

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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EDITOR: MARIE BANU

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Social wellness is about nurturing ourselves and our relationships. It is an important part of our overall health and means maintaining our health – both outside of those relationships and within them as well.

From the time we are born, our relationships help us learn to navigate the world. We learn to interact with others, develop everyday health habits, and be a part of different communities around us.

Social health and social wellness are a vital part of our overall health and wellbeing. Over the years, sociologists have created a link between social relationships and health outcomes. We interact with people every day. The quality and quantity of our relationships affect our mental and physical wellbeing. Maintaining a good level of social wellness lets you build interpersonal relationships with others.

Having good social wellness is critical to building emotional resilience. It is like maintaining a garden. Weeding out negativity helps in ensuring continued growth and beautiful blossoms to last a lifetime.

The effects of developing and maintaining healthy relationships are endless. Research shows that people who have healthy relationships and good support systems have better overall mood, deal better with stress and have increased self-esteem.

Conscious actions are important in learning how to balance our social life with our academic and professional lives. It involves openly communicating needs, feelings, thoughts and desires to those we trust, and actively listening with empathy when they share with us. It also requires engaging in and enjoying positive interactions with others and maintaining meaningful friendships and professional connections.

Even as we care about our personal connections, we should also care about the greater good of society, including our communities and the environment. The changemakers featured in Conversations Today are those who have practiced active listening and empathy.

As we begin our journey to social wellness, let us discover the power we have to enhance our personal relationships.

Wish you and your family a Merry Christmas and a Bright and Prosperous New Year!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh

Marie Banu

RELEASING EMOTIONAL BLOCKS

“For every tear shed, a day is added to your life”



Continuing with our Positive energy series of focusing on an ancient saying, we are particularly moved with the saying “For every tear shed, a day is added to your life”.

Often one relates tears to only suffering and sadness. It is also considered to be emotionally weak to shed tears. How our society and culture has snatched away an important existential mechanism of crying and helping our emotions flow!

As we dwell on emotional energy, one aspect that comes up repeatedly is, when deep emotional patterns are cleansed, tears well-up. It is not a sign of distress, but one of release. On the same lines, when we experience abundance and bliss, tears manifest in such an experience.

Like the physical body has the process of perspiration to regulate the body temperature, similarly, tears have a role to play too. Though perspiration is uncomfortable, we still do not stop it, because we cannot. However, with tears which regulate emotions, we have learned to stop it. Like perspiration removes body toxins, crying removes emotional toxins.

There is a huge limiting belief around crying. The belief is, crying indicates that you are sensitive and not emotionally strong. Hence, many of us wear the mask of being emotionally strong without crying and are unknowingly depriving ourselves from the natural process of regulating our emotions.

We begin repressing our feelings when we do not want them to ‘come-out’. In other words we do not accept them. Shedding a tear is acceptance. It is a choice we make to liberate ourselves from traps that we set on our own.

Learn to release your tears. Experience the healing properties of tears. Crying is a spiritual process, as it indicates an open and softened heart. The ancient saying of ‘adding a day to our life’ points towards life force energy flowing through us and adding a day to our life.

This cleansing of emotional toxins is essential to create physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual harmony. The emotional toxins create blocks that hinder our movement forward. Removing these blocks may not be a one-time activity; rather it may require a regular check and maintenance. When the life force energy flows unhindered, it nurtures every dimension of our existence and creates balance and centeredness.

Some guidance on emotional cleansing:

- Become aware of ‘how’ you are feeling during various situations and interactions and acknowledge the feeling/s, without branding it as good or bad, nice or not nice
- Next, accept the feeling/s, with humility and openness – whatever it is, it is OURS
- Then, recognize whether the feeling serves you or not, whether the feeling stems from ego or the feeling is an external projection on our self. If it does not serve you, release it either by sharing, writing it and tearing the paper, or crying it out of your system.

Finally, attempt to live in the present moment, without any past or future references or predetermined notions handed down by society or books, without any expectations projecting yourself into the future, and without an ego that misguides and draws you away from your true self – the universal energy.

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.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



Local schools and balwadis were supported in many ways. Right from painting of schools, providing books, play equipment, and furniture to planting saplings for school garden - SHG women ushered in a new phase in their village schools that made learning fun and engaging. Interest in education increased as the Society awarded school toppers and talented students. Starting with women, Kala and team were now able to bring all children in the community to school. Awarded thrice by the District Collector for her work, Kala reiterates that this was no easy feat, considering the level of backwardness in the village when she began her journey. Her SHGs have also been awarded many times by the District and State authorities for their contribution to community welfare.

So far, 700 women have set up independent businesses. 876 women have been pooled together under Sakthi Farmers' Producer Company to manage all agriculture and allied activities. They are supported with loans, marketing and also provided natural fertilisers. Once the membership reaches 1000, the group will be enrolled under NABARD scheme where funds and cows will be given to these women to engage in dairy farming. Kala has been very hopeful about this venture as this is the first time the SHG women will be engaging on a scalable business model.

Kala was always intrigued by the idea of social businesses, but she was not very sure about her skills in writing or presenting business plans. She did know that it was definitely a need to take her enterprising SHG

Observation and reasoning are two different traits whose co-existence adds great value in any context, especially parenting. Ms. Kala Palaniappan, Secretary of Mahasakthi Welfare Society in Sarathupatti village, Theni district, Tamil Nadu, founded in 1998, is in complete agreement as these two traits determined her course of life, personally and professionally.

Hailing from a backward village in Dindugal district, Kala grew up witnessing the lives of women and children. "I wondered why women and children's lives revolved around what men in their families did. As I grew older and understood about the family ecosystem, it was my parents actions that helped me understand the family society interface," recalls Kala.

As the daughter of an ex-army man who was wounded in the 1962 China War, she saw how her father's role and identity in the community changed. It was her father who taught about basic hygiene and first aid to people in the village. His social engagements further exposed her to the nuances of decoding needs and resources within a community. Eventually, she started her independent organisation 'Mahasakthi Welfare Society' to work for women and child development. "All that grooming I received since young made me realise that a structured approach and reach was essential for sustainable results as work in this sector cannot be retracted," she warns.

Women's economic independence not only answered many questions, but also eased the entry and execution of new ideas that could benefit both families and communities. Having cracked this early on, Kala was encouraged to map the journey of her SHGs appropriately. She formed 500 SHGs and trained them in account keeping and a wide variety of skills like making jute bags, vermi compost, fur toys, embroidery, tailoring, dairy farming, etc. For every 30 women trained, Kala ensured that at least two women started their independent enterprise. Loans, mentoring and



other support was ensured to make the effort successful. "Two is a small number, but it helped build trust. It took a lot of time to convince women about the potential of earning independently and when they did, it was overwhelming to see how families and communities adapted to the change. With this new found identity, women were coming forward to support initiatives that could improve the lives of their children. The importance women began to give to education had a strong impact," adds Kala.

When children, specially girl children dropped out or took long toilet breaks, women from four SHGs came forward and erected a water tank that made the toilets in school functional. Impressed by women's skills in decision making and prioritising needs, Kala encouraged every such initiative genuinely. This, she feels, is true empowerment!

women to new heights and therefore, came to CSIM. "It is not just the technicalities of writing a business plan. It is the whole thought process that must be nurtured from an early stage. How much we manage to trace the root of our ideas reveals their potential to transform lives. Now, I not just write business plans but have also learnt the art of studying the business idea from a different perspective. The exposure at CSIM not only teaches what you need but also prepares us for something bigger," shares an overwhelmed Kala, who was awarded a Doctorate by Chennai's Peace Global Institute.

Shanmuga Priya.T

THE INCLUSIVE CAFE



About 2.2% of India's population lives with some kind of physical or mental disability, as per the National Statistics Office report on disability released last year. After the passing of 'The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill – 2016', perceptions regarding disability underwent a radical change. It became one of the salient points on the corporate agenda with many organisations initiating special drives to recruit people with disabilities (PwD).

Mitti Café is completely run and managed by people with various kinds of disabilities ranging from Down's Syndrome, Autism, Asperger's to visual and hearing impairments, etc. The very first branch was set up in August 2017 at Deshpande foundation in BVB College of Engineering and Technology campus, at Hubballi, Karnataka. 90% of the equipment for the first unit of Mitti Café was donated by the community.

Alina Alam was 23 and a student at Azim Premji University when she started Mitti Café. She was doing her final year studies when she came up with the idea. An internship at Bengaluru's Samarathanam Trust for the Disabled got Alina involved for the first time in this space. This made her contemplate on the untapped potential of people with disabilities "I always wanted to build a social enterprise that engages these people in an empowered setup, outside the scope of charity. And that's how I



envisaged the concept of Mitti café," shares Alina.

Alina realised the struggles that people with disabilities faced and understood how they were not offered equal opportunities in the job market. She wanted to bring about a change to this situation thereby assuring them of a dignified livelihood. She believes that food connects people and this could be a great medium to spread her message.

"People bond over food. It's one of the most common activities to break the ice," says Alina. "I always wondered if

this action can be channelled to break the ice between the customers and this community", she explains.

The Café made its presence felt across Karnataka in various colleges, hospitals, business parks, and corporate campuses. Today, 800 trained adults with disabilities are gainfully employed across 15 cafes across 2 cities in Bengaluru. The Cafés have a disabled-friendly infrastructure where the wheelchair employees can move around with ease and the walls have sign language guides that can help customers

to order food in sign language. Menu cards have incorporated Braille to aid the visually impaired staff, self-explanatory placards and flicker lights that signal the staff when there is a customer call, and more such unique ideas to facilitate the disabled staff. These adaptations make every employee at Mitti Café feel valued and provides them with a better environment to work, thus making it inclusive.

Many persons with disabilities often see a dead end ahead of them due to the huge stigma that still revolve around people with disabilities. Mitti café has opened doors to a new life for each one of them who are working here. In fact, the Café has been able to normalise disability, create awareness amongst people, and empower them by providing opportunities to nurture and evolve. It is a great medium for everyone to understand that the differently-abled people are employable and are asset to an organisation.

Despite facing many hurdles due to COVID-19 and the lockdown, Mitti Café has not glitched in following its dreams. Over last year, several of their teams of adults with disabilities served over 5 million meals and beverages to frontline workers, doctors, etc. They have even set up food stalls in hospitals which led to providing rehabilitation to countless people with disabilities. Aside from meal distribution, the employees

also started making gift packs as a vertical. Two branches have opened in Koramangala and Jayanagar through crowdfunding.

COVID brought forth tremendous hurdles. But the Mitti Café team found different ways to help others. “Along with the Café, we have crafted other initiatives like Experiential training for persons with disabilities where each Mitti Café and their retail production and packaging units facilitate experiential training for persons with physical, intellectual and psychiatric disabilities. Having access to an opportunity to skill development and understanding facets of roles gives them an opportunity to use productive abilities and skills that develops their skills and employability,” she says.

MITTI Karuna (Compassion) Meals is an initiative started during COVID-19 first phase focusing on nutritious meals prepared and served by Mitti Café team to benefit economically vulnerable communities. This includes homeless people, COVID patients, caretakers of poor patients at government and charitable hospitals and children coming from low-income backgrounds. With a cost of 25 rupees per meal, Mitti Café raised funds to distribute 2 lakh meals in the last 17 months to the economically vulnerable. A part of this income goes towards the labour cost to pay members from their PWD team who are rendering their services.

The idea of helping people with disabilities came to Alina when she saw a documentary about Roman emperor Nero and how he burned people who he thought were unfit in a party. “This realisation was a turning point for me. I knew that I could no longer face myself if I remained to be one of Nero’s guests. I decided not to sit for placements, much to the dismay of my parents, who wanted me to ‘settle down’ either with a job or a husband. Instead, I started volunteering with organisations who worked in the disability inclusion space. The statistics were staggering – 7 crore persons with physical, intellectual and psychiatric disability in India, and 1.2 billion across the world – struggling for equal opportunities, economic independence and dignity despite their ability and



willingness to engage in productive work that would enable them to contribute to the sustainable development of the country, she says. “I realised that the problem was not their ability, but the disability in our own perception and the limitation which we placed in the way we view them was the problem, and I knew this needed to change,” she adds.

Alina, who is now named by Forbes, in the 30 people under 30 list, shares that she always wanted to build a social enterprise that engages these people in an empowered setup, outside the scope of charity. These were the thoughts that enabled her to build the Café.

Mitti Café currently has plans of expanding to Chennai, Mumbai and Hyderabad. They also provide hands-on training within the Café, following which the persons with disabilities can work at the Café or be placed in organisations that Mitti Café works with.

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

Ms. Marie Banu
Director, Chennai
@ 9884700029

Mr. Ramesh Balasundaram
Director, Bangalore
@ 9845211311

Mr. K L Srivastava
Director, Hyderabad
@ 91- 9912656112

Dr. Madhuri. R
Head, Coimbatore,
@ 91-9840222559

Dr. Agyeya Tripathi
Head - North & NE India
@ 91-8058662444

Mr. Sandeep Mehto,
Head – Hosangabad,
@ 91-96696 77054

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

For further information, please contact: **Ms. Latha Suresh**
Director, SAN, India
@ 92822 05123.
www.san-india.org

HOPE IN THE FACE OF DISASTER



In a disaster-prone country like India, Caritas has come to the forefront of relief during calamities of epic proportions. Since its inception, Caritas India has been involved in reconstruction and rehabilitation during such disasters. It's role includes responding to affected communities and extension of relief services, a role that the organization has played dating back to 1970, up until recent cyclones in 2021.

Deploying a mixture of skill, technique and risk-reduction approaches, Caritas India has overtime contributed to reducing losses whenever disaster strikes. From the Uttarakhand and Latur earthquakes in the early 1990s to the COVID pandemic and Cyclone Yaas in recent times, Caritas' interventions have been ever-present.

In fact, the last five decades has seen the organization work towards nation-

building as it addresses the cause of poverty. "We have been able to support 22,945 projects to tune of Rs.1,373 crore," says Fr. Paul Moonjely, Executive Director, Caritas India, "About 25,000 houses have been built for the disaster affected victims. As part of Tsunami rehabilitation program alone, Rs. 500 crores have been spent, building 13,420 houses and supporting 50,000 households with food and short term recovery aid."

"During Gujarat Earthquake, we set up 3,215 permanent houses and supported 20,000 households with livelihood generation and short-term recovery needs," Fr Paul adds.

Caritas adopts a four-pronged strategy to humanitarian aid: Immediate relief aid, Short term recovery, Long term rehabilitation and Risk resilience and management. "Our endeavour is to assist

and facilitate the disaster affected communities to build back better and establish normalcy in their lives," says Fr Paul, "Our approach under Immediate relief aid is to provide lifesaving essentials to the affected population such as food packets, drinking water, health care, medical support, non-food essentials such as temporary shelter makeshifts, mats and blankets."

Under the short-term recovery, Caritas India engages temporary to semi-permanent shelters and extends livelihood support to the affected population. Long-term rehabilitation sees the organization intervene through livelihood generation, counselling, permanent shelters, development of task force group's role allocation, village disaster and management committee.

"Our risk resilience and management cover the aspect of ecosystem

management and restoration," Fr Paul explains, "This is an intervention during peace times to study the ecosystem and based on that create preparedness measures within the community to address recurring calamities."

In humanitarian aid, timeliness and accuracy are two key parameters. "During a crisis, the most important mandate is to ensure that the affected households are reached out on time providing support to address the needs," says Fr Paul, "However, in the wake of timeliness, accuracy can sometimes be compromised." Over time, Caritas has faced a bevy of challenges including: difficulty in accessing remote locations, lack of data to address needs, inadequate emergency preparedness, frequency of disasters and response fatigue.

Caritas has worked in close collaboration with the NDMA, NIDM

nationally and BSDMA, ASDMA and OSDMA locally, and was recently awarded the Healthgiri Awards announced by the Ministry of Health as the Best NGO, during COVID pandemic.

"With the engagement of the local panchayat members, community institution leaders and local district authorities, Caritas India engages and facilitates the relief operations spearheaded by the community," says Fr Paul, "Our intervention has a secular approach, and we engage through the local partners and district administration on board."

One of Caritas' visions for the future is that stakeholders in humanitarian response should share a common agenda through joint assistance strategies, partnership declarations, harmonisation, and alignment action plans. "This can be



achieved through a series of trainings, workshops, and consultations across the country to create a common commitment and cohesive standing on humanitarian aid," says Fr. Paul. "In our humanitarian realm, one of the prominent and accelerating force of effective response has been the local stakeholders," he adds, "Caritas endeavours to engage with the local stakeholders (community leaders, grass-root institutions, local NGOs, duty bearers and the local village representatives) to create a holistic approach to any crisis."

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, billions of people were in isolation, which prompted many others to volunteer in many innovative ways. "Despite COVID, the spirit of volunteering has not extinguished within," says Fr Paul, "Volunteers during crisis can be seen as development boosters that influence and create a larger scope of effective response and preparedness interventions. Caritas India envisages mobilizing a pool of volunteers across the country to respond to a crisis and accentuate humanitarian aid."

One of the lessons COVID-19 taught society at large was the creation of community-based response mechanisms that would help in accessing support and care during the time of crisis. "Disaster clinics were meant to serve one such purpose," says Fr. Paul, "These disaster clinics are terminologically community-based arrangements that would identify and address the local needs of the community or a village through various mechanisms of development plans, community services, community resources etc. This is only to create local and sustainable mechanisms of ownership."

Caritas says it will continue to build on the scope of humanitarian aid. It hopes to do this through capacity enhancement, learning and increasing responsiveness, networking and partnerships and technology adoption.

"Research studies and assessments would help Caritas to strategise our future interventions and responses in different states," says Fr. Paul. "The study's recommendations could be effectively used by various stakeholders to engage in advocacy works and lobby with respective states and philanthropists to develop proactive and innovative strategic responses."

Another pillar of functioning for Caritas is partnerships and networks, continue to be its biggest strength. "This is especially true for far-flung areas of the country," Fr. Paul says, "Continuous knowledge sharing through training, seamless flow of two-way feedback, and multiple communication channels have helped Caritas to understand situations in depth and respond accurately and effectively."

ENVIRONMENTAL FINANCE

In year 2015, United Nations approved Sustainable Development Goals as universal call to take actions against environment protection, poverty, hunger, justice and peace. SDGs combine major social and environmental goals to achieve sustainable growth. The concept of Environmental Finance is not new but it got much needed attention after introduction of SDGs. In broad way, various pricing and trading policies that are applied to reduce the negative impact of climate change are considered under the purview of Environmental Finance. Basic idea behind the concept is to reallocate all business resources for improving investment sustainability along with ensuring profit. Funding for Projects that harm/damage environment is prohibited under the practice of environmental financing. Corporates, businesses, NPOs, Government organizations and even individual households are practicing environmental financing today.

Undoubtedly, achievement of SDGs requires funding, UNCTAD (2015) highlighted that the investment gap for environmental finance in developing nations is US\$ 2.5 trillion, which is more than India's GDP alone. It is estimated that annual global requirement to achieve SDGs will reach USD\$5 to USD\$7 trillion by 2030. Financial institutions play a significant role in providing timely, customized and affordable financial solutions to beneficiaries and stakeholders. Environment Finance can broadly be categorized in three parts to achieve sustainability in long term.

Industrial development activities have utilized available natural resources for its development and growth. A section of global community over utilized these resources while others are still deprived of basic living needs, liking availability of water and food. Studies have shown that developed economies have played a significant role in polluting the globe and bringing in the overall environmental imbalance. The residuals of chemicals which are dumped in oceans, poisonous gases coming out from factories, non-biodegradable waste burrowed into the ground has disturbed the basic ecology of our planet. From global warming to increased number of natural calamities to unconventional temperature and rainfall levels, all connect to one primary cause, i.e. environment.

It is well established facts that countries and communities do not want to compromise in industrial and economic growth, but certainly we need to find alternative ways of doing business which causes less pollution and are environment friendly. Adoption of new processes, methods and systems require new technology, research and efficient machines/tools. Industry and economies see this transformation as a cost centric activity and hence try to escape from modern environmental friendly ways and means. Global development institutions are now working close with government, policy makers, financial institutions, environmentalists and civil society organizations to develop financial solutions for environment stakeholders to tackle this issue. At this juncture the concept of environmental finance got attention from policy makers, governments and development institutions.

Instruments for Environmental Finance

Different stakeholders have different outcome orientation, each is on a lookout of specific indicators and result oriented parameters, because of this number of financial instruments have been designed for environment sustainability.

Governments and corporations are adopting for Green Bonds to meet the requirement of finance for sustainable environment. These bonds are basically a debt instrument through which funds are raised for projects to prevent pollution prevention, support

sustainable agriculture, fisheries, water recycling, develop clean transportation for smart cities etc. Tax incentive feature of Green Bond makes it more acceptable in market. The World Bank is major issuer of such bonds. Since year 2008, world bank has issued \$14.4 billion to support 111 projects globally related with renewable energy, agriculture, clean transportation etc.

Apart from Green bonds, other popular instruments are Sustainability Bonds, Social Bonds, Green Loans, and Sustainability-linked loans (or sustainability-improvement loans, or ESG-linked loans). These bonds are issued specifically to finance the combination of green and social projects. Sustainable bonds were issued for the very first time in 2014 by Unilever.

Bonds which are targeted to finance social projects are known as Social Bonds. For small or medium sized enterprises not possessing sufficient credit ratings to get loans in capital market, sustainability linked loans are provided. These loans are given in accordance with company's ESG ratings (determined by independent party).

Environmental Finance in India

India started working on this concept as early as 2007. RBI published a notification "Corporate Social Responsibility, sustainable development and non-Financial reporting – Role of Banks" in December 2007 to highlight the issue of global warming and climate change. Broad policy framework was formulated in "National Action plan on Climate Change" in 2008 to reduce and manage the risk and impact of climate change. Based on market capitalization, top 100 companies listed in BSE and NSE are now asked to produce their annual business responsibility reports as per the guidelines issued by SEBI. To achieve India's commitments in Paris Agreement -2015, many fiscal and financial incentives have been approved, including 30% subsidy for rooftop solar panel, Fame scheme (Faster adoption and manufacturing of electric vehicles), green car loan scheme by SBI with longer repayment window and 20 basis point lower interest rate, Production linked Incentive scheme for high efficiency modules manufacturing in area of renewable energy are some initiatives under environmental finance.

Consideration of small renewable energy sector under priority sector lending by RBI is another example of environmental finance in country. Credit enhancement scheme launched by IIFCL to fund viable infrastructure projects with bond tenors above 5 years, IREDA's announcement to become India's first green bank to promote clean energy investments shows government's commitment and seriousness for this

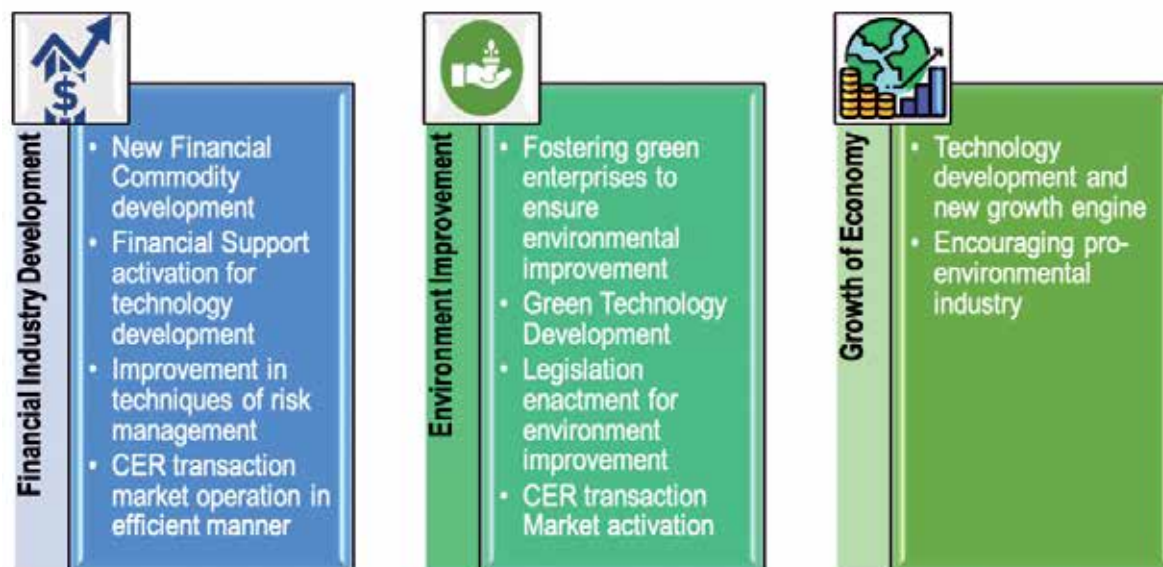


issue.

It is evident that all countries including India are keeping environment sustainability at the core of overall sustainability goals of the country. Countries like India, where economy is growing and per capita income is less, population and communities remain less participative in environmental issues. Plurality of green loan definition, high borrowing costs, mismatch between long term and short-term interest on green investment are few of the major challenges for environmental finance. Green bond issuing cost has been higher than other bonds in India. Existing literature suggests that green projects often have a high up-front cost with some cost-saving features only applicable in the long-term. Maturity-mismatches in green projects and their financing increase the cost of borrowing. Apart from all the constructive efforts at national level, there is urgent need of awareness and knowledge sharing activities on risks related to environment, development of local green bond markets, facilitating cross border investments in green bonds, improving overall green finance activities and spreading awareness about the financial benefits to common man for his contribution towards environmental protection.

Financial institutions need be vigilant against practices of "Green Washing" where companies take financial advantages under false claim of environment protection-oriented projects.

Dr. Agyeya Trippathi



TOWARDS A DIGNIFIED END

The concept of palliative care was introduced to India in the 1980's. The Indian Government at the time had introduced a policy to prioritize pain relief as one of the basic services of primary health care. Some of the earliest palliative care centres were established in Trivandrum, Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi and Ahmedabad. While there have been tremendous advancements in cancer research, the proliferation of pain-relieving care is still, arguably in its infancy, in the country.

Located in Vilacheri, Madurai, is Nethravathi Pain and Palliative Care Centre, a 50-bed facility that houses patients who are terminally ill with cancer or are otherwise bedridden, and in chronic pain.

A seven-member team of doctors runs this facility - Dr. R. Balagurusamy, a General Physician (GP), Dr. R. Amudhanilavan Cardiologist, Dr. Srividya Manjunath Gastro-Entrologist, Dr. S. Sabarimanikandan, GP, Dr. G. Praburam Niranjan, Anaesthetist, Dr. P. Venkatesh Neurophysician, and Dr. C. Satheesh, also a GP.

In 2014 they started Aishwaryam Trust, and started conducting medical camps and awareness programs in remote rural areas. In one of those camps in a certain village, a family requested them to have a look at a 45-year old patient, male. He was bedridden, with terminal stage-cancer. His family comprises of his wife and two young children. When the team asked the wife why they hadn't sought the services of the local government hospital (GH), she told them that in the GH, an attender (usually a family member) was required to be stationed beside the patient at all times. Since she was the only one making ends meet for her family, she couldn't additionally take on this attender's responsibility. Their only solution at the time was to keep the patient at home.

This incident sparked a series of discussions among the doctors of Aishwaryam Trust. They realized that there was a real need in Southern Tamil Nadu, for a palliative care centre. There were several below-poverty-line families who were unable to afford care for the dying members of their household. Typically, these would be people who were single, and/or childless. Where in families, caring for immediate members of itself is a tedious process, there is no scope to care for the next of kin. Sometimes patients would suffer so much pain that they'd be pushed to the brink of suicide.

Dr. Balagurusamy and his friends decided to start a palliative care unit,

that would be able to take in these kinds of patients and care for them, and ensure they lived out their last days in relative painlessness.

For six months, Aishwaryam Trust struggled to get any support from the general public. In 2015, they rented out a small space in an old building where they took in a handful of patients. However, the neighborhood was not very supportive of this palliative care unit, owners disliked that there were a lot of deaths in the space, and neighbours could not digest the frequent comings and goings of ambulances in their area.

After learning of their difficulties, Jalaja and Janardhanan, a philanthropist couple from Thirunagar area donated 27 cents of land to Aishwaryam Trust. With this, they established their own centre. Subsequently, a successful businessman Shyam Gupta, donated a 25-bed facility in Madurai, expanding the capacity of Aishwaryam Trust.

The local Social Welfare Board refers eligible patients to the centre, as also do concerned members of the public who know about Aishwaryam Trust's work. Food is made fresh in-house, using meal plans that are developed in consultation with dieticians. At the Palliative Care Centre, the patients have access to 15 nurses and additional in-house attenders. Access is also available to symptomatic care- for instance, opioid analgesics (pain relieving medication), supportive therapy and so on. When a patient with no family, dies at the

facility, the centre teams up with Mr. Manikandan, a person deeply interested in ensuring dignified cremations for the dead, to conduct their last rites with dignity. Mr. Manikandan has been doing this service for the past 35 years.

When the first wave of the COVID pandemic hit, it was a terrible time for the people living here as well as those working in this sensitive field of work. Dr. Balagurusamy recounts with a lot of pain how his team, all his staff, nurses and attenders, stayed back at Nethravathi Centre for weeks together, unable to get back to their own families, because of the fear of spreading infection. His team made arrangements for his administrative staff to stay put at accommodations near the centre, and took every effort to ensure steady supply of food to everyone. His team developed a system for outside helpers to safely deliver food, washed-clothes and other things at an outer delivery room for contactless service. At this time, they faced an acute shortage of some important supplies such as adult diapers. Since all transport was halted, they were unable to source it from their usual sources. In spite of all these difficulties, Dr. Balagurusamy says that the centre was able to survive the pandemic with minimal losses.

Till date, Aishwaryam Trust has supported over 400 patients, who have lived anywhere between a few months to a couple of years in the centre. The seven-member founding team has

Aishwaryam Trust has supported over 400 patients, who have lived anywhere between a few months to a couple of years in the centre

always enthusiastically pitched in, monetary, physical and social resources to fulfill their mission. Currently, the centre is struggling to find volunteers who can visit the patients for a few hours each day to support the patients. Dr. Balagurusamy insists that it would be easy to train volunteers if the latter would spare a little time. Efforts are underway to produce a short film to create more awareness on palliative care. Aishwaryam Trust is also in the midst of talks to start a centre for children with intellectual disabilities in the near future.

"It is our belief that care-centres like ours should cease to exist in the near future," says Dr. Balagurusamy. While it might sound contradictory, it echoes his belief that care needs to be made accessible to patients in the comfort of their own homes, rather than being away from friends and family. A profound thought indeed.

Archanaa Ramesh



SANCTUARY CARE: A SAFE SPACE FOR KIDS, A RESPITE FOR PARENTS



When both her parents passed away, 29-year-old Alicia's life came to a breaking point. And as a single mother attending to the daily needs of four children, she could barely keep it together.

"I was on the verge of breaking down. At some point, you think that they [the kids] are just annoying you, and you want a moment for yourself," she admits.

With no one else to rely on, the daily grind of taking care of four young children took a toll on her physically and emotionally. Tending to their everyday needs left her exhausted as she continued to struggle with the loss of both her parents.

When she tried talking to others about her experience, she remembers being labelled 'attention-seeking'. "That's what made me totally shut down from everyone. I kept my silence from my friends and family," she shared.

The social isolation of being misunderstood, coupled with the grief of losing her parents and the stress of parenting four children pushed Alicia further into a corner.

"Knowing that you failed to do things as a mother, you will feel very down. In my mind, I was suicidal."

That was when she reached out for help.

ASANCTUARY OF RESPITE

Her social worker then referred her to Sanctuary Care (a service of charity Boys' Town), an organisation that facilitates short-term care and shelter for children while their parents manage a crisis. This programme reaches out to all families in need, regardless of their socio-economic, ethnic or religious backgrounds.

Sanctuary Care, through their network of social workers and respite carers, helps mothers like Alicia navigate difficult periods by providing a helping hand with child rearing while the mothers take the time needed to care for themselves.

Like any mother, Alicia was initially hesitant about being separated from her children, "What if they don't want to come back? What if they are in short term care and they see a very conducive place? And what if the children think that I don't love them anymore?"

But the desire to better care for her children outweighed her fears and she handed them over to Magdalene, a case worker from Sanctuary Care, fully assured that it was only a temporary situation.

IN GOOD HANDS

Case workers like Magdalene play an important role in facilitating the programme.

"When a case is made known to us, we will try to reach out to as many suitable carers as possible to take

care of these children," Magdalene shares. "We speak to carers to assess who is best suited in terms of time and commitment to manage the children during this period of placement."

Besides ensuring the right match between respite carers and mothers-in-need, she also verifies that the children's daily routines are not disrupted during this period. Frequent visitations helps her assure parents that their children are well-adjusted in their new environment.

"We also pre-empt the carers on what they might need to take note of so that they are aware, and to ensure a smooth transition," Magdalene adds, as she takes into account the valid concerns of parents.

The saying - "It takes a village to raise a child" - rings true when a community steps in to help a parent in need. Volunteer respite carers, like Roma, understand the anxieties both parties feel during parent-child separation, and will do what she can to support the family unit. She works closely with case workers to understand the needs of the family and to make both parent and child feel as comfortable as possible.

"When I did a video call with Alicia, I made a point of saying 'Don't worry, they are coming back home to you as soon as you're ready. I'm sure they miss you,'" Roma shares. "Because I know how I feel as a mom over my two kids, and the thought of not having them with me is horrible."

Being a single mother herself, Roma identifies with Alicia's struggles.

"I know that's a lot of work, and I have Aye Myo here to support me full-time," Roma says, referring to her helper. "I know she's [Alicia] doing it alone and that's really tough, so I would have said 'yes' no matter what, but my heart definitely goes out to that struggle."

Magdalene, who makes frequent visits to Roma, sends Alicia updates to give her comfort that her kids are in good hands.

"I was very relieved actually," Alicia describes, "It really makes you feel like 'Okay, they're safe' and you are doing a good job for yourself, and a better you as a mother."

Once her mind was at ease, Alicia was able to begin the painful process of coming to terms with the loss of her parents.

"On the first day when I came back home, it was quite empty, and I decided to go to my late mother's house to sleep over," she recounts. "I really took the time to process what actually happened."

And eventually, with the help of family and friends, Alicia remembers, "The thoughts of suicide, and everything just went away completely."

CREATING A HOME

Feeling better, she turned her attention to creating a better home for her kids.

"I started to clean up to make it a conducive place for the children where they can play, have fun and enjoy being at home at the same time," she adds, "So they will come home feeling very secure."

Alicia recounts the times her children came home and compared their rooms with their friends', "I felt a little sad, but I told them not everybody has the privilege to have an aircon, or television inside their rooms."

Decluttering her physical space also helped her mentally and emotionally. She wanted to instill in her children the importance of discipline and respect for others, "So as they grow older, they know how to keep themselves organised."

After 10 days of self reflection and setting the house right, Alicia welcomed her children home with open arms. And she was rewarded by the delight on their faces, as they admired how different and clean the house was. She says happily, "It was quite a blissful thing to see, and it's very meaningful for me."

TIME WILL HEAL

The time apart spent on self-care and healing also brought Alicia closer to her children and made her more aware of her own needs.

"I'm much more mentally stable and can manage to reserve my energy for each individual child," she shares on her current state of being, "It's a much better me actually... Now, everyone looks forward to coming back. Home is where you should really, really feel safe."

As Alicia continues to bond with her kids, her advice to other parents who are struggling is, "Take a leap of faith. This is where you can turn your life to be a better person, become a better parent. For me, Sanctuary Care definitely helps a lot."

ABOUT SANCTUARY CARE

Sanctuary Care (a service by charity Boys' Town) offers free home-based short-term placements for children whose families need assistance. Parents with poor or no social support systems can turn to Sanctuary Care while they work towards resolving their crisis at hand.

*A story by Our Better World
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www.ourbetterworld.org)*

GENDER IDENTITY: WO(H)MAN

On December 20th, 2021, The PG & Research Department of Economics, New College, conducted a special lecture on Gender Identity in collaboration with Centre for Social Initiative & Management at MIIT hall, New college.

Dr. S. Kareemullah Basha, Associate Professor & Head of PG & Research Department of Economics delivered the welcome address. He shared his opinions, thoughts and beliefs about the transgender community, which were drawn from history, epics and religion.

Dr. A. Abdul Raheem, Associate Professor PG & Research Department of Economics introduced the Resource person Ms. Jeeva, Founder & Director of Transgender Rights Association.

Ms. Jeeva's speech centered around the gender identity crisis faced by the transgenders. She started with the physical transformation a transperson undergoes during their adolescence. She shared the

struggles she underwent and explained how she overcame those hurdles to create her own identity. She then briefed the students about the varied initiatives in her organization that address the issues faced by Transgenders and the achievements of TRAI. Her speech made the students and staff empathize with the Trans community.

Dr S. Mohamed Nazeer, Assistant Professor spoke about the Law and Rights which are favourable for the Transgender community.

Ms Lakshmi Kalai of CSIM shared a few inputs on how we can include the transgender community and enable employment opportunities. She briefed about the CSIM courses offered in various colleges.

Dr. M. Fakir Ismail, Assistant Professor delivered the vote of thanks and the programme ended with the National Anthem.

Lakshmi Kalai



CONVERSATIONS WITH SRI RAMANA MAHARISHI

In reply to Miss Leena Sarabhai, a cultured Indian lady of high rank, Sri Bhagavan said: The state of equanimity is the state of bliss. The declaration in the Vedas 'I am This or That', is only an aid to gain equanimity of mind.

D.: So, it is wrong to begin with a goal: is it?

M.: If there be a goal to be reached it cannot be permanent. The goal must already be there. We seek to reach the goal with the ego, but the goal exists before the ego. What is in the goal is even prior to our birth, i.e., to the birth of the ego. Because we exist the ego appears to exist too.

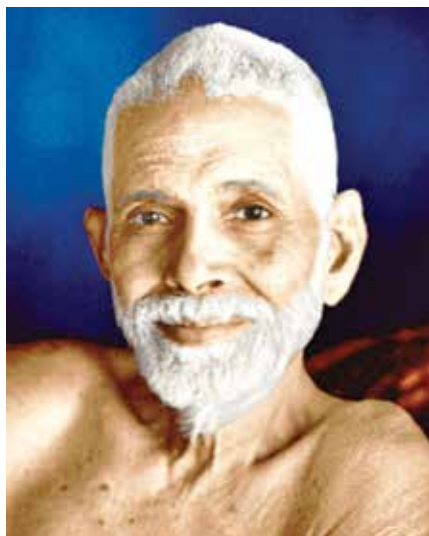
If we look on the Self as the ego then we become the ego, if as the mind we become the mind, if as the body we become the body. It is the thought which builds up sheaths in so many ways. The shadow on the water is found to be shaking. Can anyone stop the shaking of the shadow? If it should cease to shake you would not notice the water but only the light. Similarly to take no notice of the ego and its activities, but see only the light behind. The ego is the I-thought. The true 'I' is the Self.

D.: It is one step to realisation.

M.: Realisation is already there. The state free from thoughts is the only real state. There is no such action as Realisation. Is there anyone who is not realising the Self? Does anyone deny his own existence? Speaking of realisation, it implies two selves - the one to realise, the other to be realised. What is not already realised, is sought to be realised. Once we admit our existence, how is it that we do not know our Self?

D.: Because of the thoughts - the mind.

M.: Quite so. It is the mind that stands between and veils our happiness. How do we know that we exist? If you say because of the world around us, then



how do you know that you existed in deep sleep?

D.: How to get rid of the mind?

M.: Is it the mind that wants to kill itself? The mind cannot kill itself. So your business is to find the real nature of the mind. Then you will know that there is no mind. When the Self is sought, the mind is nowhere. Abiding in the Self, one need not worry about the mind.

D.: How to get rid of fear?

M.: What is fear? It is only a thought. If there is anything besides the Self there is reason to fear. Who sees the second (anything external)? First the ego arises and sees objects as external. If the ego does not rise, the Self alone exists and there is no second (nothing external). For anything external to oneself implies the seer within. Seeking it there will arise no doubt, no fear - not only fear, all other thoughts centred round the ego will disappear along with it.

D.: This method seems to be quicker than the usual one of cultivating qualities alleged necessary for salvation (sadhana chatusthaya)?

M.: Yes. All bad qualities centre

round the ego. When the ego is gone Realisation results by itself. There are neither good nor bad qualities in the Self. The Self is free from all qualities. Qualities pertain to the mind only. It is beyond quality. If there is unity, there will also be duality. The numeral one gives rise to other numbers. The truth is neither one nor two. IT is as it is.

D.: The difficulty is to be in the thought-free state.

M.: Leave the thought-free state to itself. Do not think of it as pertaining to you. Just as when you walk, you involuntarily take steps, so too in your actions; but the thought-free state is not affected by your actions.

D.: What is it that is discriminative in action?

M.: Discrimination will be automatic, intuitive.

D.: So Intuition alone matters; Intuition develops also.

M.: Those who have discovered great Truths have done so in the still depths of the Self.

The ego is like one's shadow thrown on the ground. If one attempts to bury it, it will be foolish. The Self is only one. If limited it is the ego. If unlimited it is Infinite and is the Reality.

The bubbles are different from one another and numerous, but the ocean is only one. Similarly the egos are many, whereas the Self is one and only one.

When told that you are not the ego, realise the Reality. Why do you still identify yourself with the ego? It is like saying, "Don't think of the monkey while taking medicine" - it is impossible. Similarly

it happens with common folk. When the Reality is mentioned why do you continue to meditate Sivoham or Aham Brahmasmi? The significance must be traced and understood. It is not enough to repeat the bare words or think of them.

Reality is simply the loss of the ego. Destroy the ego by seeking its identity. Because the ego is no entity it will automatically vanish and Reality will shine forth by itself. This is the direct method. Whereas all other methods are done, only retaining the ego. In those paths there arise so many doubts and the eternal question remains to be tackled finally. But in this method the final question is the only one and it is raised from the very beginning. No sadhanas are necessary for engaging in this quest.

There is no greater mystery than this - viz., ourselves being the Reality we seek to gain Reality. We think that there is something hiding our Reality and that it must be destroyed before the Reality is gained. It is ridiculous. A day will dawn when you will yourself laugh at your past efforts. That which will be on the day you laugh is also here and now.

D.: So it is a great game of pretending?

M.: Yes.

In Yoga Vasishtha it is said, "What is Real is hidden from us, but what is false, is revealed as true." We are actually experiencing the Reality only; still, we do not know it. Is it not a wonder of wonders?

The quest "Who am I?" is the axe with which to cut off the ego.

In answer to a Canarese Sanyasi, Sri Bhagavan said: There are different grades of mind. Realisation is of Perfection. It cannot be comprehended by the mind. Sarvajnatva (the state of all-knowing) is to be sarvam (the all); 'the all' pertains only to the mind. The known and unknown together form 'the all'. After transcending the mind you remain as the Self. The present knowledge is only of limitation. That Knowledge is unlimited. Being so it cannot be comprehended by this knowledge. Cease to be a knower, then there is perfection.

Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi

"It is high time that a scientific caste census is taken to help the State formulate its future."

Justice K Chandru shares with Marie Banu his inspiration to advocate for the neglected sections of our society

Justice K. Chandru, an Indian advocate and former judge of Madras High Court, was a well-respected judge among the judiciary and. He practiced in the constitutional side of the Madras High Court and was made an Additional Judge of the High Court on July 31, 2006, and he retired on 8th March 2013.

Justice K. Chandru is known for his judgments that impacted the lives of many impoverished and downtrodden people. During his judicial career, Justice K. Chandru pronounced over 96,000 verdicts. He was known for fighting against caste discrimination and for the rights of all oppressed communities in Tamil Nadu.

In an exclusive interview, Justice K Chandru shares with Marie Banu his inspiration to advocate for the neglected sections of our society.

From being a people's lawyer to a People's Judge, what was your inspiration to advocate for the neglected sections of our society?

I was working with the working class and their trade unions since my student days. Therefore, when I became a lawyer I wanted to join a law firm which works for the interest of the workers and the poor people. Thus, I joined M/s. Row & Reddy, a leading law firm that was started in the forties by two famous barristers including Mr. V.G. Row. I worked in that firm for seven years that mainly dealt with labour matters and also certain human rights issues. It was my Marxist ideology and working with trade unions that inspired me to work for them as a lawyer. When I became Judge, the same training and motivation continued even on the bench.

Known for taking pro-justice stances, can you share your experience with Justice Sathya Dev and Justice Krishna Iyer?

As a law student, I knew about Justice Krishna Iyer. He was instrumental in starting a legal aid movement in Tamil Nadu and formed a Society called Tamil Nadu Legal Aid and Advice Board. It was first of its kind in India and did many wonderful works in rendering aid to poor and needy. As a lawyer, I was part of its panel and conducted many cases for the poor pro bono.

Justice Iyer was our motivating force. His tenure as a Supreme Court Judge saw many judgments which are pro-social justice and we were inspired by the same. His contribution to labour jurisprudence is immense and I have published a book exclusively dealing with Justice Krishna Iyer's contribution to labour law. Initially as a labour lawyer, his judgments gave immense

strength and binding legal precedents to argue in courts. Later, he was instrumental in my accepting the office of judgeship and was continuously monitoring our work with occasional notes of appreciation.

Justice Sathya Dev became a judge only in 1978, the time when I was a Junior lawyer. He took a lot of interest in me and our friendship grew over the years. He was known for his uprightness and integrity which was a great inspiration to me. He advised me: "You should accept judgeship. Being a Senior Lawyer earning money is not enough. You must render service to the society."

When the Jai Bhim was filmed and the court hall set was created, I suggested to the Art Director that portraits of Justice Krishna Iyer and Justice Sathya Dev must adorn the walls of the court hall set which was complied with.

That was my least contribution in perpetuating their memories.

What were the challenges you faced at the time of Parvati Case trial which is the story of Jai Bhim film?

The challenges I faced in handling the case of Parvati were manifold. First of all, she did not have enough information about the fate of her husband Rajakannu. Thereafter, when we filed a habeas corpus petition, the Judges were initially reluctant to record evidence in that case. The whereabouts of the two nephews of Rajakannu (who were also kept in the lockup and tortured) were unknown. It took several efforts to locate them in a remote village in Kerala, bring them to the High Court to be examined as eye witnesses to the murder of Rajakannu that was committed by the police inside the lockup.

While the case was ongoing, the Sub-Inspector attempted to bribe and influence me to withdraw from the case. This led me to complain to the High Court about his misconduct. The High Court took a stern view and summoned the DGP. After a reprimand, the Sub-Inspector was suspended from service for improper conduct of approaching the other side counsel.

Similarly, a special Public Prosecutor was appointed by the Government to conduct the murder trial before the Sessions Court in South Arcot that was also challenged by the accused police. On my intervention, their writ petition was dismissed.

Mr. Venkatraman, an advocate from Chidambaram town who was appointed as a Special Public Prosecutor (SPP) also faced severe strain. His house was attacked by hooligans and his library, furniture and car were burnt, while the police was watching the other way. This



made me to move a resolution in the High Court Advocates Association calling for police protection for the SPP. Finally, on my application, two gunmen were provided to guard them. I also filed a case for the loss of property and the High Court granted compensation to the lawyer.

Likewise, I had enough problems in pursuing the Parvati case. However, thanks to Justice P.S. Misra, the Senior Judge in the bench and who came from Patna and his stern approach resulted in not only compensation being awarded to the tribal woman and her nephews, but also a house plot given to her on directions from the Court. The accused policemen were convicted with life term imprisonment and their appeal in the High Court was also dismissed thus making them to undergo the full sentence in jail.

Do you think the Jai Bhim film will trigger the formation of policies or plans to benefit the neglected communities?

The Jai Bhim film drew the attention of the cine viewers and sensitized them about the plight of the tribals and the fact that they are being excluded from several government schemes. The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, who was invited for the Jai Bhim film preview, wrote a letter to the production company stating that the film will light a lamp in the lives of the Irulas and that everyone must emulate such actions. On the Diwali day, the Chief Minister also spent a day in a Kuravas colony in Poonjeri, Chennai. During that time, he ensured that the Revenue Officials were also present and attempted to sort out some of the long

pending demands of the Kuravas. He also made the Chief Secretary to Government of Tamil Nadu send a circular to all District Collectors to provide details of the tribals living in their districts on a weekly basis with a view to sort out some of their fundamental problems like: roads, street lights, water and drainage facilities, provision of anganwadis, distance from schools and primary health centres.

I am sure that once the statistics are collected, certain development work will be undertaken by the government since the circular itself said that the Chief Minister was directly scanning all the work relating to the tribals in the State.

Caste being an indicator of Class, do you think we should insist on a caste census? (Article 15 and 16 talks about Social and Economically backward class.)

The Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBCs) have to be identified by the State for the purpose of affirmative action. Though the word "class" alone is mentioned, the courts have interpreted that a caste can be an indicator for identifying an SEBC. Since new claims for inclusion in the SEBC list are coming from different quarters and some of the already included OBC communities are demanding exclusive quota in reservation for them, it is high time that a scientific caste census is taken to help the State formulate its future policies. Therefore, a caste census which was given up long ago must be renewed and a fresh census must be undertaken.