

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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"I want to create a dialogue with women and make them aware of their rights."

An exclusive interview with Poet Rajathi Salma

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Since early days, love has always been associated with human solidarity although some might feel self-sufficient and say that don't require love. Sociologist Niklas Luhmann says: "While it may be entirely conceivable to lead a life individually without love and yet find self-affirmation in the world, it is not at all possible for love to be replaced as a mechanism of society as a whole."

In Ancient Greece, 'Philos' was the word used for love." It was an adjective that was employed to designate a relationship of closeness or belonging to something—a household, a tribe, or a dynasty. Its reference was to society, to something larger than the individual.

In Hinduism, Manmatha is known as the God of Love. He represents all forms of desires, like the desire for success, wealth, happiness, fame, knowledge, and even liberation. According to Vedas, before all things came desire. It is considered one of the prime movers of the world and no great accomplishment is possible without it.

Isn't it true that love is the medium of the family, just as money is the medium of the economy, power that of politics, and truth that of science?

A child experiences unconditional love and caring from his family first. From the moment a newborn is able to focus clearly, her eyes peer into those of her mother, searching for the affirmation that comforts her. The affirmation that says, "Yes, I am loved. Yes, I am safe. Yes, I am OK." This shapes his personality and leads him to the society where again he expects to be loved.

Love is not an internal state of mind, but a medium of communication. It is the way in which truth, money or power communicate meanings or choices.

Valentine's Day has been recognized as a day to grow consumerism. Is it enough to have just one day in the year to remind us that we care about each other, and we deserve to love ourselves? It is a definite NO! True love does not need public expression. Love should be right up there in our hierarchy of needs. It seems an overly sentimental notion, but we are born hungering for love, just as we hunger for food.

One can neither purchase nor coerce love. Love has to be continuously learned and mastered, especially in its communicative aspects, rather than taken for granted as a generous provision of nature.

In the end, love is our highest calling, love for God, self, others. We may call it humanitarianism but love is what compels someone to leave the comfort of their lifestyle to serve the vulnerable. Beyond the allure of financial reward, many who engage in social work have been driven by something deeper and noble. This is called 'love for mankind'. The changemakers featured in Conversations Today are all such people.

Love, be Loved!

—Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

Ego and Love



It is this false 'I' that has to become the real 'I'. One has to give it some prop of something which can help it unify with Brahman from which it has separated and now has to be turned away from the multifarious objects of this dualistic universe. It is necessary to make the Inner Organ go back to the Atman-locale in the heart. The Inner Organ is the conglomerate of the mind, the intellect and Ego. The Ego is the false 'I' which has fattened itself by its appropriation of things and objects from the pluralistic variety of the universe. The mind and the intellect function at the basic prompting of the Ego. When somebody has fattened himself

well, how can he go through a small gate? When a fat person arrives at our house don't we sometimes make fun of him by saying that our entrance has to be demolished and redone to admit him?! But this gate (of the heart) cannot be broken or hammered into a smaller one! We have only to make the whole person (Ego) leaner! How to make him leaner?

How did he (the Ego) become fat? Seeing everything as distinct from everything else, he has been annexing and accumulating from this plurality and fattened himself. All that outer coating has to be melted/dissolved away now. Not only that. Afterwards that ego which is making him think of himself as a separate Jiva has to be melted away. Only if it is reduced thus, it can hope to enter that small needle point through the heart and reach that advaitic bliss of the Atman within. How can that be done?

— is the question. It can be done only by practice of 'Love'!

The egoistic false 'I' has been amassing left and right all along. That has to be changed to a process of giving oneself in love — that is the only way to reduce the fat 'I' to a lean 'I'. That, and nothing else, is the route to go to the locale of the Atman.

One may ask: Did not one reduce the fatness of the Ego by dispassion, shama and dama? What was reduced was only the fat in the mind and the intellect. It is true that they were cleaned, sharpened, churned and reduced. But the Ego is more subtle than these. It is the one which drags us into the mire of duality, without our even knowing that it is so dragging us! We may not be outwardly bragging with pride: "I have got dispassion; shama and dama, etc. have been achieved by me". But inwardly without our being conscious of it, this individualised ego which has separated itself from the ParamAtmA, will be patting itself on its achievements. Actually the gains in Atma-SAdhanA, that have so far been obtained, along with the individuality, should be melted away in the Atman. Instead of that, the ego appropriates all the honours to itself. And it thus fattens itself! It is the feeling of individuality that is at the head of all these and that is what prevents it even of thinking to reduce and merge into the locale of the Atman. In other words, the most important thing needed for Brahman-Realisation, namely surrender of the ego, never takes place.

The function of Love — the noblest attitude of giving oneself up — is exactly this: it prevents the ego fattening itself on the great achievements and helps it to thin out. Fortunately, the acquiring of discrimination, dispassion, shama, dama, etc. have refined the antaH-karaNaM. So if only one makes the determination, one can generate the necessary Love. And one can go on to surrender the ego and the individuality and thus exhibit this Love.

—Source: ADVAITA-SAADHANAA
(Kanchi Maha-Swamigal's Discourses)

Creating Ripples in Learning

An avid traveler and photographer, Preeti Iyengar, a third-generation educator from Hyderabad, is the Head Mistress of her own school for over two decades now. She met Mr. Manmohan the Chairman of India Literacy Project (ILP), Hyderabad an illustrious alumni of CSIM who influenced her to get involved in the social sector.

ILP was founded in 1990 in the USA by a group of Non-Resident Indians with a mission to be 'A Catalyst for 100% literacy in India'. It is a developmental support organization that works in partnership with local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other networks in India. ILP's main role is to enable and support the implementing partner (NGO) in its processes of strengthening the community, to identify and address the gaps in the delivery of education services, and to bring about systemic changes through advocacy. The Hyderabad chapter was launched in 2007.

Four months after taking the plunge into the social sector, Preeti joined CSIM. "Joining CSIM's course on Social Entrepreneurship was one of the best things that happened to me apart from joining ILP. CSIM opened up my vision to many factors that exist in the NGO sector, right from its finances, the rules and regulations, the types of organisations, etc. The project work was my most enjoyable part of the course as I learnt a lot more than I did in a long time," says Preeti.

Prof. K.L. Srivastava, Director, CSIM Hyderabad whom Preeti refers ardently as the "Storehouse of knowledge" is one of the most influential people in the current phase of her life.

ILP has initiated many exciting and innovative programs. Mobile Libraries bring joy of reading to young new readers, and Multi-Dimensional Learning Space (MDLS) takes learning to a whole new level that goes beyond the school curriculum. Counseling-Scholarship-Mentoring (CSM) program provides the much needed bridge for children to progress from school to college levels and beyond. The Knowledge Hub initiative provides a platform to share ILP's rich experiences and know-how with everyone.

"We have a good traction in our work in and around the cities of Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai and Visakhapatnam, through our local chapters in each of these cities. The MDLS is part of ILP's Quality of Teaching and Learning focus. As part of this project, we have created content and processes that can significantly impact learning levels in children, and complement any quality of education interventions that the School might already be pursuing," she says.

All resources created as part of the MDLS project is available as free/open source content. ILP is now working with Government Schools to set up smart



class rooms, and supplement this infrastructure support with pedagogical support in the form of digital content such as lesson plans and experiment kits for multi-dimensional way of learning in classrooms.

"The two aspects of the MDLS project that is closest to my heart are the career guidance program and the library program. Teaching how to comprehend a sentence and then looking at that glow of recognition on the faces of children is extremely gratifying", she says.

With 60 core volunteers and 40-50 floating volunteers, ILP Hyderabad works in over 225 schools in the city impacting over 35,000 students. Volunteers teach or read books to the

children. "We have a flexible system where volunteers can offer their time; it could either be one hour a week or even two hours a month. All we ask the volunteers is to treat this task seriously and be committed to it."

Speaking about the rising number of volunteers, she shares, "It's encouraging and heartening to see how the youth is also interested in giving back to the society. Earlier, volunteering was considered something that was done by people after retirement."

Preeti meets aspiring students who are driven with passion to reach heights, no matter how hard life gets. Her heart flutters when she talks about some of the exceptional students who shared their

Highlights of ILP – Hyderabad

- Multi-Dimensional Learning Space (MDLS) centres in Telangana are now serving over 75 schools in Telangana
- 12 Mobile Library vans cater to 102 schools and over 10,000 children
- Career Counselling carried out in over 120 schools benefitting over 7500 students.
- Scaled up summer camps from 4 schools to 6 schools.
- Teacher Training through workshops and Tele-Mentoring for the teachers on modern teaching methodologies.

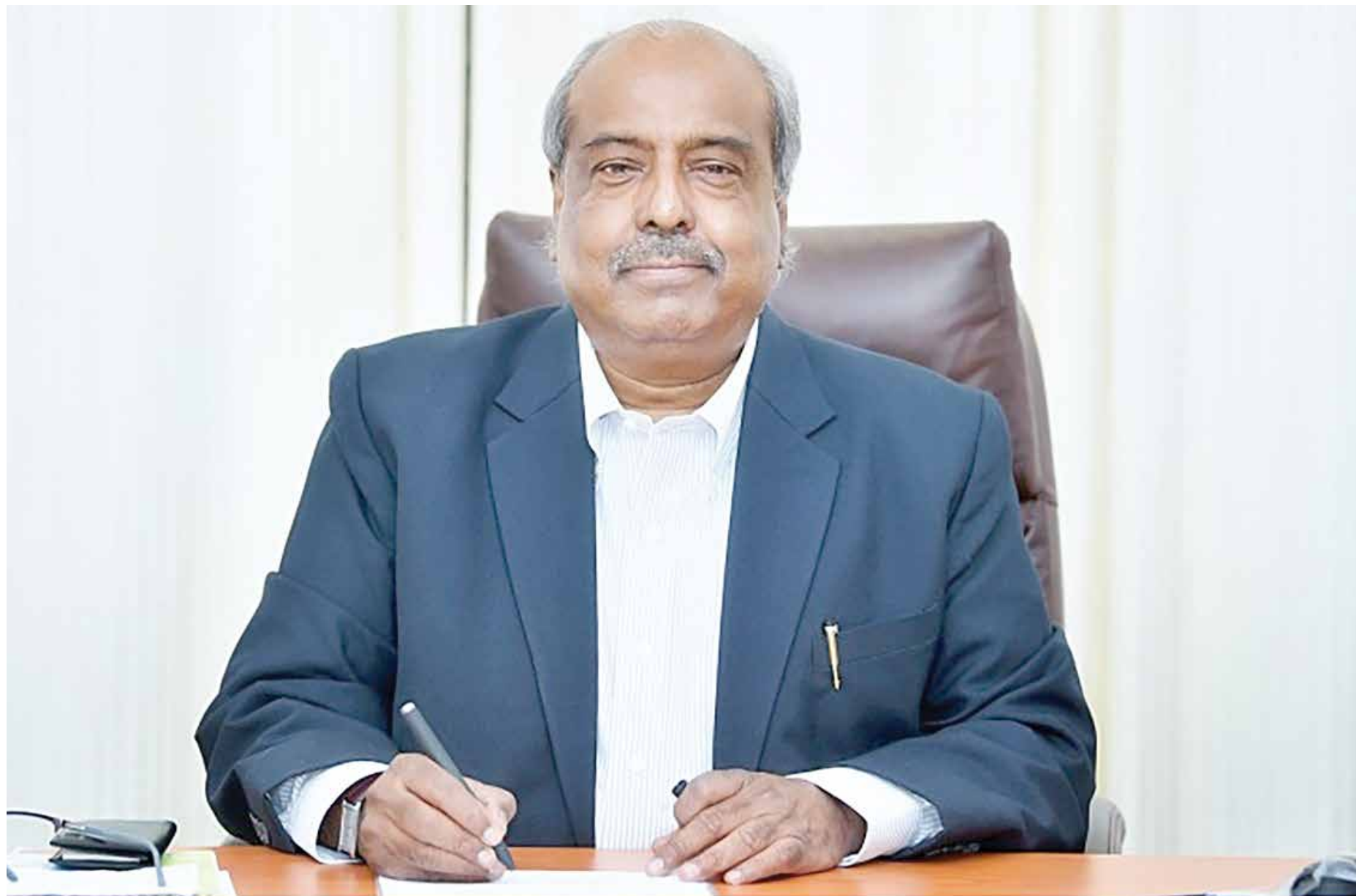
dreams of defying odds and struggles to achieve their dreams. She has been instrumental in convincing parents of many of such girl children who need education. She finds joy and happiness when these girl children come back to share their gratitude and respect to people like her who have been the light, that paved way for their dreams to come true.

"I have seen much more of the world in these one and a half years than what I had experienced in the past two decades. It has been an enriching journey," says Preeti with a humble yet deep satisfaction.

—Angela Anish

Leader & Leadership Matters...

12. Influence : The true sense of authority



Meaning of Influence in relationships:

The Leader has the ability to influence people and events to move in the direction (s)he wants. (LOI, www.discoverself.com).

Influence affects the way people think and do things so the task is accomplished as designed. The synonyms are control, impact, leverage, leadership, weight and so on.

The antonyms are powerlessness, weakness, subordination, incapacity, inferiority and so on

In our discussion on Leader and Leadership matters, starting from this month, next 7 months we are focusing on the attributes that build Leadership Orientation in a person. The first and foremost is the ability to influence and move things and people in the right direction. The usual confusion is which is more important – Power, authority or Influence. A very apt explanation I came across in www.theydiffer.com says, Power is the potential or the ability to influence decisions and control resources. Power has force built into it. But Influence on the other hand, is the ability to alter others people's perception of any situation. It is more about creating such an impact on others so that it affects the way they think or do things, and makes them do what the other person wants them to do. Influence is not about force but more about being compliant because right words and strategies are used. (<https://theydiffer.com/difference-between-power-and-influence/>)

Interestingly, both Task and People are affected with the presence and absence of the attributes in Leadership Orientation.

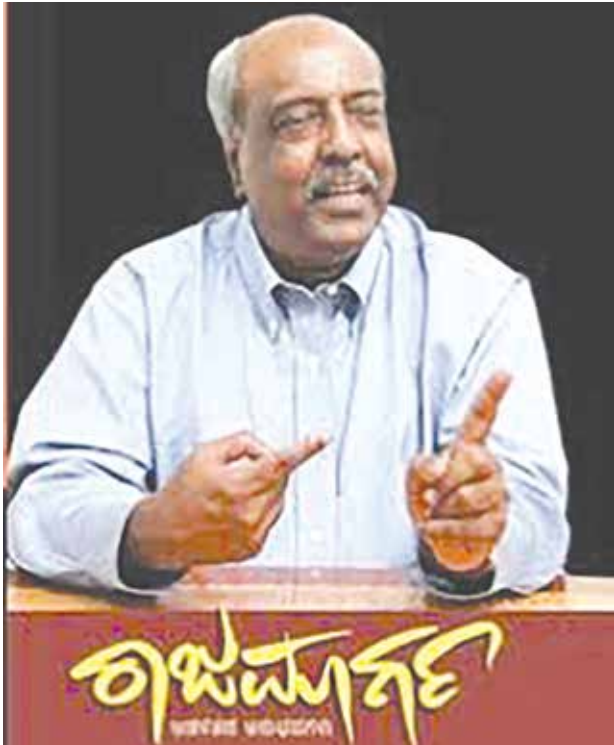
Influence emerges out of a deep respect and belief that people have on their Leader. To understand what brings the Influencing capacity to a Leader, we met Shri K. Jairaj retired Additional Chief Secretary, Karnataka Government who has through his illustrious career displayed a tremendous capacity to influence and complete successfully tough projects in various roles and regions within Karnataka.

Shri K. Jairaj (1976 batch IAS) is a B.A. (Hons.) and M.A. Economics from Delhi School of Economics. Additionally he obtained M.P.A. Woodrow Wilson School Of Public And International Affairs, Princeton University and M.P.A, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, U.S.A, where he was Edward's Mason Fellow. He has held significant

positions in infrastructure, energy, transport and urban development sectors, including Additional Chief Secretary, Energy Department and Chairman, BESCO, Managing Director, Bangalore International Airport Ltd; Managing Director, Karnataka Power Corporation Ltd; Managing Director, Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation; Commissioner, Bangalore City Corporation (BBMP) for two terms, Commissioner for Commercial Taxes and Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister. He, along with Shri N.R. Narayanamurthy, Chairman of Infosys established the Bangalore International Airport Limited (BIAL), India's first green field airport on public private partnership (PPP) basis with Siemens, Germany. In 2004-06, Shri Jairaj served with the World Bank, Washington D.C. USA as senior public sector management specialist in the Africa region. He has played key role in serving as President of AIMA, BMA, as

board of governors IIM (Kashipur and Bangalore). He has also in his illustrious career grown several educational institutes and NGOs like BMS Institute of Technology, AMC and Sri Krishna Sevashrama hospital. He is author of two books 'Jaithayatre' and 'Rajamarga' in which he shares in all honesty the perils and successes of his journey through life and roles as an officer in government. Even post retirement, he is more active pursuing larger good and public welfare with passion and commitment. The achievements and contribution, the number of people who have been willing to support and love to work with him speaks loud of his capacity to influence.

Thank you Sir, for agreeing to share your perspectives with me with me. Can you share what according to you is ability to Influence and how important is it for a Leader?



"Influence is something that a leader has which does not arise due to mere formal position. It is a sheer force of their personality. It is profession agnostic and relevant to all Leaders. People may have no formal position bestowed on them, but they may be highly influential like Anna Hazare or Ghandhiji or best example is Jayaprakash Narayan. If a Leader relentlessly pursues holistic context, larger vision and public welfare, his influencing power has been valued. A selfish pursuit has not been appreciated anywhere. Ability to influence is undoubtedly the most critical attribute. I have worked in government positions where there is no absolute authority vested and one has to be aware of that and yet influence decisions and projects to move in the right direction for larger good."

Sir, How easy or difficult is it to balance Authority, Influence and Dictatorship? How have you balanced it?

"It is one of the most difficult balance. When there is position and power one tends to become arrogant and dictatorial. Invariably position and power can make one feel so. In government, there is no absolute authority vested even in an IAS officer and it is usually tempered by various circumstances. There is always a level above and we need to be conscious of it. I have always reminded myself that I have a purpose to serve and larger well-being has been focus. Further the extent of authority varies based on the sector we work. In a government sector, it is a 60-40 rule where 60% of compliance comes from exercise of authority and position. The 40% is the personality that the Leader can be and influence the people to give their best. In a developmental or Non-profit organization with no formal position, 20-80 rule works where 20% is the formal compliance and 80% is because of the Influencing

capacity of the Leader. In a private sector, 50-50 works where both position power and influencing capacity are important. One thing to remember in this is that threat works only at the base level and motivation goes a long way in completing the tasks."

Sir, you have exhibited great ability to influence be it in government or in the social sector positions that you have held and continue to hold, according to you what qualities should a Leader possess to become Influential?

Shri Jairaj has outlined 6 areas in which a leader has to focus to be influential.

1. To be able to articulate a clear and concise vision for the team/ group. It is critical for the leader himself to have clarity on the vision and values of the project/ institution and put this clearly across by engaging the team to think through and understand.
2. Excellent planning and proper execution capability. The Leader should go into details, support the team in execution plan and ensure the time frame is maintained.
3. Excellent communication skills, both written and oral. Communication is the best vehicle which can enable a Leader to reach out to all stake holders and exert his power and influence.
4. Empathy is imperative for a Leader. A leader should feel for the people who work through you, with you and for you. There should be a sense of selflessness that a Leader emerges from to influence the group to give its best.
5. Integrity adds maximum value. The Leader themselves have to stand for something larger than self. A sense of integrity in all transactions and standing by what they commit for is very crucial for influencing others.
6. Approachability, a sense of wholesomeness will make others comfortable to open up, share and discuss matters. There is no history of a forbidding personality being an influential Leader. He could have used his power and threat but that will not enable others to seek him out in times of need. Ego has never played a good companion to Leader, especially in social organizations. Humility goes a long way.

A leader who is has high influencing capacity usually moves in teams and doesn't do the work by being in front but by being a foundation and holding the group. Shri Jairaj also adds, "The leader should be self-observant and evaluate oneself on all these attributes. The foremost quality is to be Self-aware and Self-corrective."

Can you share with us one experience where your influencing capacity did not work and you had to take stern actions from authoritative position?

"Oh, yes. My experience when I was heading the Apex Bank. There was a union settlement to be made. I wanted the discussions to happen smoothly but in spite of all efforts the union went into a strike. It was very disappointing that the officers also abstained from work. I walked into the office and saw that only the Joint Registrar was present. I was very angry and I prepared a hand written note suspending two General Managers and put it up on the notice board. This brought some shivers within the system. Eventually the Union came for talks and we could do a fairly good settlement keeping their interests and welfare in mind." Shri Jairaj added that it is important we should know what action will bring long term results and influence the culture.

Sir, I am curious about the kind of influences you had in your childhood which made you choose IAS and how did you develop this strong influencing Leadership personality?

Shri Jairaj gives his beaming smile and with a tenderness in his voice reminisces the younger days of life with fondness, "I come from a middle class family and my parents were both doctors who served in different parts of



Karnataka. My sister and I studied in Kolar mission school. Papanna would take us to school every day. When we neared the school, usually a large Dodge car would pass by and he would get off his cycle and fold his hands in *namaskara* exhibiting deep respect. This intrigued me and when I asked him who it was, he would reply that it was the Deputy Commissioner in the car. I was awed by the respect a deputy commissioner received. My grandfather during vacations would also share the extent of influencing role that IAS or ICS and other government officers had and the difference they could make to the country and people. There was a time while completing my course in USA that I had a dilemma if I should come back to India and apply for IAS entrance or if I should seek a job in USA. I shared my thoughts with my professor Arthur Louis, and that made a deep impact. He said, Instead of being a second class citizen in this rich country it is much better to be a first class citizen in your own poor country. If I am in your position I would choose to not think about this white collar job. Instead, I would go to India and put all my capabilities into better use."

Sir, that says a lot and we were blessed to have you in our State and country. What would be the last words for our readers from you?

"Leadership through position and power can be obtained in life but Leadership through capacity to Influence has to be nurtured with those 6 attributes of clarity of vision, execution capacity, communication, empathy, integrity and approachability. This doesn't happen in a day but over a period of time with deep self-awareness and constant introspection."

Ability to Influence gives the Leaders the true purpose of the Position and Power they hold.

Additional learning links - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bFCCR-Kp8w> and

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r45rdzFv-Ac>

A leader with the capacity to Influence also has to be empowering and give freedom to the team members. We will explore the attribute of Empowerment in the coming month of Conversations.

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath



IT'S PLAYTIME!



Clichéd as it might sound, all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. We’ve read the line several times over, and have mused over it a few times before. Pooja Rai probably did too, before she decided to take things a step further and co-founded Anthill Creations along with her batchmates from college. A social enterprise that aims to design “inclusive and interactive playgrounds,” Anthill leverages the power of play, and brings about a sense of development through what is essentially playtime. “When a child plays, he or she learns to use creativity and imagination,” Pooja explains, “Playtime helps a child’s personal, social and emotional development.” She continues, “When children are waiting for their turn by the swing, for instance, they are learning self-control and patience. When they help each other climb bridges and monkey bars, they learn team work.”

So, the key to ensuring teamwork could well lie in creating play elements that encourage collaboration — like a 3-way see-saw or balancing

beam. “This helps children learn many life lessons which we don’t learn inside classroom on how to work with difficult situations, how to keep our ego aside if we want to play at a very little cost,” says Pooja, who is also the CEO at Anthill Creations. “This only goes on to underline how powerful the act of playing is. What we learn in our early years define the kind of person we become as adult. And if we can teach our children to be more empathetic, loving, caring and risk-takers through play, we will

be creating a better world.” Aside of cultivating these traits through its take on playtime, Anthill also ensures that designing inclusive playgrounds — ones that can be used by differently abled children — translates to a sense of empathy and better

sensitivity among children.

Is it a problem, then, that most schools don’t allocate enough time for play? Or that most schools don’t have proper playgrounds? “When there is lack of resources, play takes a backseat,” says Pooja. “When a child is not even getting food to eat, classes without teachers, it becomes very difficult for government schools & low-resourced schools to give enough importance to playtime.” But if recognizing and leveraging the importance of playtime is one part of the story, the fact that Anthill does it through sustainable means, is another. At what the enterprise calls a “design



library”, Anthill brainstorms on what goes into the holistic development of a child. Part of the process involves creating sustainable, easy-to-scale playgrounds.

“Our construction materials are lighter and the construction process quicker,” says Pooja, “Ensuring this, we at Anthill create playgrounds at a super-fast pace — just a four-day period — with do-it-yourself designs.” Using sustainable and low-cost materials, Anthill also ensures that its “playscapes” are one-fourth the cost of a usual playground, which uses materials like steel, wood or plastic. “Across the world, over 981 million tyres are thrown away each year, and even less than 7% are recycled. We use these scrap tyres and other recyclable materials like oil drums to create beautiful playscapes,” says Pooja.

Through the process, Anthill also ends up empowering communities. The organization creates community leaders and changemakers by using local community volunteers for most of the project work involving building its playscapes. “The modular designs that we have for different

play units are easily replicable and a do-it-yourself process, with a step-by-step process is built by us,” says Pooja. What this means is that the end product is pretty much automated.

Cluster transformation is another area of interest for Anthill. “What this means is that we build hundreds of playgrounds by transforming urban and rural spaces into hubs of activity and play, in government schools and public spaces,” says Pooja. A case in point is the organization’s restoration of fallen coconut trees as a result of Cyclone Gaja, across several areas in Tamil Nadu. “We will be working on the rehabilitation project and build playgrounds for children. Play is the best way to bring normalcy especially after such a traumatic event for children,” she says. The organization is also building inclusive playgrounds for the visually challenged. “It’s about catering to all five senses through sound and textures,” explains Pooja, “We are also open to a partnership model, where we can train the local people to build playgrounds in their own communities.”

The target for Anthill is to build 10,000 playgrounds in the next five years, touching the lives of five million children. “We want to enable community champions, and make play accessible to every child,” says Pooja.

As exciting as these plans might seem, Pooja feels there is scope for change in the way present-day playgrounds are designed. “There is so much scope for innovation in design and material,” she says, “The act of playing has to evolve with society. It has to be an integral part of our everyday lives. Be it office spaces or shopping malls, there should be a play area where children can be left to be themselves without a guided adult supervision.”

While the scope for learning outside the classroom is immense, the need for creating environments where children can discover and learn on their own is more a priority now than ever before. “Children are naturally curious and if we give them the right environment, they can grow and learn on their own,” says Pooja, signing off.



Confidence



The Japanese General Nabunaga decided to attack even though he had only one soldier to the enemy's ten. He was sure he would win but his soldiers were full of fear. On the way to the battlefield they stopped at a *Shinto* shrine. Nabunaga said to his army, "I shall now toss a coin. If it is heads, we shall win. If tails, we lose. Destiny will now reveal itself." He tossed the coin. It was heads. The soldiers were so keyed up for the fight that they wiped out the enemy. Next day an aide said to Nabunaga, "No one can change destiny." "Right", replied the General, showing him a coin that had heads on both sides.



Explicit Learning

- A. Boosting your confidence is the problem, not the winning of the battle.
- B. Convince yourself that you can - and you will.
- C. You have the option to make or mar your future.



Introspective Learning

- A. What is the nature of 'Confidence'?
- B. What makes me fear failure? How do I overcome it?
- C. Who decides my destiny?

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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.

For more information, please visit our website www.csim.in

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

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Ode to Young Trash Ambassadors

As the guitar strings play music in rhythm, the trash ambassadors sing the Agal Anthem:

*"It's I! It's I! It's I who keep my city clean (2)
Roll over the oceans, roll over the seas
You and I can make our city clean"*

These are 5th graders from Chennai becoming Trash Ambassadors to keep their city clean. And there is a story behind how it all began in the first place.

For a textile retailer Karthikeyan and a Singapore based retired banker Vajidha Hameed, the floods of 2015 was not just another phase of devastation that would pass. What started off as an accidental meeting in one of Karthikeyan's shops (where Vajidha came to buy bedsheets for flood relief) led both to a passionate entrepreneurial journey.

The reason for the nasty flooding was many, but a major problem area was the humungous amount of solid waste dumping and industrial discharges that contaminated and clogged the water bodies. Another man-made disaster which could have been avoided, only if humankind was concerned about how garbage could be managed.

The hassles always fade, and people tend to go back and forget what led them or will possibly lead them to such bad catastrophes again. But, this was not the case for Karthikeyan and Vajidha. They researched and brainstormed as to why such man-made disasters were uncontrollable. "If we had proper drainage channels, and effective waste disposal and dumping systems, the flooding could have been controlled and the disaster would not have got as bad as it did," says Karthikeyan.

"While most of India is prone to becoming a littering yard, the same 'us' would not dare to litter a street in a foreign country for the stringent rules those countries follow. It's not only the rules, but the mindset that leads someone to litter or not. In order to change this mindset, it's crucial address the root of the problem. It is therefore necessary to influence a mind shift change among children by talking to them so that they grow up to be responsible citizens of the country. Cleanliness will become a way of living!" explains Karthikeyan.

Clean living must become a way of life. Our smallest actions could bring about the biggest changes. "Somewhere something has to CHANGE," says Vajidha Hameed who has designed a beautiful learning content for 5th graders on environment.

Karthikeyan and Vajidha launched Agal Foundation on February 2016. "It was important to design a module that is interactive, and playful for children. We used activity based learning programmes conducted by volunteers and teachers. And, it worked! We named this module as 'Thrash the Trash Champs' which consists of three modules and spans over a period of 23



weeks, with one hour/week. Trash Ambassadors from 5th grades have started to rise and the children have

welcomed this programme with all their heart. Currently, this is being conducted at four schools across Chennai.

The schools that Agal partnered with have started to integrate the learnings in their own waste disposal systems thereby bringing about change. "Recycle, Reuse, reduce" became the mantra. Slowly, this programme became infectious with parents of children also reporting to adopt these waste disposal practices.

'Breaking the Taboo' - a seminar organised by Agal foundation in November 2016 on women working professionals had a huge impact on college students. The primary aim of the seminar was to sensitise children on ways of disposing sanitary napkins in the most hygienic and effective manner. Agal has also conducted programmes with Loyola College in Chennai to raise awareness on waste disposal methods and its rightful management.

Recently "Thrash the Trash Champs" of Agal Foundation has gained global recognition. Paris Peace Forum, a global platform for governance projects that was held in November 2018 invited Agal Foundation to showcase their programme.

The dream of Vajidha Hameed and Karthikeyan does not stop with just 4 or 100 schools. "In order to infiltrate and make this as a way of life, it is essential for us to launch this programme in multiple schools across the country. And that's what we are striving at," says Karthikeyan.

The duo are aiming to digitalize the content to expand the reach of the programme. They are superheroes in all true sense as they are nurturing a mindset that has ripple effect on all who is touched.

—Angela Anish

SOCIAL IMPACT AND INEQUALITY

“As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest.” Nelson Mandela



Inequality is a difficult topic to understand and tackle but it seems to be increasing in a relative sense and surely has to be addressed by all those working for a fairer society – that includes those pushing for a wider and more effective social economy.

According to the OECD, the average income of the richest 10% of the population is about nine times that of the poorest 10% across the OECD, up from seven times 25 years ago. (OECD).

There has always been income inequality but as the world becomes more and more interconnected, the divisions between those that ‘have’ and those that ‘have-not’ is increasingly widening. And this has a knock-on effect where the disparities in income translate into disparities in wealth – raising the question, who owns our world?

Statistics and numerous learned papers show that we are living in a divided world. But we can divide the world in different ways.

We can divide the world into geographical areas where national boundaries and the variance of differently developed cultures is the most obvious way to segregate world society.

I used to work for international development organisations and we talked about whole countries being ‘un-developed’ or ‘under-developed’. This approach, in my view, was flawed as it did not account for the social economic divisions that existed within these countries.

We can also divide the world by socio-economic class, and with globalisation, this is where the very real inequality resides.

I worked for a number of years in Jakarta. The urban upper middle class in Indonesia had more in common with the upper-middle class in London and New York than it had with those scraping a living in make-shift shanty towns along the sides of the Jakarta canals – and these slum areas were only a short walk from the affluent districts.

It may be considered eccentric and old-fashioned to talk about socio-economic class these days, but it is difficult to ignore in any sensible debate about inequality.

But what is meant by ‘socio-economic’? These two

terms, linked by a hyphen, are often applied liberally without paying attention to its actual meaning.

Inequality is not only economic in terms of money, income and thus access to acquiring things, it is also social, meaning access to opportunities, inclusion and integration in society, and all the benefits associated with where one is born and into what kind of family.

The rather clumsy phrase, ‘socio-economic’ can be extended into the social economy sector where social benefits are inextricably linked to the economic.

To go back to my time working for aid organisations, we used to focus very much on the social and basically survival aspects of development. In refugee camps in Sudan and Somalia, I worked on the delivery of services to refugees who were struggling to keep their families alive and together. Fellow aid workers then recognised the importance of economic activity, often in community-owned structures, to help people and communities become more resilient and less reliant on outsiders.

Returning to Scotland in the late 1980s, I drifted into working with community-owned businesses. I was a researcher with Community Business Scotland and addressing inequality seemed to me to be at the core of what community enterprise/business was all about.

It is interesting to muse over the fact that the main measurement of success for community business in the later 1980s was how many jobs they had created or sustained. In those days having a job enabled people to have economic and social stability. This is no longer the case as many who are statistically in poverty at the moment actually do have work of some kind.

With community-owned business, a core ingredient was collective and shared ownership inherited from the long-standing co-operative movement.

Within the social economy sector at the moment the issue of who actually owns a social enterprise has received a lot less attention – compared with the emphasis placed on the impact a social enterprise has on its external stakeholders.

Reporting on impact is, of course, not a bad thing, but it does not mean that other things such as the type and level of collective ownership of a social enterprise should go unreported. The question being, do external

stakeholders and the ‘community’ have any degree of ownership of the social or community enterprise; and how does this operate in practice? The type of ownership and wide involvement, in itself, can indicate a commitment to addressing inequality.

Surely, we have to move to a world where people collectively own the means that produces income and eventually wealth – whether it be land, buildings or technology. Shared ownership can address inequality.

The impact any organisation has on social and economic inequalities should be reported on a regular basis by all organisations. For a social enterprise it is likely that this will mean, firstly, demonstrating how it is planning to address inequality; and then secondly, assessing how well it is doing this.

Social Accounting and Audit (SAA) provides a framework that not only expects reports on impact but also expects any organisation purporting to create socio-economic benefits to report on its key organisational aspects which include ownership, the degree of stakeholder engagement and internal pay differentials. The Social Audit Network (SAN) is the leading proponent of Social Accounting & Audit (SAA) and its annual Gathering in Liverpool on 17th October 2018 will be focusing on inequality.

I often meet people working in ‘social enterprise’ and they say they want to ‘change the world’, ‘make things better’ and address social and economic inequalities. These sentiments are laudable and worthy of support but there have to be some practical ways they continue on that path and do not get diverted into just running yet another business. I believe SAA is an organisational framework that can keep social and community enterprises ‘on track’ to do what they really intend to do.

So finally, the late Nelson Mandela said ‘none of us can truly rest’ when ‘gross inequality’ persists. As ever, he was right. But for social enterprises to seek a solution to combat gross inequality there has to be a greater understanding of inequality issues and a responsibility to regularly and systematically report on the progress made in addressing it.

—Alan Kay

Social Audit Network (SAN)
www.socialauditnetwork.org.uk

Back in business, after the storm

Devastating floods in Kerala tested SaveAGram's spirit and savvy in Wayanad. Now, the community is more ready than ever to receive travellers once more.

Cows

When Amala Menon set up SaveAGram to help struggling rural communities in India tap the power of tourism, the last thing she expected to do was vetting what type of cows farmers were buying.

Yet that was what she found herself doing, when Kerala was hit by devastating floods in August, 2018. It was the worst flood to have hit the state in over a century, unleashing mudslides that displaced more than a million people, killed at least 445, and swept away roads, bridges and homes.

Amongst the areas that were affected was Wayanad, where one of SaveAGram's homestays is located.

Amala went from social entrepreneur to a mini "crisis relief" agency of one, rallying friends to donate monies, and making sure the funds raised — over US\$14,000 in all — were put to good use.

Including making sure farmers looking to replace livestock bought the best cows for their needs. "I wanted to make sure they bought the good desi cows," she says. Desi cows refer to breeds indigenous to India, which are prized for producing more nutritious milk.

First growth, then crisis

SaveAGram was set up in 2014 to help villagers preserve their unique rural lifestyles by offering homestays to travellers, thereby generating income.

After Our Better World first told their story in 2017, SaveAGram saw their profile grow, with enquiries for their homestays surging from once monthly to 100 a month.

The enquiries also resulted in more bookings, with monthly proceeds rising 22 fold. Since the story was published again on The Better Traveller, SaveAGram has received 230 enquiries as of December 2018.

"The stories raised our profile and gave us more visibility," says Amala. "So we have been trying to figure out how to take that further."

Then came the floods, which brought tourism in the state to a standstill.

The Nambiars — SaveAGram's hosts in Wayanad — were fortunate to have suffered relatively little damage to their property, except to its plumbing. Following repairs, the Nambiars are ready to receive guests once more.

But others were harder hit: some losing homes, and others losing an entire season's crops — and income.

From preserving lifestyles to rallying for help

The Indian government had pledged to provide cash payouts to those affected, but upon visiting the villages, Amala realised not everyone was eligible.



"There was nothing. People were living in tents, living in other people's homes. I started thinking about how I could make a difference," she says.

Amala managed to raise 10 lakhs (US\$14,324) in donations, and worked with Wayanad Girijana Trust, with which she partners for SaveAGram, to ensure every dollar made maximum impact.

One group stood out as being most in need of help: farmers. "Crop loss is a huge loss. People take loans to plant crops every season. So what we did was to identify households, and gave them Rs5,000 (US\$71) to help tide them over."

"In India, Rs5000 goes a long way, it can help manage their household expenses,

school fees. If they had loans, they could put some money towards paying off their debts," says Amala.

Organic farmers — whose practices Amala encourages — received double the amount, and SaveAGram also pledged to buy their produce going forward.

Those who wanted to buy a cow were given Rs30,000 (US\$430) to do so, allowing them to secure their livelihood.

Fourteen households whose homes were destroyed were pledged about 800,000 rupees (US\$11,416) for rebuilding, with the money released in tranches.

The "social" in "social enterprise"

SaveAGram, Amala stresses, is not a charity. "But when you run a social

enterprise, it's so related to the social situation that you have to rethink what you do occasionally."

She also saw how the community rallied to support each other. "Even small farmers are trying to think of what else, where else they can come in."

With the floods subsided, Wayanad is open for business again, the green hills and flowing river peacefully beautiful once more.

"SaveAGram's primary aim to help villagers generate income," says Amala. "When travellers visit, it gives them a sense of joy, pride and income."

Reflecting on her experience, Amala says: "I think the kindness of human beings came up, and people trusted me enough to reach the people who could benefit. "[This trust] so powerful that you have to use it. I am so humbled by it."

ABOUT SAVEAGRAM

SaveAGram was founded to preserve the unique lifestyle of rural Indian villages, by offering homestays to travellers as a way of generating income. It began with a pilot in 2014 in Gaja in Garhwal, and was expanded to Wayanad in Kerala in late 2015.

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

“I want to create a dialogue with women and make them aware of their rights.”

Rajathi Salma tells Marie Banu how she uses her writing for women empowerment.

Rajathi Salma is one of Tamil's most important contemporary poets. Overcoming orthodoxy, marital violence and imprisonment in her own home, Salma has become an international literary figure and spokesperson for women's rights. Her work articulates the nuances of repressed desire and sexuality, as well as bringing life to the often-invisible domestic space inhabited by many Indian women. With two volumes of poetry, one novel and a collection of short stories, Salma has made her mark as a distinctive Indian literary voice.

The late Lakshmi Holmstrom's English translation of her novel *The Hour Past Midnight* was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Prize and long-listed for the Man Asian Prize. As well as being a woman of letters, Salma is a committed public servant and activist, running an organization for the promotion of women's rights and education in rural India. She is the subject of a multi-award winning documentary film, *Salma*, by British filmmaker Kim Longinotto.

Salma is the author of two books of poetry: *Oru Maalaiyum Innoru Maalaiyum* (An Evening and Another Evening) (2000) and *Pachchai Devathai* (Green Angel) (2003).

In an exclusive interview, Rajathi Salma tells Marie Banu how she uses her writing for women empowerment.

About your interest in writing?

I grew up in my hometown Thuvankurichi, a village at Tiruchirappalli in Tamil Nadu. I could not pursue my schooling after the age of 13 as this was the custom in my community—girls can't go to school after they attained puberty.

My parents were liberal intellectuals and they understood the complexities of identity that I might face, but were compelled to encourage some form of conservatism within me. There were always certain things that I couldn't wear; certain things that I couldn't eat; and certain topics I couldn't discuss. I lived within those confinements for much of my early life.

I felt very lonely and wanted to study. I started reading all I could get hold of. I spent two hours a day in the library nearby and my brother used to also bring

me books from here.

After marriage my husband and his family did not allow me to read or write. So, I would wait until everyone was asleep at night before sneaking to the toilet to write.

We had a small box for sanitary napkins and I used to hide my pen and papers here. I wrote on a pen name Salma, as I did not want to disclose my identity. In the morning, I would seek the help of my mother and my maid to post my writings to magazines. They used to also secretly deliver the response letters to me. A lot of comments that I received on my writing/poems made me feel confident.

Why do you choose to write mostly about women?

I read a lot of literature, mostly Russian literature that was translated into Tamil, Walt Whitman, Kaleel Gibron and Poplon Neruda. I learnt about the issues that were happening around the world and realised that this was totally different to what women in my community/village were experiencing. I felt a conflict within. This influenced me to write about women and the changes that I wanted to see happen. There is a need for social awakening and a woman certainly deserves a better treatment!

Social issues—passion

I am concerned about the social pressure on women that curtails their freedom. Some women do not understand these issues as they accept these restrictions as part of their religious and cultural beliefs. There is a need to sensitise them and make them realize that no religion states that women needs to be suppressed. I want to create a dialogue with women and make them aware of their rights.

Are the present laws adequate to protect the rights of women in India? Your thoughts?

Although there are laws to govern rights for women, it comes to effect only when there is an issue. There is a rising incidence of crime against women, which can't be denied. What is required is the change in people's mindsets.

The value of gender equality needs to be inculcated since childhood and can be achieved through education. Families need to treat their children equally. This



is what I have been emphasizing in my writing!

Can you tell us about your Trust?

In 2010, I launched a Trust “Your Hope is Remaining with” with an aim to achieve gender equality and voice against any form of discrimination

against women. Social order with justice and liberty are our twin principles and we work for development, capacity building, enlightenment, and empowerment of women in Chennai and Trichy districts.

We are also engaged in creating awareness on the importance of education especially girl child education.