

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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We Could Be Heroes

About Volunteers involved in Chennai flood relief



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sustain only on profits. It is
much more than that."**
An exclusive interview with
Mrs Latha Pandiarajan,
Co-Founder, Ma Foi

From the Editor

Dear Friend,

Disasters are times when either the best or the very worst in organisations and people are revealed. At the time of the November-December floods, Chennai saw both in equal measure. While individuals and voluntary organisations joined the government in providing rescue and relief support to help the city recover from the floods, many faced threats to life and property.

The freeing of surplus waters of Poondi reservoir and Chembarambakkamm lake led to such inundation that more parts of greater Chennai and its surroundings were inundated, making the rescue of marooned people top priority.

This disaster highlighted the inadequate level of preparedness. The inundation in Chennai and its neighbouring districts revealed the flaws in urban planning, housing and real estate policy, and water management. As large sheets of water spread across localities, isolating thousands of people from the rest of the city, several people were further affected with the seepage of drainage water into their homes.

A blessing in this disaster was the amazing generosity, ingenuity and fortitude from the civil society who reached out to the flood affected people instantly. It is because of the collective wisdom of these masses that gave hope to the people.

Networking has saved several lives during this crisis. A must mention about the social media that provided a common platform for everyone to come ahead and contribute to the relief fund for flood victims. It helped volunteers communicate the right information and map the demand and supply so that help is extended at the right place and at the right time.

We are certain that people will be able to build back their lives better than before and will emerge stronger.

—Marie Banu

Holding the Space

"if you think of holding space as being in the center of the wheel, it's being in the center and holding the energy of what's both inside the bounds and outside; it's magnetic - you draw in what's most coherent to the intention."
—Margo Adair



In the last two weeks I have repeatedly experienced the power of “holding the space”. This happened in an hour of silence in an ‘Awakin Circle’ and later in a workshop on Non-violent Communication.

The energy of silence and the energy of empathy moved me beyond bounds. I could see how non-judgmental, unconditional love and being present to the moment produces a harmonious and refined energy field. In such an energy field the heart opens to all emotions—be it love, pain, anxiousness, peace and so on.

I also remembered another learning I had several years ago—‘the dance of insight’—the ‘aha moment’ where a new learning and a realization sets-in the space that one holds in a coaching engagement.

In the book “The Intuitive Body” the author Wendy Palmer refers to the feminine energy having the attribute of

holding the space. It is the capacity to be, without doing- we accept life exactly how it is. The feminine energy has an element of spaciousness in which there is room for all kinds of things to occur. The ability to hold the space, to be, to not do, is the power of the feminine.

Another way to look at it is that holding space for someone means staying engaged and present with them while they undergo a process of self-inquiry and discovery of truth. When we hold the space for someone we are just present, and listening. We aren’t judging, giving advice or offering a solution. We are just there, in the present moment, holding their pain, their anguish, their joy, their space.

By holding the space we experience Presence—an important non-verbal capacity to affect and influence the situation and the environment. It is an

acceptance and affirmation of our emotions, from our pain to our bliss. It is a waiting and a stillness that quietly holds our dreams and hopes.

An analogy, which beautifully embodies the meaning of ‘holding the space’, is how a mother offers space to her child when she is hurt. Perhaps the mother is not offering any medicine, not even words of assurance, but in her silent, loving presence, the child feels warmth, acceptance and trust that everything will be fine. Such is the power of ‘holding the space’.

Put together, one can hold the space in meditation for oneself and also hold the space for others by deep listening and by providing a container that holds any overwhelming feelings emerging from others. The holding of space is an embodiment of love. It holds the potential to be life changing, healing and transformative.

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.

Just a call away

Health is not just the absence of illness. It is the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of an individual. Unplanned urbanization and rapid changes in the social structures have resulted in high stress levels amongst people of all age groups. Consistent pressure to perform and competition have led to stress, depression, anxiety, lack of self-assertion, and several other problems, which at extreme levels push individuals to take a drastic step like suicide. The prevalence of this issue and its scale of effect has brought a renewed focus on mental health and wellbeing. Social awareness campaigns and related services have been building the support systems required for individuals to tackle these challenges that appear in their personal as well as professional lives.

Balaji is a Mechanical Engineer by profession. Hailing from a lower middle class family, he could not afford to indulge in developmental initiatives that allowed him to contribute towards the society. He therefore volunteered with different organizations and even now at the age of 49, he continues to do so. "While volunteering with different social organizations, I was introduced to the larger objective of suicide prevention. I wanted to tell as many people as I can that one must fight to live his or her life, without giving up," shares Balaji, who then got trained and began to work closely in this front.

Balaji was on a mission to give quality time to people who were depressed or had suicidal tendencies so that such people could have someone to listen to their woes. "Just venting out their emotions made a remarkable difference in the lives of many individuals," he asserts. Changes in life style and the accompanying pressure to sustain the same for social status and acceptance has led to a stalemate where many individuals often feel lost between their external and internal identities. While some take to deviant behavior like alcoholism, substance abuse straining their family and relationships, others decide to eliminate themselves from the predicament.

Driven by a deep rooted willingness to serve the society and trained in counseling, Balaji did not have to look back. "CSIM changed the way I thought I must work." Referred by friends, Balaji at first saw the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme (SEOP) as another certificate course that can add more value to his work. However, what began as a casual intake in the classes brought in a paradigm shift in the way he visualized his work. "The classes rekindled my desire to become a Social Entrepreneur. I wanted to do more. I founded Darshika in 2015, in Hyderabad," says Balaji, acknowledging CSIM as a

Darshika is a voluntary organization that promotes holistic education to instill coping mechanisms which help individuals overcome their emotional challenges and psychological pressures



The classes rekindled my desire to become a Social Entrepreneur. I wanted to do more. I founded Darshika in 2015, in Hyderabad

platform that provides knowledge and exposure to build on ideas and experiment on their execution.

Darshika is a voluntary organization that promotes holistic education to instill coping mechanisms which help individuals overcome their emotional challenges and psychological pressures. Following the three cardinal principles of educate, empower and evolve, he encourages a chain of actions that creates space for people to reassess their situations. Run with an extensive network of volunteers, Darshika has been able to work with school students, adolescents, working population and senior citizens.

"Anybody could be stressed about anything. But, there must be someone who would listen and respond to them at that one moment when they feel at a complete loss of self-worth."

By educating the beneficiaries about the



need to speak out their minds, confront the obstacles and empowering them by eliciting the support systems like Darshika, Balaji and team look forward to the evolution of new personalities. Through constructive listening, they facilitate the affected people to analyse their life situations rationally and from all possible perspectives, which in turn helps them to identify alternative approaches to a particular crisis situation. As he insists again, "Darshika perseveres to build moral strength."

In a short span, the organization has also made its presence felt among national organizations like the Defenders India, which is an umbrella organization of like-minded groups. It has also been associated with several organizations who can refer individuals for support. So far, Darshika has catered to over 200 individuals on a one-to-one basis and most of them, as

Balaji recalls, felt that there was no one who cared for them or that their opinions were never respected.

Stress, as he illustrates with case examples, can affect individuals from 8 to 74 years, leading to suicidal tendencies. "We have a child studying in standard four who had attempted suicide due to stress," says Balaji. Every age group has to adhere to a predetermined and socially approved package of roles and responsibilities. Balaji opines that this emotional baggage, which is the prime reason for the sense of performance and competition, leading to stress, must be eliminated.

Darshika maintains its client information confidential and offers its services free of cost. They can be reached at (040)27755505 and 27755506, on all days between 5.30 and 9.30 pm.

—ShanmugaPriya.T

Inspiring Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

A Maharani Saheba spoke in a gentle and low voice, but quite audibly:

D.: “Maharajji, I have the good fortune to see you. My eyes have had the pleasure of seeing you, my ears the pleasure of hearing your voice.

“I am blessed with everything that a human being would like to have.” Her Highness’s voice choked. With great strength of mind she rallied and proceeded slowly, “I have all that I want, a human being would want But ... But ... I ... I ... do not have peace of mind ... Something prevents it. Probably my destiny....”

There was silence for a few minutes. Then Maharshi in his usual sweet manner spoke:

M.: “All right. What need be said has been said. Well. What is destiny? There is no destiny. Surrender, and all will be well. Throw all the responsibility on God. Do not bear the burden yourself. What can destiny do to you then?”

D.: Surrender is impossible.

M.: Yes. Complete surrender is impossible in the beginning. Partial surrender is certainly possible for all. In course of time that will lead to complete surrender. Well, if surrender is impossible, what can be done? There is no peace of mind. You are helpless to bring it about. It can be done only by surrender.

D.: Partial surrender - well - can it undo destiny?

M.: Oh, yes! It can.

D.: Is not destiny due to past karma?

M.: If one is surrendered to God, God will look to it.

D.: This being God’s dispensation, how does God undo it?

M.: All are in Him only.

D.: How is God to be seen?

M.: Within. If the mind is turned inward God manifests as inner consciousness.

D.: God is in all - in all the objects we see around us. They say we should see God in all of them.

M.: God is in all and in the seer. Where else can God be seen? He cannot be found outside. He should be felt within. To see the objects, mind is necessary. To conceive God in them is a mental operation. But that is not real. The consciousness within, purged of the mind, is felt as God.

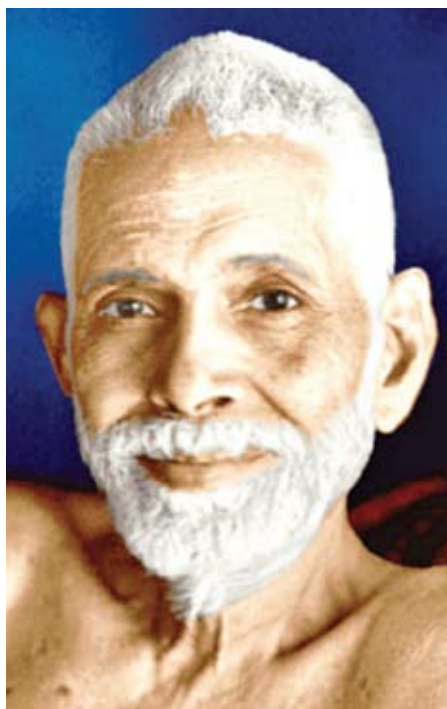
D.: There are, say, beautiful colours. It is a pleasure to watch them. We can see God in them.

M.: They are all mental conceptions.

D.: There are more than colours. I mentioned colours only as an example.

M.: They are also similarly mental.

D.: There is the body also - the senses and the mind. The soul makes use of all these for knowing things.



M.: The objects or feelings or thoughts are all mental conceptions. The mind rises after the rise of the I-thought or the ego. Wherefrom does the ego rise? From the abstract consciousness or Pure intelligence.

D.: Is it the soul?

M.: Soul, mind or ego are mere words. There are no entities of the kind. Consciousness is the only truth.

D.: Then that consciousness cannot give any pleasure.

M.: Its nature is Bliss. Bliss alone is. There is no enjoyer to enjoy pleasure. Enjoyer and joy - both merge in it.

D.: There are pleasure and pain in ordinary life. Should we not remain with only pleasure?

M.: Pleasure consists in turning and keeping the mind within; pain in sending it outward. There is only pleasure. Absence of pleasure is called pain. One’s nature is pleasure - Bliss (*Ananda*)

D.: Is it the soul?

M.: Soul and God are only mental conceptions.

D.: Is God only a mental conception?

M.: Yes. Do you think of God in sleep?

D.: But sleep is a state of dullness.

M.: If God be real He must remain always. You remain in sleep and in wakefulness - just the same. If God be as true as your Self, God must be in sleep as well as the Self. This thought of God arises only in the wakeful state. Who thinks now?

D.: I think.

M.: Who is this ‘I’? Who says it? Is it the body?

D.: The body speaks.

M.: The body does not speak. If so, did it speak in sleep? Who is this I?

D.: I within the body.

M.: Are you within the body or without?

D.: I am certainly within the body.

M.: Do you know it to be so in your sleep?

D.: I remain in my body in sleep also.

M.: Are you aware of being within the body in sleep?

D.: Sleep is a state of dullness.

M.: The fact is, you are neither within nor without. Sleep is the natural state of being.

D.: Then sleep must be a better state than this.

M.: There is no superior or inferior state. In sleep, in dream and in the wakeful state you are just the same. Sleep is a state of happiness; there is no misery. The sense of want, of pain, etc., arises only in the wakeful state. What is the change that has taken place? You are the same in both, but there is difference in happiness. Why? Because the mind has risen now. This mind rises after the ‘I-thought’. The thought arises from consciousness. If one abides in it, one is always happy.

D.: The sleep state is the state when the mind is quiet. I consider it a worse state.

M.: If that were so, why do all desire sleep? **D.:** It is the body when tired that goes to sleep. **M.:** Does the body sleep?

D.: Yes. It is the condition in which the wear and tear of the body is repaired.

M.: Let it be so. But does the body itself sleep or wake up? You yourself said shortly before that the mind is quiet in sleep. The three states are of the mind.

D.: Are they not states of the soul functioning through the senses, etc.?

M.: They are not of the soul or of the body. The soul remains always uncontaminated. It is the substratum running through all these three states. Wakefulness passes off, I am; the dream state passes off, I am; the sleep state passes off, I am. They repeat themselves, and yet I am. They are like pictures moving on the screen in a cinema show. They do not affect the screen. Similarly also, I remain unaffected although these states pass off. If it is of the body, are you aware of the body in sleep?

D.: No.

M.: Without knowing the body to be there how can the body be said to be in sleep?

D.: Because it is still found after waking up.

M.: The sense of body is a thought; the

thought is of the mind, the mind rises after the ‘I-thought’, the ‘I-thought’ is the root thought. If that is held, the other thoughts will disappear. There will then be no body, no mind, not even the ego.

D.: What will remain then?

M.: The Self in its purity.

D.: How can the mind be made to vanish?

M.: No attempt is made to destroy it. To think or wish it is itself a thought. If the thinker is sought, the thoughts will disappear.

D.: Will they disappear of themselves? It looks so difficult.

M.: They will disappear because they are unreal. The idea of difficulty is itself an obstacle to realisation. It must be overcome. To remain as the Self is not difficult.

D.: It looks easy to think of God in the external world, whereas it looks difficult to remain without thoughts.

M.: That is absurd; to look at other things is easy and to look within is difficult! It must be contrariwise.

D.: But I do not understand. It is difficult.

M.: This thought of difficulty is the chief obstacle. A little practice will make you think differently.

D.: What is the practice?

M.: To find out the source of ‘I’.

D.: That was the state before one’s birth.

M.: Why should one think of birth and death? Are you really born? The rising of the mind is called birth. After mind the body-thought arises and the body is seen; then the thought of birth, the state before birth, death, the state after death - all these are only of the mind. Whose is the birth?

D.: Am I not now born?

M.: So long as the body is considered, birth is real. But the body is not ‘I’. The Self is not born nor does it die. There is nothing new. The Sages see everything in and of the Self. There is no diversity in it. Therefore there is neither birth nor death.

D.: If sleep be such a good state, why does not one like to be always in it?

M.: One is always only in sleep. The present waking state is no more than a dream. Dream can take place only in sleep. Sleep is underlying these three states. Manifestation of these three states is again a dream, which is in its turn another sleep. In this way these states of dream and sleep are endless. Similar to these states, birth and death also are dreams in a sleep. Really speaking, there are no birth and death.

—Excerpted from talks with
Shri Ramana Maharishi

Rubber & Rabha

Rabha is one of the important tribe of Assam largely concentrated in Goalpara district of Assam. The traditional economy of the Rabhas in general, is based on agriculture, forest based activities and weaving. In the past, the Rabhas used to practice shifting cultivation. Later they took up the job of settled cultivation and started cultivation with plough. Besides cultivation, hunting was also an old practice of Rabha people. Weaving was a traditional occupation of the Rabha women. Known for their unique skill of hunting, trapping and fishing activities, they use different varieties of bamboo species and local wood to meet their livelihood.

In the early 90's most of the Rabha men were involved in major insurgent activities and the area was always in a state of unrest. When rubber was introduced to the Rabha tribes by the Rubber Board officers, many were apprehensive about it, but a few like Gigen Rabha and Joma Ram Rabha of Ghangamari village decided to go ahead and cultivate rubber in the small holdings that they had. On seeing the economic gains it yielded seven years later, many other Rabhas joined in rubber cultivation. Today Gigen, 60 years old, is the President of the Ronggiri Rubber Producers Society and has 56 rubber farmers enrolled as members.

"Ten years ago, we used to go only for rice cultivation and worked as laborers. Now, after planting rubber, we have a secure livelihood and a steady income. I have four sons and they are all very educated. I am very proud of this and I am sure that the life for my grandson who is just one year old now would be secure. He will not go through the hardships that we had faced while young," says an 82 year old energetic Rabha.

"Rubber has changed our lives. There were days when we went hungry for two to three days straight but today we have two square meals a day. We are all economically better and have bank accounts with little savings. We have also



stopped drinking alcohol as are aware of its ill-effects," says Joma Ram Rabha.

"My work at the Rubber Board is very fulfilling. When I meet these tribals and interact with them, it gives me a great sense of satisfaction. The regard they have for the Board is immense and they follow all that has been told to them. The quality of rubber that is produced by these tribals are of the highest quality which fetches them a good price. I appreciate their sincerity and commitment to their work and derive a lot of inspiration from them,"

says Priyanka, Extension Officer at Rubber Board in Agia.

"If not for Rubber we would have all been part of the insurgent groups in this area and I cannot imagine how and where our families would be. Rubber gave us all a positive diversion. There is work every day at the rubber farm. We have to ensure that rubber is tapped every day, processed and sold. We have no time to get involved with any of the militant forces who are plaguing into our areas.

Our hard work has paid off and today we

are all proud to say that we have a secure livelihood and our lives are also safe. Our children are all going to schools and colleges and we are proud to be part of the mainstream society in Assam. Though we live a little far away from the city, we do go to the cities and towns once in a while and experience urban culture too," says a very humble Gigen. He is a role model for the Rabhas of the surrounding villages in Bardamal area of Goalpara district of Assam.

"I am very happy to see the transformation in our village over the last decade. We used to live in dilapidated houses and were having a hand to mouth existence. We also had restricted access to the nearby places like Agia the nearest town as there were no vehicles for commuting. Today, rubber has brought in prosperity amongst us and the scene has changed. We were all able to re-build our houses and our standard of living has improved. I am happy to see the next generation children zooming around in their two wheelers and there is happiness and cheer in all the families.

Rubber has not only enabled individual farmers to prosper but has brought in prosperity in our society. "Our initial days of hard work have paid and we envision a bright future for our children," says a Kalpana Rabha, the woman Executive Secretary of the Society.

Most of the Rabha villages in this region are now easily approachable. Inter village pucca roads are connecting the villages with electricity, small markets and communication towers.

The present generation is taking part in the development process of the State. The young Rabhas have also become very eligible bachelors in the area as they have all come out of their impoverished conditions and are able to provide a better quality of life to their families.

The one crop that made this possible is Rubber!

—Latha Suresh

Editorial

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INITIATIVE AND MANAGEMENT

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani. 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. CSIM operates in Chennai, Coimbatore, Hyderabad and Bangalore.

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CSIM also facilitates Social Audit for social enterprises through Social Audit Network, UK and SAN, India.

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We could be heroes

A week of tragedy — one unlike anything Chennai had ever seen before — had undoubtedly brought out the best in the city. Even as flood waters wreaked havoc on homes, household appliances and even human lives, December 2015 will be remembered for Chennai's heroes, but unlike the kind we are used to. These heroes were just like anybody else, and their heroism was driven by just one factor: the need to make a difference.

On December 2, amateur danseuse Supriyaa Ananthanarayanan, was watching with despair as her television kept beaming visuals of a sinking city. "Just the thought that a lot of people were stranded overnight, and that there wasn't enough help or voices raised, was enough to tell me that help was needed soon," she says. It was day one of what would soon become the worst floods to hit Chennai in a century. Nearly 36,000 cusecs of water had just been released from the Chembambakkam Reservoir, and low-lying settlements by the Adyar River and the Cooum were slowly witnessing water levels rising. Soon enough, these homes were flooded. This, even as localities like Velachery and Madipakkam, built on erstwhile lakes and bunds, were also beginning to feel the wrath of mother nature. "I began with the intention of helping out a few friends who I hadn't heard from — people who lived in Velachery," Supriyaa concedes, "Soon enough, when we were out on the streets, we realized that the scale of the tragedy was beyond imagination. We saw how bad it was." Supriyaa then teamed up with her brother's theatre group and began by distributing food, to those who lost their homes overnight. The team also put up a bunch of numbers on social media, spreading the word that they were out there to help. "Chennai Live and Radio Mirchi had read our posts on Facebook and announced a couple of our phone numbers on air," she says, "That caused a lot of people to call us and donate relief material to the cause." But Supriyaa was merely one of several youngsters whose bravest avatars came to the fore when Chennai saw its worst tragedy in a while.

In another corner of the city, 18-year-old Loyola College student Adrian David was enjoying his rain break when he realized that it would be a while before the break ended. As news of flooding began streaming in on television, he took his bicycle to survey the areas around him. "MMDA Colony, Choolaimedu and Saidapet were the worst-affected, and I felt the need to help in any way I could," he says. With the help of two like-minded friends, the trio began supplying food packets to these areas, after getting a rough estimate of population count from locals. Similarly, several others — mostly youngsters — began doing their bit for a city in need. From organising relief control centres, to setting up relief camps, to volunteering in relief camps or driving SUVs with relief material for distribution, the Chennai floods saw Gen-Next in action. Chennai's spirit was there for all to see.

Several corporate houses: the Polaris Group, Sangam Cinemas and Cognizant Technology Solutions to name a few, also pitched in with monetary contributions and relief distribution. Overnight, blankets, food packets, sanitary napkins, mosquito repellents, candles and clothes reached several thousand people stranded in different pockets of the city: from Pulianthope to Alandur and even some of the worst-affected areas like Porur. "A lot of the people involved in volunteering were also affected by the floods in some way," Supriyaa says, "But they were able to get out safe without having to bear with too

much damage, and that must have also been a trigger to reach out and help those who weren't quite as fortunate." While most volunteering groups began by distributing food, they soon realized that food was being distributed in large measure by relief centres. The focus, as Supriyaa recalls, would not have to shift to other necessities: "like blankets, sanitary pads, and innerwear for women, clothes for children." Supriyaa continues: "We then put together a care kit, which included a blanket, brush, paste, soap, a pain balm, a mosquito coil, a biscuit pack and a bottle of water."

While most volunteering groups began by distributing food, they soon realized that food was being distributed in large measure by relief centres.



Welcare Health Systems

For setting up affordable eye-care centers inside other general hospitals, diabetes centers and pediatric centers

Founders: Dr. T. Senthil, Dr. N. Malathi

Welcare sets up an affordable eye screening centers inside existing diabetes centers, general hospitals, pediatric clinics and other health centers. Welcare installs an innovative Internet-connected retinal/pediatric screening device and trains a technician to operate the device. Patient information including retinal images are securely transferred online to

Welcare's certified ophthalmologists for review and diagnostics. The results and recommendations for follow-up are then shared with the patient through the staff at the facility they visited.

Unitus Seed Fund has invested in this venture which is the first company to innovate and screen for diabetic patients through telemedicine, connecting the patient in the diabetes center to a remote ophthalmologist; screen



children for visual defects through telemedicine; The company has also launched Teleopia, a customized software programme for tele-ophthalmology.

From two centres in 2013, it currently operates multiple centers in 11 cities across India. The venture aims to be a large Tele-Ophthalmology company with 800-1000 centers all over India and international markets and reach out to 10 lakh diabetic patients, two lakh pediatric patients and prevent at least 2.5 lakh patients from blindness. It primarily works in Tier 2, Tier 3 towns and provides these services to BOP patients at very low costs.

— S. Meera

This article was first published in The. Smart CEO Magazine (www.thesmartceo.in)

- Welcare has so far reached out to 30,000 BOP customers and prevented blindness in 6000.
- First to screen children for visual defects through telemedicine.
- First company to innovate and screen for diabetic patients through telemedicine, connecting the patient in the diabetes center to a remote ophthalmologist
- Create Teleopia, a customized software programme for teleophthalmology

Mydentist

Founded in 2010, the company has quickly scaled up to a chain of 102 dental care centers, with 500 dentists and has served over 4 lakh patients till date.

Founders: Vikram Vora, Parth Vora

Mydentist is a chain of dental clinics which aims to provide high quality dental services at affordable prices. The dental chain has 102 dental clinics across the country, with more than 500 dentists and treating more than four lakh patients. It recently raised US \$ 8 million in Series C round from LGT Venture Philanthropy, Seedfund and Asian Healthcare Fund.

Standardization of processes and procedures has enabled the chain to scale up and stay consistent across geographic locations. The company uses

cloud technology for billing, MIS, operational systems, asset management, facilities management and treatment planning and execution. This has enabled the company to make dental treatment affordable.

Mydentist has treated more than 400,000 patients, conducted more than 500,000 checkups and has 1200 employees. Its revenues have grown from Rs. 10 crore in 2013 to Rs. 48 crore in 2015.

— S. Meera

This article was first published in The. Smart CEO Magazine (www.thesmartceo.in)



- Interesting statistic: 85% of the employees of Mydentist are women
- It has 102 centers in Mumbai, Pune, Surat and Ahmedabad and is looking at having 300 clinics by March 2018
- It uses, Instahealth, a cloud based solution for billing, MIS, operational systems, asset management, facilities management and treatment planning and execution

Beginning with ‘ma’

Assam Autism Foundation was founded in 2003 as a Public Charitable Trust in Guwahati to help autistic children experience the process of learning, and then integrate them in normal schools.

As a nation that has many unresolved questions regarding the protection of child rights, attending to children with special needs, like autistic children, has a long way to go. Home to more than 10 million people with autism and one in every 66 children diagnosed with autism, there is certainly a need for extensive research on providing care for autistic children, who as experts say, can only be taught through their interests, which may seem trivial to any outsider.

Ms Shabina Ahmed, Founder Director and Managing Trustee of Assam Autism Foundation is a Developmental Paediatrician who has spent decades in demystifying the concept of autism for parents and medical practitioners. Drawing from her work experiences with the Indian Council for Child Welfare and World Vision, Shabina decided to focus on providing care for autistic children. With publications like ‘Understanding of Autism – first edition for physicians’, and ‘Demystifying Autism – for parents’, in English and Assamese to her credit, she has been regularly discussing autism in print and visual media.

Assam Autism Foundation was founded in 2003 as a Public Charitable Trust in Guwahati to help autistic children experience the process of learning, and then integrate them in normal schools. During her clinical practice as a paediatrician in 1996, Shabina came across a two and a half year old child who was autistic. Taken aback, she referred the child to NIMHANS in Bangalore, which she thought was the right place for such children. When the child came back to her own chamber after sometime, she was moved by the parents’ perspective. “All they wanted from me was to help the child call her ma,” she recalls.

For the first time, Shabina could see autism from the parents’ point of view and decided to spend two to three hours of her clinical practice only for this child. As this child showed improvement, the word spread and many parents approached her seeking similar services. “This is when I realized that this mission needs long term commitment and service so that we can see the children from early learning process to adulthood. We, seven friends, came together and started this Trust,” shares Shabina who was also instrumental in bringing out the ‘Disaster preparedness for Disability’ – first of its kind manual in pictorial form for the hearing impaired and autistic,



Essentially, what AAF tries to build is an atmosphere for inclusive education which calls for an inclination to reach every child, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities.

and in braille form for the visually challenged.

As Shabina always advocated through AAF, learning process of autistic children is completely different from that of regular children. “Without the much needed help, they become school dropouts and parents bring them back to me. Autistic children appear to be themselves, directed by themselves, and in their own world. Therefore, they lack social and emotional bondage; language, communication. As a result, they do not make or have friends. As they do not initiate socialization, their play and learning process are also restricted. But, they are very interest driven,” Shabina explains.

“During normal teaching such children may ignore what is told, but when we try to explain concepts through their interests, they love to engage in the process,” says Shabina, adding that it is their specific interests

team headed by Shabina, who is also the Curriculum Head, ponders on where to begin and how much they can make up. As she elaborates, they are into ‘backward teaching’ – “we identify the subject of interest (for example: brinjal), then break down from the whole item, take them through drawing, coloring, labeling and then writing, which is the exact reverse of what happens in regular school.” Illustrating the need to enter the child’s world of learning, she refers to a child who completely refused to write and was very sensitive to new habits. On identifying that he loved red color, the team started using red colored objects, red sketch pens and then, he began to write. As she aptly puts it, “We have to spend quality time in learning the child and then to enter the child’s world. We cannot afford to hurry through the curriculum we have at hand. The child’s interest decides what he or she learns and also the pace of learning.”

Essentially, what AAF tries to build is an atmosphere for inclusive education which calls for an inclination to reach every child, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities. Access to knowledge becomes critical in such an endeavour. Research has shown that 250 genes are associated with autism. Besides the epigenetic factors, toxic substances in the environment are also believed to cause autism. Every child’s biochemistry is different, their response to toxic substances in the environment will also be of varying degrees and sensitivity. As small behavioral changes can influence these factors, AAF has been active in promoting a greener planet by advocating the use of paper bags instead of plastics and also cycling drives. AAF has simultaneously embarked on the task of raising awareness on autism and research on how to educate autistic children. Recently, Shabina made a presentation at an International Conference in Turkey in 2014. Amidst all these efforts and key positions in many forums, awards are aplenty. Shabina is the recipient of many prestigious awards like the National Award for Child Welfare given by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2014), Community Leadership award given by ERD Assam (2013), Excellence in Social Initiatives given by Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhini Trust (2008) and Pioneer award given by the Indian Academy of Paediatricians, east zone (2002).



that causes the deviance in growth patterns and hence autistic children won’t be able to cope with general schooling.

While research continues to get closer to the cause for this developmental disorder, AAF attempts to provide vocational training and skill building programmes for its children so that they can function independently. “My children are growing and they need skills to realize independence. As we have to follow a one-to-one approach, our progress in this endeavour will be dictated by how children take to these new efforts,” says Shabina. A child who likes vegetables is taught through vegetables while another who likes colors is taught through art. With such human intensive teaching process, AAF is now working with 12 children and 9 teachers.

Children who come here, whether at the age of 3 or 7, are untrained. The

—Shanmuga Priya.T

Communication – critical for sound project management

One factor that can totally mask a sound project management is the absence of appropriate sounds; that is absence of appropriate communication. Most of the time communication is akin to verbal dialogue. But the true meaning of communication is when something is conveyed it has to match with what is understood. It goes beyond the explicit and verbal to several arena of non-verbal, written, symbolic, unstated, implied and so on. Conflicts arise when there is a gap that arises in any of the areas of communication.

Communication is a critical dimension in project management. It becomes more critical when the projects are heavily people dependent. Social organizations are necessarily people oriented and therefore communication becomes 'The Critical Dimension' that plays a large part in the project's progress, sustenance or failure. More than what is communicated, 'how', 'when' and 'where' is more important for efficient communication. 'Why' becomes very important for effective communication.

Communication has many dimensions, channels and modes. It is the process required to ensure timely and appropriate generation, collection, distribution, storage, retrieval and ultimate disposition of information. Communication involves 2 parties – a sender and a receiver. An efficient and effective communication will involve a thorough understanding of what the receiver needs to be communicated. The requirements of the customer / investor / promoter / donors / supplier or the staff have to be captured and understood well. The requirements are captured and stored for effective planning. To plan well, it is important to know the full context in terms of scope, requirements, environment and past experiences in which the communication has to happen. Capturing the history of the human emotional dimensions also play a critical role in the planning activity.

There are many methods of planning the communication and technology today is gaining ground as the most efficient way. There is no one way that is the best. It has to be appropriately customized to the stake holder and the context individually. The impact a communication has on the stakeholder is based on their interest in the projects / initiatives / business or any transaction. Collecting as much information as possible to ensure a holistic understanding is important. For e.g. all the demographic information of stakeholders which includes their place, age, critical dates, background, experiences, logistical requirements, functional requirements, disciplines, specialties, as well as their likes and



dislikes, responsibilities, cultural background, decision powers and so on.

There are many channels that exist in communication, if there are 2 people it's just one channel, but when the number increases, e.g. 3, then it becomes three channels, 4 is 6 channel and 6 people will be 15 channels. This is because the combinations keep increasing exponentially.

A simple formula is to calculate the channels is $= N(N-1)/2$, where N is the number of people. This information is critical because we can't deal with just one or two channels or modes of communication; we need many combination and configurations for each person. Choosing the channel is also a critical step in planning.

The most important fact is to know that the communication should be expended either when communicating information contributes to success or where a lack of communication can lead to failure. This applies to both internal and external communication needs of the organization.

Many a times in most of the projects, organizations, entities or social enterprises, there would be communication dashboards either through reports, MIS (management information system), or memorandums or simple meetings with sharing. These methods are very contextual and need based. Not all methods would be required but the way they would add value will be defined based on the plan rather than trial and error method. As the communication channels, methods and responses mature over a period of time, one can decide and understand the most appropriate and contextually required mode of communication. This maturity and understanding needs to be documented so that others can use it appropriately.



Monitoring and controlling communication is another important part of this process. When the 5W 1H (what, when, where, who, why and how) of the communication with its purpose is clear, channelizing and utilizing the communication will become easier. Responses to the 5W 1H has to be noted clearly and documented. Considerable discussions with stakeholders have to happen periodically and updates have to be documented too regularly. These actions will ensure that communication barriers and issues would be reduced considerably. Efficient and effective communication is an effort and a process and not a default that can be taken for granted.

In communication processes we have to watch out for certain barriers that will lead to external and internal conflicts. Communication issues may arise because of the three major gaps (Sampath, JM 1999) -

- Intention and Action: This can happen when there are strong beliefs and biases because of which there is a mask and need to maintain a pseudo image
- Action and Perception: This happens due to cultural bias, beliefs from past experiences, familiarity and fear/ insecurity leading to different interpretations
- Perception and Expectation: This happens due to non-clarity of purpose and filters applied while communicating and receiving the information.

There could be many filters that may filter receiving and understanding the communication. Some of the major ones could be -

- Senders reputation and status within the organization

- Environmental background
- Dysfunctional emotional behaviors and past baggage
- Situational consideration – Pre defined Mindset
- Historical consideration in message interpretation
- Ambiguity in language and Semantics
- Knowledge Base
- Message content – hidden agendas and future plans
- Differences in culture
- Differences in project environments
- Attitude – perceiving others using one's own standards
- Stereotypes – sticking to a particular culture to apply in any situation
- Thought patterns – differing culture across geographical distances/organizations
- Time sense – differing sense of urgency

The Leaders in the organization have to constantly look into each of these factors very seriously and take utmost care in every channel of communication, within the system or outside. It is not about the number of years that people work in an organization that is important; but what they remember, leave behind as a legacy and how they felt and how much they enjoyed being a part of the journey is more important. Communication plays a key role in ensuring the journey is meaningful and enjoyable. The popular saying 'words are a source of misunderstanding' goes a long way in showing that when there is efficient and effective communication 'words can be a source of great transformation'.

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath and Prathaap B

Flood Relief by CSIM Students



C SIM staff and students have been rendering relief to the flood affected people in Kanchipuram district since day one of the disaster.

At Mathuranthagan, one of our students works for the welfare of the Irula tribes who belong to BPL (below the poverty line). Food, water, and relief items were distributed to 77 families (300 members) who were severely affected by the floods.

CSIM students are now conducting a rapid appraisal at Kanchipuram district to identify areas for rehabilitation support.

If you wish to join us in the journey of rebuilding the lives of the affected, please write to chennai@csim.in or call 9884700029.



“Any organization does not sustain only on profits. It is much more than that.”

Latha Pandiarajan shares with Marie Banu Ma Foi programmes and her pleasant moments.

Latha Pandiarajan a Chartered Accountant is the co-founder of Ma Foi Management Consultants; India's first and largest internationally acclaimed human resource Management Company, based out of Chennai. Ma Foi initially focused on placing middle level managers in the Middle East. It then started offering all the businesses under HR Services which made them the No.1 HR services provider in India. In 2002 they partnered with the Dutch HR Company, Vedior which took a majority stakes in them. This helped them to expand in various countries and they had 70 offices in India and had their presence in 18 countries. In 2007 Randstad acquired Vedior for US\$5.14 billion and hence Ma Foi became a part of Randstad.

In an exclusive interview with Marie Banu, she shares Ma Foi programmes and her pleasant moments.

What was your vision when you launched Ma foi?

We started Ma Foi in 1992 when HR is not even an industry. It was more on personal management and there were only few recruitment companies. It wasn't very professional as some used to take money from candidates to place. Looking at all this, we wanted to be in this space as there is lot more you can do here. My husband Mr. Pandiarajan belongs to this industry and I am a Chartered Accountant. Hence, we thought this combination would work well. I always had a passion to work for HR and to work with people. So, it blended well.

Ma Foi is a French word meaning “My Word”. I thought that it symbolised trust, what we really wanted to say in terms of integrity. That's how we started. The vision was to make a change and we were pioneers in this industry. It was exciting and at the same time bearing the pioneers cross.

Right from day one we always believed in two things: institution has to be built on values and the institution will be run by people. We took people from different industries and trained them.

Initially, it had its own challenges. We started with only 60,000 rupees. Banks did not recognize us and they were not giving us over draft facilities. We kept growing and always had the drive to grow large because more than anything size matters as it is only then that people sit and listen to you.

I can really say from my own experience that this is

very true. We struggled to get an overdraft of one lakh rupees and it is so ironical that when you become big the same bank assigns a relationship manager to handle your account and it is very easy to even get 100 crores from the bank.

About MaFoi and its charitable activities?

We donated 5000 rupees —our first profit from Ma Foi to Banyan. Initially we started supporting children in the Sivakasi belt. At the end of 1993, we launched the Trust. As the organization started growing, we had a lot of people helping us and wanting to do many things. Hence, in 1997 we started the Ma Foi Foundation. More employees started to volunteer and take part.

Any organization does not sustain only on profits. It is much more than that.

Can you tell us about your Projects?

We always wanted to look at our programmes holistically. Our focus was on education, health care and women

empowerment for sustainable livelihoods. For education, we started the programme under the brand ‘Disha’ meaning ‘showing the way’. Health care was carried out by Ekam. It was initially incubated by Ma Foi and when it started growing large, we spun it off as a separate Trust. For women, we worked through Sornam Trust. Each of these Trusts help each other. We conduct medical camps for our children through Ekam, and for women who are poor and cannot afford their children's education — they are supported through Disha.

The idea was to look at a family as a whole so that people can move from one level to another. When you look at it holistically, it becomes easier to deal with.

You have been actively involved in the social sector for a few years. Can you share some memorable moments?

I have a lot of pleasant memories. What is very close to my heart is our project ‘Gems of Disha’. This programme focuses on children who are not studying well.

We had initially supported children who were studying in eighth standard in corporation schools. We worked along with the respective School Principals and conducted weekend classes for the weak children.

One day, when we wanted to expand the project, we identified students who were not studying well and were abused and mocked at. We then decided to work with the last 10 students in eighth standard and mentor them. Instead of having teachers, we invited students who had passed out from the same corporation school and were studying in college to come in the evenings to teach these children. We asked them to first spend time listening to the children and then slowly start teaching. They could related well and we paid them a pocket money of 1500 rupees a month. We took 60 children in the first batch and my greatest satisfaction was when 52 of them cleared the board examination. Most of them who used to get single digit marks are now in College.



We donated 5000 rupees —our first profit of at Ma Foi —to Banyan. Initially we started supporting children in the Sivakasi belt.