do I anchor and draw my strength to keep moving?
- How do I see Transgender women in our society?
- What do I respect and identify in others? Their form or essence?

Discovering



A salt doll journeyed for thousands of miles and stopped on the edge of the sea. It was fascinated by this moving liquid mass, so unlike anything it had seen before.

"What are you?" said the salt doll to the sea.

"Come in and see," said the sea with a smile.

So the doll walked in. The further it went the more it dissolved till there was only a pinch of salt left. Before that last bit dissolved, the doll exclaimed in wonder, "Now I know what I am!"



Explicit Learning

- Profound and lasting learning needs total involvement.
- Start seeing things around you and you'll see yourself in them.
- Explore the world, and you'll discover yourself.



Introspective Learning

- What is the nature of 'Self-Discovery'?
- How do I discover myself?
- Who am I?

REFORMING THE STREETS THROUGH MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT



Devendra Kumar Gupta, founder of Ladli Foundation Trust, often quotes, “When you take a step towards society, the latter doubles its efforts to steer you towards success.” His life, riddled with challenges as it has been, has proven this to be true. Devendra’s childhood was sparse. Abandoned by his parents at the tender age of two, he not only had to fend for himself, but also for his infant sister, as soon as he was able.

Forced to work as a child labourer, he grew up in one of the high-crime slums of Delhi. At age 8, he was beaten up by some few drug-using youth. This incident made Devendra question what caused the young boys to beat him up. Instead of resorting to anger, he decided to do befriend these older kids.

He would get together with these boys and play local sports such as kabaddi, all evening. Soon, several more youth started playing with and befriending young Devendra. This organized playtime gradually helped youth get over their drug addiction. Seeing this change, their families started supporting Devendra, encouraging

their kids to befriend him.

Soon Devendra was busy straddling two major undertakings - his own livelihood, which he earned through clerical jobs here and there, and his social service in his immediate surroundings, the slums of Delhi. He also set up his own business in due course. Years later, when he started looking for marriage alliances for his sister, he became acutely aware of the deep-rooted social problems of dowry and gender-based violence. It was the challenges he faced at this time, in the year 2012, that led him to build Ladli Foundation Trust- an organization that empowers women and girls in impoverished communities to become educated, skilled and independent.

In Devendra’s neighborhood, it was plain to see that women’s rights was non-existent. Domestic violence was highly prevalent, along with a low literacy rate of women. Human trafficking and marriage rackets were all too common and in general, women did not have a right to expression over the smallest of things, such as asking for menstrual pads.

Ladli runs several programs to eradicate

gender-based violence. In 2012, he undertook the responsibility to verify grooms for local women of marriageable ages. Appreciating his efforts, the parents of the brides then proceeded to help him organize a mass wedding event by pitching in whatever they could- cooking the wedding feast, setting up the wedding decorations, etc. Till date, Ladli Foundation has arranged the marriages of 1,753 verified couples through these community-led, annual mass wedding events.

Emboldened by the community’s support, in 2015, Ladli Foundation proceeded to start education and vocational training for women through its volunteer run training centres in Delhi. Devendra converted one of his old residences into a training centre. Mothers who previously took extreme measures to protect their daughters from street criminals, felt safe enough to send their daughters to be trained here. Over 16,000 young women have learnt basic English and Computer skills through this training program so far. Many have since moved on to acquire clerical jobs and are financially independent.

In 2017, Run for Ladli was begun. A half

marathon for men who wish to support women’s rights, the event was attended by 25000 men, with the then Union Minister being its chief guest. Since then, major PSU’s such as ONGC and BPCL have partnered with Ladli in several different CSR projects. One such project “Saheli”, has helped screen over 300,000 women in Delhi and surrounding rural areas for infectious diseases such as TB or HIV and other medical conditions such as anemia. The screening has helped those in need of immediate medical care to seek it, as well as to help women become more comfortable talking about their own health needs. “Life can be challenging for anyone, but for a woman, her challenges begin even before she is born” says Devendra. Right from talking about female foeticide to menstrual health, sexual health and communicable diseases, Ladli Foundation, along with its partner organizations, helps shed some light on women’s health in communities where their health is often the very last priority of households.

Also in 2017, in 48 districts in India, a massive Kanya-Puja drive was conducted by



“Life can be challenging for anyone, but for a woman, her challenges begin even before she is born”

Ladli Foundation. Families across these districts who observed this tradition, were encouraged to pledge their continued support for 2 girl children each, for a period of 9 years. The objective of this initiative is to create a bond between the girls and the local families. Over 3,000 girls have been “socially adopted” through this program, according to Devendra.

Ladli Foundation attained “special consultative status” with the UN in 2020. Devendra was invited to the March 2021 UN Commission on Status of Women and even delivered an address emphasizing on the importance of women’s health in determining women’s overall development. With 2300 interns working under him and over 5000 volunteers ready to spring into action in a moment’s notice, Devendra has helped establish Ladli Foundation as a veritable grassroots movement, a notable one at that. Now the Foundation’s programs run in over 50 districts spread across North

India. Aside from big name corporate partners, Ladli Foundation also has the support of the Delhi Police.

Speaking of challenges, Devendra says, “We need a larger platform to raise our voice. We feel we are still too small. Getting government agencies to listen to us continues to be a challenge. Our research has resulted in us creating a huge data bank with case studies about the plight of women and other groups in poor communities. All this information needs to be put to better use. We wish to be involved in policy making”.

Devendra remains cheerful and resolute in his journey with Ladli Foundation. He signs off on a note of conviction, “I started my life as a child labourer. People still invested in me, believed me enough to become who I am today. The universe offers you several opportunities. It is up to you to rise up to those opportunities and create your own success”

Archanaa Ramesh

UNRAVELLING THE TRAP OF TRAFFICKING, WEAVING A NEW LIFE

Late afternoon, a mild winter's day in a village in Assam, India. The laughter of children playing mingles with the clucking of chickens strolling around the yard, occasionally pecking the ground.

Over these sounds, a rhythmic “tok, tok, tok” of wood hitting wood drifts through the air. The sounds are coming from a large wooden loom in the front porch of a nearby house, expertly operated by a weaver. She patiently works the loom to turn colourful yarn into textile, intricate patterns blooming under her hands as she pulls the strands into place.

Watching her is Ella Sangma and a group of children. As they look on, Ella, who manages the weavers, says, “You know what we make with the cloth your mamma weaves? We make dresses from it, we make diaries.”

From these humble beginnings, the textiles become fashionable items sold across India and online by Impulse NGO Network, creating income and a shot at a better life for their makers.

MODERN-DAY SLAVERY

For many living in rural communities in India, a better life often means moving to big cities in search of job opportunities.

The reality is a perilous one. Traffickers prey on vulnerable communities — such as ones with few income prospects or struck by war or natural disasters — by using the dream of a better life as a lure.

But instead of a better life, they are forced to work as sex workers, domestic helpers, factory workers, manual labourers and beggars. Women and girls are also trafficked into forced marriages.

Each year, thousands of trafficking cases are reported to the Indian authorities; between 2011 to 2018, 38,508 cases were reported, based on figures released by India's National Crime Records Bureau.

The Global Slavery Index estimates that on any given day, 8 million people in India — among them children and teenagers — live in modern slavery, where violence, coercion and deception are used to exploit people against their will.

Ella was once among them. At the age of 11, her mother sold her to traffickers, who brought her to Delhi, and forced her to work.

They said, “You have been sold to us,” recounts Ella. “I asked, ‘Can a human being be bought and sold?’”

Ella eventually managed to share her plight with a policeman, and was freed in a raid. Later, she testified in court — in the face of death threats — against her traffickers, one of whom was jailed.

Feisty as she is petite, Ella says: “I have faced such difficulties since childhood. I never had the option to be afraid. If one needs to fight for something, then one has to.”

IMPULSE TO ACT

Globally, forced labour is estimated by the International Labour Organization to be a US\$150-billion industry, and women and girls make up the majority of people trafficked into slavery.

“We have to start to think of human trafficking as a crime that exists in many countries and many communities,” says Hasina Kharbhih, who founded Impulse NGO Network to tackle the problem.



“It can happen to anybody. Today, even people coming from a middle class family can be highly vulnerable when they are moving for employment opportunities.” Hasina began working in the northeastern city of Shillong in 1987, organising sustainable livelihood initiatives for women, but a bigger issue soon materialised; children were going missing and being trafficked into forced labour in urban areas. With little recourse for help, the women artisans she was working with turned to her.

Impulse was initially set up to create awareness of the trafficking problem. But, realising that there were little resources to support survivors, and little knowledge of how to identify and intervene in trafficking cases, Hasina created a framework — the Impulse Model.

The model brings together the state government, security agencies, legal groups, media and citizen organisations to combat trafficking by pooling knowledge and data. A database was also created to enable easy reporting.

To date, Impulse has supported over 70,000 trafficking survivors by reporting suspected cases to the authorities, facilitating their rescue and reintegration into society, and helping survivors seek legal recourse and compensation.

Its database, the Impulse Case Info Centre (ICIC), which compiles and shares information with Anti-Human Trafficking Units in India, has more than 1,000 NGOs and government agencies in its network, not just in India but also in Southeast Asia.

PREVENTION IS POWER

But can trafficking be prevented from happening at all?

Impulse hopes to at least chip away at one root cause that makes people easy prey for traffickers: lack of income.

It started a social enterprise unit Impulse Social Enterprises, which sets up weaving clusters in rural communities. A master weaver oversees each cluster, training members and ensuring their work is up to scratch. The weavers are paid fair prices for their textiles, which Impulse, collaborating with designers, turn into

products for the lifestyle market.

Ella, who manages the weavers, says, “It is better to be at one's place and earn with dignity. The fact that ‘I can earn’ is empowering.”

She adds, “If I had such a job, if I knew how to weave, maybe whatever happened wouldn't have happened.”

Weavers earn about US\$85 to \$100 a month, which supplements traditional sources of income, such as agriculture.

To date, over 30,000 weavers have benefited from Impulse Social Enterprises. From being able to keep their children in school, to having the means to upgrade their homes, the social enterprise is giving women a bigger say in determining their fates.

The work also revives a culture that was in danger of dying out, as such textiles were thought to be no longer fashionable and skills were not being passed down. Impulse ploughs 60 per cent of the profits back into design development and training, to ensure its products stand out in a crowded consumer market.

“You're not buying because you feel sorry for the women. You buy it because it's a beautiful product. You buy it because you want to empower another woman,” notes Hasina.

A COVID-19 LOCKDOWN, BUT TRAFFICKING CONTINUES

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across India, Impulse remains firm in its efforts to fight the relentless growth in human trafficking, which remains a threat even with the country on lockdown.

Criminal networks remain active by using technology — such as encrypted communication channels — to facilitate trafficking, and some have even made use of the lockdown to create new ways to carry on their crimes, such as by transporting victims in ambulances, says Hasina. The lockdown has also meant that police resources have been directed towards law enforcement, rather than investigating crimes like trafficking.

Meanwhile, non-profits are struggling with a lack of funding due to the economic fallout of COVID-19 even as the need

to tackle trafficking remains urgent. Impulse's weavers' incomes have also fallen due to orders drying up and supply chains disrupted by the lockdown, compounded by intense flooding in Assam and around.

To address this, Impulse has launched a fundraiser to support a new initiative, which will see weavers sew face masks, which will be distributed to essential workers as well as rural communities at risk. This will create some income security for its weavers, as the pandemic wears on.

“Our goal is to support women across the region to be able access new markets,” says Hasina. “Unless this occurs, given the economic pressures, it provides a massive boost for human trafficking criminal networks amidst the increased opportunities for criminal networks to traffic and exploit women and children.”

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Hasina has also started the process of further empowering the weavers, by giving weavers over 40 a stake in Impulse Social Enterprises.

“The solution to end slavery is basically economic empowerment. So the big question for me is, well, is [Impulse Social Enterprises] going to be really owned by women?” says Hasina.

“I realised that I'm growing old, they're growing old. They have given so much of their years to Impulse. So do I leave them there, or do they become part of the larger goal? For me, the larger goal is [for them] to be shareholders of the company.”

Ella acknowledges the role Hasina has played in her life and those of other survivors: “There is a saying, ‘The mother who nurtures is greater than the mother who gives birth’. The way Hasina cares for us, no one will.”

She hopes that Hasina's compassion will rub off on society, creating a more accepting environment for trafficking survivors.

“If people turn away from them, then the survivors feel guilty. They feel it is their fault that they were trafficked,” says Ella. “She thinks, ‘I will rather go back to where I came from.’”

“We should talk to them with a free mind and accept them wholeheartedly. I think if society supports them, trafficking will be controlled.”

ABOUT IMPULSE NGO NETWORK

Based in northeast India, Impulse NGO Network is an anti-human trafficking non-profit, working across borders and agencies to rescue those who have been trafficked and helping them navigate the road to recovery and reintegration. Its livelihood arm, Impulse Social Enterprises, addresses the root causes of trafficking by creating financial opportunities for rural communities in the form of weaving projects. To date, Impulse has supported over 70,000 survivors, while its livelihood projects have benefited over 30,000 women.

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

www.ourbetterworld.org

BEING THE CHANGE

Life is full of surprises and shocks. How one responds to these defines an individual's personality. And the changes that come up eventually could not only be life changing for the concerned person, but also for many others who may not have thought from that perspective. Ms Preethi Srinivasan, Co-Founder of Soulfree, a Public Charitable Trust in Thiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu has shown the way forward for quadriplegics like her and is determined to show how positively-abled any individual could be, irrespective of the challenges in their body.

Spinal cord injury is an incurable condition that completely changes lives in a split second. From being a national level swimmer and the youngest member of Tamil Nadu senior women's cricket team, under whose leadership the under-19 cricket team won its only national championship, Preethi became physically confined due an accident on the shores of Pondicherry. "Suddenly it was like I was invisible. Nobody looked at me in the eye and that broke me. People could not think of me beyond my wheel chair. Fortunately, I had people around me, especially my mother, who reassured that I was what I think and I was what I do. I slowly came to terms with my condition, learnt about being a quadriplegic and the adjustments to live with my new body," admits Preethi.

"My father's demise and mother's bypass surgery forced me to introspect about my future. What will I be without my mom? Those seven hours when my mother was being operated, I could not help but delve into the plight of women like me who could end up without any source of support in any form. I wondered if we were even cared for," she shares. She was shocked to learn that there were no long term facilities to support women in her condition. Post-surgery, her mother's recovery and the struggles she faced kept Preethi thinking. Her mother too felt the chills and recounted that she too was scared about her daughter's future. "There are many mothers like mine who need an external source of assurance that their children will be safe and sound after their lifetime. I wondered if I could do anything at all. The news of two paraplegic girls' suicide shook us. My mother wanted me to be the change. I wanted to save lives. I wanted to show that the idea of ability is never limited to one's body," says Preethi.

Soulfree was officially registered as a Public Charitable Trust in 2013 to improve the quality of lives of persons with severe disabilities, primarily those facing a lifetime of paralysis due to spinal cord injury. Right from building awareness for self, family and community, to medical rehabilitation, Soulfree intends to demonstrate that right to life is a fundamental right with no tags attached. "It is usually accepted that we have no role in society – not as a spouse, not as a student, not as an employee. All doors are shut and there is no attention to help us adapt with our new bodies. There is no specific data about us; we are not even counted and there are no rehabilitation centres. In many places, our condition is read with locomotor disabilities, hence no focus is placed upon our actual needs and issues. Soulfree aims to show how an integrated approach can change this scenario and build an ecosystem of services that can lead to independence and self-reliance," explains Preethi, quickly adding that independence also means the freedom to use a restroom whenever they wished to.



My mother wanted me to be the change. I wanted to save lives. I wanted to show that the idea of ability is never limited to one's body.

One of Soulfree's primary focus is on education, to build awareness on spinal cord injury which has been termed the world's most debilitating condition by the WHO as it results in permanent and severe physical impairments. The team reaches out to every school or college wherever possible to get the message out and sensitise the families and society. "When we say sensitise, it is a bigger connotation than often understood. Medical services must be prompt in attending to care and emergency needs of those in my condition. Accessibility and Inclusion are two sides of the same coin and the first, undeniably the most crucial aspect is the gesture from people around. There is difference between telling a paraplegic or quadriplegic that you believe in them and your gesture in letting them be themselves. That is the level of sensitivity we must get used to and respect their choices and aspirations. A sensitive society aims to create space for those who feel left out. We are definitely taking steps in the right direction but it is a very long way up till there," asserts Preethi.

Provision of mobility aides, airbeds, retrofitted scooters, monthly stipends, medical support, counselling and education, employment consultation (like voice based jobs) have all been brought under one roof to shape Soulfree as a one stop resource and research centre in a span of eight years. Having touched the lives of more than 1,000 families, Soulfree has left

no stone unturned in saving the lives of many. "We know people dying of as simple and treatable cause as bed sores. I would say society, as a whole has failed in building itself for us. We can be taught to be as productive as anybody. I want my community to recognise themselves for what they are," says an emotional Preethi, who never misses an opportunity to communicate how small changes and gestures could be life changing for persons facing a lifetime of paralysis.

A fully equipped rehabilitation centre has been Soulfree's dream from day one and today they are ready to launch their 20,000 square feet facility with a capacity of 60 residents. Built against all odds, including the pandemic, the entire building is wheel chair accessible. Offering a variety of therapies including Hydrotherapy, the very functioning of this rehabilitation centre will set a precedent and help develop a new framework for the management of persons with permanent paralysis. With international organisations already inclined to collaborate and associate, Soulfree is all set to revive, rather rewrite lives. "As word spreads, I sure hope we don't get to hear news of paralysed individuals committing suicide for being in a condition that is no fault of theirs. We must learn to invest in helping them live a dignified life," insists Preethi.

Shanmuga Priya.T

GLOBAL SAMARITAN

Matiur Rahaman is the eldest among three siblings of an agricultural family. In spite of the family's frugal financial situation, he managed to finish his schooling and thereafter graduated in commerce. He moved to Kolkata to pursue Chartered Accountancy but had to discontinue because of financial constraints.

On returning to Murshidabad, he worked in a couple of NGOs as an accountant. Soon he conceptualized his own NGO – Karna-Subarna Welfare Society. Like any other NGO, he started with issues on education, empowerment and health. Helping Indian people in foreign countries – either dead or incarcerated – happened by chance.

Asatulla Sheikh, Rahaman's maternal uncle's son-in-law, was working as a gardener in Malaysia. A lightning struck him and killed him instantly. Rahaman's uncle approached him for help to bring the body from Malaysia. "I didn't know the process to bring back a dead body from other countries," admits Rahaman.

He contacted the local police and district magistrate for help. He even spoke to the local journalists for information. In desperation he wrote to the chief minister of the state. All to no avail.

He tweeted to Ms. (late) Sushma Swaraj, then Minister of External Affairs. He instantly received a call from MEA seeking information. Immediately he got another call from the High Commission in Malaysia. They gave him the link to "Madad" (helpline) the Consular Services Management System of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. They asked him to stay connected with MEA.

The body was located at Batu Anam in Johor area about 140-km away from Kuala Lumpur. Within a week, the dead body was sent to Kolkata. It was brought to Berhampore from Kolkata Airport for burial on the next day. The people of Murshidabad district were soon talking about the Malaysian incident.

Murshidabad is a town in West Bengal and is located on the eastern bank of the Hooghly River. It was originally called Makhsudabad, it was reputedly founded by the Mughal emperor Akbar in the 16th century. In 1704 the nawab (ruler) Murshid Quli Khan (following Aurangzeb's orders) transferred the capital from Dacca (now Dhaka, Bangladesh) to Makhsudabad and renamed the town to Murshidabad. During the 18th-century, Murshidabad once was a prosperous city. The city's decline began with the defeat of the last independent Nawab of Bengal Siraj-ud-Daulah at the Battle of Plassey by the British in 1757.

Khairul Sheikh is a daily wage labourer of Sahajadpur village in Murshidabad district. Khairul's 28-year-old son Jurail Sheikh went to Saudi as a sweeper on a monthly salary of Riyal 700. He died due to prolonged illness at Al Munawwarah in Medina. The father ran from pillar to post of the district civil administration departments for a week but all his efforts turned futile. It was then that someone from the neighbouring village informed him about Rahaman – the only person in Murshidabad district who knows the procedure to bring back corpses from any country.

When approached, Rahaman requested Khairul Sheikh photocopies of Jurail's passport, Aadhar Card and an authorisation letter to proceed on behalf of Khairul. And the details were registered on the "Madad" helpline. Managing these documents is time-consuming. It may take a week or may extend to six months because of several reasons. But Matiur Rahaman patiently followed the issue, fulfilling all the bureaucratic norms.

Finally, Jurail's mortal remains arrived at IGI Airport, New Delhi instead of NSCBI Airport Kolkata.



To date, 37 such people have already been brought back from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Malaysia by Rahaman. Seven more people are about to be repatriated, including one from a Malaysian detention camp and six from Saudi Arabia, two of whom are in jail

Rahaman contacted the officials at Delhi Airport to confirm that the coffin would be shortly picked. The dead body of Abdul Gaffar was brought from Al Quassim, Saudi Arabia to India after six months of his demise. The poor family borrowed Rs 1.5 lakh to bring the coffin by flight.

But Rahaman's job wasn't over. Transporting the coffin from Kolkata Airport to Berhampore, a distance of about 181-km one way, was another challenge. At his request, the Chief Medical Officer of Health, Murshidabad sanctioned a free ambulance service. Eventually, the coffin reached and Jurail was laid to

rest in Sahajadpur village.

In yet another case, an Indian boy who went missing abroad. Najemul Sheikh (28), a resident of village Mahalandi in Kandi, Murshidabad district, went to Malaysia with the help of an agent. He was told that the company hired him for a packaging job at the salary of 60 Malaysian Ringgit per month. But he landed up cutting green coconut. However, he was in touch with his family regularly and suddenly the communication was truncated. He escaped from his workplace but was then caught by the Malaysian police.

His father, Khudabaux Sheikh, along with his wife, visited Rahaman stating that they didn't have any idea whether their son was dead or alive. Based on their information, Rahaman docketed the grievance on "Madad". Soon the Pravasi Bharatiya Sahayata Kendra (PBSK), Kuala Lumpur Branch, sent him a message on WhatsApp stating that Najemul was alive and in a detention camp. The letter from the High Commission in Malaysia stated: "We have checked our record. Mr Najemul Sk is in Tekan Detention Camp. He is ready for repatriation. Kindly provide us with a Malaysian contact number, so that we will inform them to make payment for his Air ticket."

The same letter was forwarded to the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police of Murshidabad. The letter from MEA shook them and they picked the agent for questioning. The agent made a video call to his Malaysian counterpart. Subsequently, the name and number of the agent in Malaysia were passed to the High Commission. Najemul was vaccinated for COVID-19 before he was repatriated to India. He was sent to a quarantine centre in New Delhi for six days and reached his village on 29 March 2021.

To date, 37 such people have already been brought back from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Malaysia by Rahaman. Seven more people are about to be repatriated, including one from a Malaysian detention camp and six from Saudi Arabia, two of whom are in jail. He also rescued 14 Indian sailors, who were taken into custody by Yemeni Coast Guard in February 2020. Heron Sheikh Siddiki from Murshidabad was one of them. They were sailing from Oman to Saudi Arabia and due to inclement weather they had to anchor their ship at Yemen port. These sailors were confined to a hotel in Sanaa, Yemen. They all have been repatriated to India via Dubai.

Matiur Rahaman (45) is a resident of Berhampore, is a social activist who has been bringing back dead bodies from abroad. He has also liberated many labourers, who got stuck either in overseas jails or detention camps since 2017. And he does it all for free of cost. A chartered accountant by profession, Karna-Subarna Welfare Society is his umbrella organisation. Before the Moguls, Shashanka Deva was the emperor of Bengal from 600 AD. His capital was Karnasubarna, the present-day Murshidabad and hence the organisation's name. He is supported by Mr. Sunil Baskey, Mr. Hupna Mardi and Ms. Panigareti Tudu, the field stakeholders in the project area.

"He is the Samaritan of poor labourers. We are illiterate and know nothing about the paperwork. He does it on behalf of us for free," says Khudabaux Sheikh.

— Harry Jayanth

CHANGE THROUGH DEVELOPMENT

Up to 24% of the world's poor live in India, the fifth largest country by gross domestic product in 2017, according to the World Bank. India's richest 1% held 58% of the country's total wealth, which was higher than the global figure of about 50%, indicating extreme inequalities. India is expected to add nearly 273 million people by 2050 and will surpass China as the world's most populous country by 2027, according to the recent UN World Population Prospects 2019 report. Given the findings of the IHDS survey, this could have serious implications for the lives of India's poor. Female literacy has an overall impact on the lives of family members and rising levels of education result in progressively better access to shelter, water, sanitation, education, health, and information, irrespective of their economic status, the IHDS study found. A household is 1.6 times more likely to be deprived of access to necessities such as shelter, sanitation, education, and water if there is an illiterate woman in the family.

Since its inception in 1994, Gram Nehru Yuva Trust a non-profit organization has been working with enterprising men and women in the developing world to build competitive farms, businesses, and become self-dependent. By linking people to information, capital, and markets, Gram Nehru Yuva Trust has helped millions to create lasting prosperity for their families and communities.

GNYT offers loans, grants, and loan guarantees to help create jobs and support economic development and essential services such as housing, health care, first responder services, and equipment and water, electric, and communications infrastructure. GNYT also provides technical support to help communities to undertake community empowerment programs and help youth & women to become self-dependent. A dedicated voluntary organization based on Gandhi and Nehru Bihar, GNYT operates in 4 districts of Bihar and Jharkhand.

GNYT arranges workshops, seminars, training programs for the young and old. Their society is a Jan Bikash institution motivated, formed, and operated by local villagers. Gram Nehru Yuva Trust is working towards a great mission every day, to promote a better quality of life for communities, notably vulnerable populations, and empower them by enriching their lives through education, health, and sustainable livelihood skills and fundamental rights in all perspectives.

Estimates suggest that each year, at least 1.5 million girls under 18 get married in India, which makes it home to the largest number of child brides in the world - accounting for a third of the global total. Nearly 16 percent of adolescent girls aged 15-19 are currently married. GNYT conducts workshops on Child Rights and Child Marriage to bring awareness to rural youth. In

partnership with the Government of Bihar, the Trust conducted a program in Jandaha, Basmatta, Kolhasar Panchayat in 40 villages. Street plays, rural meetings, campaigns are conducted from time to time to stop child labour and abuse. GNYT has impacted about 1500 villages through this program.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, a total of 5264 cases of human trafficking were reported in India in 2018, where 64% were women and 48% were below 18 years old. The most affected areas are Bihar, Maharashtra, Telangana, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Orissa, and West Bengal. People from economically disadvantaged classes, and belonging to the categories of SC, ST, OBC are more susceptible to fall victim to such malpractices. GNYT often organizes workshops involving



Anganwadi workers; ASHA workers and youth club members to prepare taskforces to prevent this gruesome act.

Empowering women and youth is one of the main objectives of the Trust. This is implemented through skill upgrading training. An income generation program was conducted in Kolhasar Village for unemployed youth. Through this program, GNYT aims to provide a three-month training on tailoring and making incense sticks wherein around 60 young girls took the training. These young girls are then provided with a little loan with the help of a local bank so that they can start small enterprises.

Farmers in rural areas of Bihar & Jharkhand are in a very poor situation; the Trust arranges training for their upgradation. National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), Field Office, Ranchi (Jharkhand) with the cooperation of the Government, FPO has been formed in 5 villages under the Jarmundi block of Dumka district and registered in the Companies Act. The main purpose of the study was to increase the income of small and marginal farmers;

every FPO has 100-300 shareholders.

GNYT has an active wing that helps small and marginal farmers who are into agriculture and milk production. "We arranged a Farmer Producer Organisation Program in villages like Raja Simria, Badrampur, Thari, Sahara, Bhavandiha, Jhakhiya, Palsia, Machla, etc. with the collaboration of National agriculture and village development bank, Field Office, Ranchi (Jharkhand) of Jarmundi area in Dumka district. Around 100 farmers attended this program and we made the FPO committee for them" says Shri Sunil Kumar, one of the Managing Trustees of GNYT.

Another important training conducted by the Trust is training for the FPO Board of Directors. Under the FPO of NABARD, field office, Ranchi (Jharkhand) for the capacity-building of the members of the Registered Farmers Producer Organization, a training of the athletes was organized and 25 members from Akhand Jyoti Sanstha and 25 members from Gram Nehru Yuva Trust got the training from the FPO under Bihar District. Along with this, there also has been training for CEOs for FPOs to upgrade the skills of members. A 5-day training program was conducted for the same.

With the help of the Bihar Skill Development Mission, Patna, the Trust was able to arrange computer training for youth and students. For this, network connections were provided by the institution for operating computer tracking in Banka District. In the institute, youth are being trained on the subject of DCA, tally, and data entry operations. So far, the institute was able to impact the lives of over 120 youth.

The Trust believes that women's empowerment is an asset to our society and empowers them through workshops. To make Muslim women self-reliant in the Madrasa complex located in Minor Gao-Parman of Jandra Panchayat of Katoria block, the Trust started a tailoring training. The training lasted for three months.

GNYT organizes Micro Entrepreneurship development to encourage locals to be self-dependant. Training camps on poultry and goat farming were conducted for 30 women. After the program, every successful trainee was given a small loan for self-income from the Central Bank of India. The organization also arranges seminars and workshops on climate change and air pollution. The youth is made aware of ways to protect the environment.

Over the years Gram Nehru Yuva Trust has grown by leaps and bounds. The impact the organization has on people's lives has exponentially increased with the help of teams and volunteers and rural youth. The organization strives hard every day to make a difference and bring development and empowerment to young and old alike.

Angela Anish



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

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

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non-profits to facilitate them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives. www.csim.in

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

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"Our vision is deeply embedded into the independence struggle."

Shri Niraj Lal shares with Marie Banu about Arvind Limited's CSR programmes

Shri. Niraj Kumar Lal is the Group Head of Corporate Social Responsibility, Arvind Limited and brings two and half decades of experience in Corporate Social Responsibility. His domain includes health education, skill development and slum networking. He is a member of CII National Committee on CSR and Convenor of CII Gujarat State Panel for CSR and Social Inclusiveness. Mr Lal has facilitated collaborative relationships and partnerships between the Industry, Academia, International Development Agencies and Consulting organisations for greater productivity and holistic development.

In an exclusive interview, Shri Niraj Lal shares with Marie Banu about Arvind Limited's CSR programmes

Arvind Limited and its Swadeshi spirit?

Our vision is deeply embedded into the independence struggle. Before becoming pioneers of denim in India, Arvind began its journey in 1931 in response to Mahatma Gandhi's call for Swadeshi. During the struggle for Indian Independence, the Lalbhai family founded Arvind Mills, creating capacity to compete with the world's finest textile mills. Three brothers, Kasturbhai, Narottambhai and Chimanbhai, came together to produce international quality fabric using superior quality Indian cotton to support in the freedom struggle.

Arvind's early years in the CSR space?

CSR for Lalbhai Group has been in practice even before the term 'CSR' was coined. If you look at the educational advancement or the cultural and social milieu in Ahmedabad, our founders have contributed greatly to its development. We have been bringing people together and setting up institutions of importance because we believe that institutions are the actual founding stone for any society to grow.

Our founding father Shri. Kasturbhai Lalbhai had set up Ahmedabad Educational Society with a group of local industrialists. This Society runs schools, colleges, technical institutions, besides social, cultural and religious institutions. Ahmedabad is a city of institutions, and you will see our footprint in top institutions like IIM Ahmedabad, Centre for Environment Planning and Technology, Physical Research Laboratory and many others. These institutions are backed by industry leaders who believed that the importance of a vibrant city and its

growth can only happen if you have a strong institutional base.

Our CSR policy is based on the belief that healthy businesses prosper in a healthy society and Business leaders have a huge role in shaping the socio-cultural development of a geography.

Talking about our early social programmes, Narottam Lalbhai Rural Development fund (NLRDF) was launched by Arvind Limited as a registered NGO in 1978. This was basically to take care of the rural development programmes aimed at promoting and strengthening livelihoods and welfare and development of rural communities across Gujarat. NLRDF was instrumental in setting up educational institutions, health infrastructure, hospital, technical institute, ITI in remote areas in Khedbrahma in Sabarkantha district in Gujarat. We not only created, but also empowered the local communities to manage these institutions.

Overall, over the decades, we have a better organisational structure where education, social, and health initiatives are being run.

Tell us about slum upgradation programme?

In 1995, we were created 'Strategic Help Alliance for Relief to Distressed Areas' (SHARDA). While NLRDF was managing the rural programmes, SHARDA focused on urban poor.

In 1998, our slum upgradation programme was included amongst the 100 best global practices.

Slums are usually known to be resource draining liabilities and they usually do not have good infrastructure. We believed that slums actually have lot of resources which can be put to better use in providing them quality infrastructure facilities. The local government requested us to manage this programme, and we were successful in completing the programme well within the stipulated time and budget.

We ensured that every house had a toilet, access to water and electricity, and concrete roads. It was well-managed and we asked the people to pay for the facilities offered to them. While the slum dwellers paid one-third of the cost, Arvind limited contributed one-third of the expenses and the rest was borne by Ahmedabad municipal corporation and community making them the equal partner in true sense.

Any notable programmes of Arvind Foundation?

We are managing the rural programmes for over 40 years and the urban programme for 25 years now. In



2015, we launched Arvind Foundation and all our initiatives have moved into this umbrella organisation without compromising on the operational independence of NLRDF and SHARDA.

Arvind's CSR has three thematic focus areas: educational advancement, rural advancement and cultural advancement. On Educational advancement, we created a program Gyanda. It is Arvind's flagship programme in the area of education.

Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation runs over 450 schools that provides free education to over 1.3 lakh students. Most of the students live in congested urban settings and given the social and economic constraints, many students tend to drop out after primary education.

Gyanda programme mentors children from the urban poor families, and provides supplementary education to those studying in schools run by Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. The idea is to ensure that these children complete their education at least up to Class XII. They get quality education and we help them in establishing Education - Employment link, thereby making them the last generation in poverty.

Another important initiative undertaken by Arvind is a programme that empowers tribal women. We conceptualised the programme of training and placing the trained girls with Arvind and ensure that they work and stay with us. It is a unique residential programme based on a 6E strategy of Equipping (skilling), Employing (Job), Earning (Salary & saving), Educating (Higher Education), Empowering

(Decision making and pursuing aspirations), Exploring (their potential).

We identify girls from dense tribal areas like Godhra, Banaskantha, Sabarkantha, Narmada, Valsad etc. The identification, selection and training is done through our civil society partners like Gram Vikas Trust, Shroff Foundation Trust and Arul Rural Development Foundation. Candidates are selected based on their academic qualifications, dexterity, aptitude and health. Once selected, Arvind takes care of all their basic needs – housing, food, health and transport – as well as helping them in pursuit of higher education in addition to the statutory salary and benefits.

This did the magic as once they start living in the dormitories and work for Arvind, they are paid a salary with complete social security benefits and insurance. We realise that they had 5 to 6 hours free every day. We tied up with Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University for graduation studies. Over 150 girls who stitched garments in Arvind graduated from the program and we add over 100 girls to this programme each year. They are also provided computer education, English literacy, career counselling and many of them have started moving from Blue-collar to white collar jobs.

With a little help, two of our girls are now serving as Police Constables drawing a salary close to 30,000 rupees. This is the journey I believe every development programme must have!

Pandemic has disturbed the pace of all initiatives but things are getting back to normal now.