

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 8 | Issue 2 | February 2020 | 12 Pages | For Free Circulation Only | www.msdsrust.org



PUBLISHED BY: P.N.SUBRAMANIAN
on behalf of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani,
391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar, Alapakkam,
Chennai - 600 116. Phone : 044-42805365
www.msdsrust.org

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

The availability of equal opportunities, resources and freedom on various counts - irrespective of religion - is what we call as Gender Equality. This means that all humans should be treated as equals despite their gender and should be allowed to make decisions and choices in their life as per their own aspirations. It is actually a goal which has often been neglected by our society despite the fact that governments all over the world have been known to come up with various laws and measures to ensure gender equality.

"Have we been able to achieve this goal?" Are we anything near to it? The answer is probably "No". This is the scenario not only in India, but even across the world.

While the laws of Independent India are robust giving women a safety net, it is unfortunate that Gender Equality is still an issue. In 2018, India has topped in the Unsafe Countries for Women list bringing a national shame which the citizens and the leaders most gladly shrugged off.

There are numerous incidents which reflects the status of gender equality or rather gender inequality every day. There have been many initiatives made by our Government to somehow bridge this gap. For instance, schemes run by the government under the Ministry of Women and Child Development such as Swadhar and Short Stay Homes aim to give alleviation and restoration to women in distress as well as destitute women.

The United Nations has been quite active in supporting the Indian government towards achieving its goal on gender equality. In 2008, the UN Secretary-General propelled the UNiTE to End Violence against Women crusade with the mean to raise open mindfulness and increment political will and assets for averting and consummation all types of viciousness against women.

Moreover, the making of UN Women came to fruition as a major aspect of the UN change plan, uniting assets and orders on gender equality. In India, UN Women works intimately with the Government of India and common society to set national benchmarks for accomplishing gender equity. UN Women attempts to fortify women's financial strengthening through its help to women agriculturists, and manual foragers. As a major aspect of its work on harmony and security, UN Women trains peacekeepers to identify and stop strife related sexual brutality.

Women have been battling for equivalent rights for ages, for the privilege to cast a ballot, the privilege to control their bodies and the privilege of equality in the working environment. What's more, these fights have been hard battled, yet regardless we have far to go, in treating the women as equal to men.

By offering gender equality in areas of health services, education, job, and involvement in administrative and monetary decision-making practices will ultimately benefit in attaining the economic sustainability overall.

We hope the entire world recognizes the efforts of men and women equally soon in our modern society. Let us make a conscious effort to bring Gender Equality into existence.

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

"There is a fundamental purpose for which we live, we must look beyond one's immediate goals; to what we ultimately want to accomplish and consider life's highest potential for development" – Parmahansa Yogananda.

There are broadly two types of leaders. Servant leaders and Power leaders. People create organisation and organisations have a purpose. Leadership of the organisation galvanize people together with a purpose driven will.

People bring their energy, passion, heart and soul to the game of building teams and people derive joy and meaning through their contribution of time, talent, treasure and touch.

People get values driven and become most valued players and feel secure and optimistic. The purpose of the organisation lies in its ability to garner diversity of thought and multitude of perspectives.

Therefore, leadership is critical to nurture the people, motivate them and get them more connected, more accountable and more involved, all the time.

The people on the path of servant leadership tell the truth, share credit, listen more than talk and open their mind. They believe in listening twice as much as they talk and they learn twice as much and solve twice as many problems. Thus, a leader is of sensitive nature, flexible, open, intelligent, rational, consistent and firm and fair. Servant leader will put everyone else a head of himself.

In social entrepreneurship, motivation is the very key for achieving the desired impact. This can be achieved by servant leadership as opposed to power leadership.

In servant leadership the manifestation is one of leadership to serve, to serve attribute is to abandon consciously the attitude of arrogance, overlordship and superiority but exhibit and practice, unconditional love and forbearance, giving self-respect and single-minded devotion to nurture and give leadership with grace.

Servant leadership encourages creating many, many leaders from within to integrate leadership, fellowship and followership. It provides fertile ground for taking ownership and walk the talk and mentoring of people.

The striking examples amongst many are Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, Mother Teresa, Acharya Vinoba Bhava, Bharathiyar, and Dr. Venkataswamy of Aravind Eye Hospital.

Servant Leaders lead us to a shared vision – not same as vision shared and they are eternally confident that they have to continue learning. They lead us to positive affirmations and thoughts, which create positive experiences.

If the Servant Leader has to be authentic, he has to be his own author, discover own intrinsic nature, ability and desires and discover that he has to have a way of achieving them.

Servant Leader believes that "there will never be another now; will make most of it now" and that "there will never be another

me and I will make most of it myself". He believes that God's delay is not God's denial.

Attitude is the positive choice for the dedicated Servant Leader.

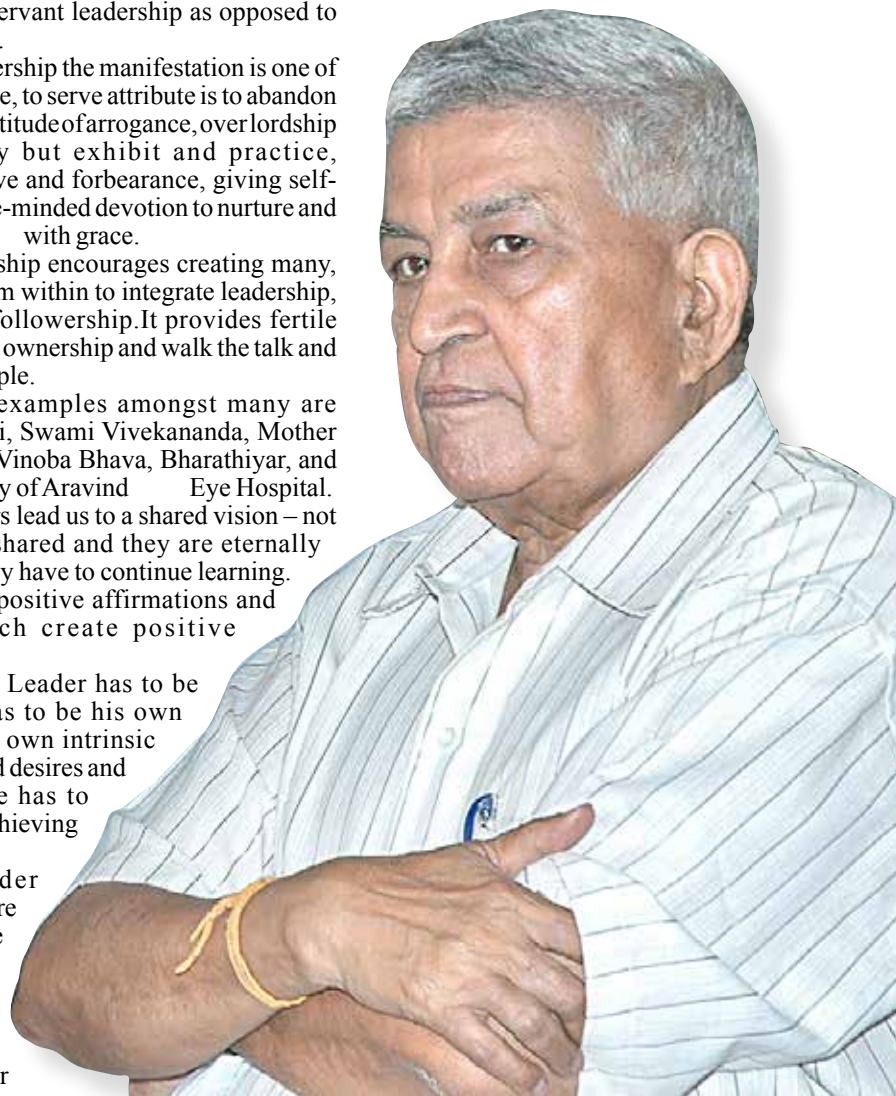
Attitude of gratitude: It is the foundation for the solution to the problem or challenges in life, that is cause for the divide in society between "haves" and "have-nots".

Attitude of courage: Courage is required for abandoning fear of failure. You must consider failure as a stepping stone for success. Close scrutiny of failure will improve knowledge and ability to manage risk.

Attitude of mentorship: For a great leader, one has to be a good mentor. Mentorship ensures empathy and painstaking training, which is innovative and inspirational. A mentor is like a guru. The mentor has taken on herself the duty of releasing the potential of her mentee, by employing gentle, persuasive and compassionate initiatives.

Attitude of building reinforced relationship, effectiveness, sustenance, replicability and customizing to new and different contexts. Servant leadership has to provide high level overview and guidance in the value chain of social work.

PN Devarajan



A1 Read Aloud

‘The Book Shelf’ library was established in August 2016 for children and young adults, with a collection of 1500 books

Children’s holistic development is not only a comprehensive process in itself, but also educative in nature to every keen observer. Their associations with sounds and eventually words, their description of everyday things, their response to others’ descriptions, their assessment of their ability to perform different activities and a set of many other co-related factors not only take them towards their growth milestones, but also lay the foundation for their personalities. “As adults, there are some fundamental habits we must cultivate as early as possible so that it becomes a part of their personalities. I strongly vote for reading here,” says Ms. Haripriya Bathula, Founder of The Book Shelf – Library and Learning Centre in Hyderabad.

With regular aspirations about higher education and dedication, she successfully completed her MS in Biological Sciences from the National University of Singapore. “I dreamt of a secure life like any middle-class student did. But sometimes, your degrees and your pursuit are totally unrelated,” laughs Haripriya, who became passionate about reading and development of literary skills in children. It was during her post-graduation days in Singapore that she got exposed to libraries and the culture of reading. “Libraries were as big as malls and every single person I came across was a member in some library. The culture of reading regularly surprised me. It opened my understanding of literature and cast a strong influence on my observations and decisions thereafter,” she recalls.

Back home after studies Haripriya was shocked to observe her niece’s addiction to video games. “Children spent more time with gadgets. I wondered why my three-year-old niece wasn’t reading anything? My niece’s response to this came in as a bigger shock. She didn’t know that she could read books that were available at home,” she says.

While Haripriya tried to understand the gravity of the response, she just began to read out to her niece every night, with no intent or expectation in her mind. “I felt the urge to make a start somehow. The process opened up my thoughts on children who liked reading, but never knew what they could read,” she adds.

Within two years, her niece began to read regularly. The success prompted her to try the same with another niece. “It is never too late to start reading aloud to children,” insists Haripriya, who by now has started her homework about



establishing a library, exclusively for children. “I felt a strong drive to take this idea forward, for in the long term, I wanted to see reading as part of every child’s routine,” she says, fully aware of the responsibility in her hand. Two factors, she believed, were the key to realising this dream – access to a wide range of books and the guidance to choose the right book for every child. She wanted her library to let children explore the world of literature and therefore, she had to do something more than just provide a good collection of books.

After all the groundwork, ‘The Book Shelf’ library was established in August 2016 for children and young adults, with a collection of 1500 books. “Running a library for children is a big challenge,” admits Haripriya, who also introduced read aloud, storytelling and puppetry sessions in the library. She facilitated creative writing, public speaking and formation of book clubs. Representing the library at various events, Haripriya became a renowned storyteller and a resource person at different institutions. Summer Literature camps in the library and celebration of popular literary

characters like ‘The Gruffalo’ added more value to her story telling events that soon catered to children with mental disabilities as well. Her library presently boasts a collection of 8000 books.

“All the challenges I face disappear when I see children eagerly interacting with me about what book they could read next. Their approach and their specific questions reassure that it was all worth the effort,” says Haripriya who loves being with children. However, her thoughts began to shed light on underprivileged children who had no access to books or libraries. She organised read aloud and storytelling sessions in government schools and also in association with other non-government organisations, but felt that for wider and stronger impact, a well thought out plan was necessary. “Unless I learnt to organise my efforts outside the library, my library might end up as a biased intervention,” she worries.

By reading culture, Haripriya refers to a habit that cuts across all class differences, allowing the children to share and listen to different perspectives. “This is



essential to bring them up as thinking adults. So, I need to do more and move out of the comfort of my library,” says Haripriya, who feels that CSIM happened to her at just the right time. “Devising programmes with a measurable impact was necessary and CSIM not only guided me but prepared me to visualise my activities on a different scale. I began to dream of community libraries where children and their illiterate parents read aloud and attend storytelling sessions too. That is the magic of language and literature,” says Haripriya.

Shanmuga Priya.T

A class act for migrant workers

Six years. 7,500 students. SDI is on a mission to future-proof vulnerable communities through affordable education.



➤ Mohd Alam Mia

It is Wednesday morning at an urban farm in Singapore. Curious fingers gently probe the yellow caps of golden oyster mushrooms, as a guide explains the basics of mushroom cultivation.

The attentive visitors are migrant workers on a learning trip, and among them is 35-year-old Alom Mia. For Alom, the mushrooms before him are more than just a novelty or super food. They represent fresh hope and the opportunity to start anew in his home country.

A former construction worker, the Bangladeshi has been in Singapore for eleven years — and unemployed for more than two.

A workplace accident in 2017 left Alom with a severe knee injury, unable to work and in chronic pain. Living off his savings, loans and welfare support, he despaired over how to support his family and his uncertain future. “If I am not healthy, what am I going to do after returning to Bangladesh?” he laments.

Amidst his troubles, a lifeline materialised in the form of SDI (Social Development Initiative) Academy. Founded in 2013, SDI is a social enterprise offering affordable education and livelihood skills to marginalised communities such as low-wage migrant workers. With non profit HealthServe sponsoring the fees, Alom attended SDI’s entrepreneurship course, which includes learning trips such as the urban farm visit to help them develop new skills.

Fast-forward eight weeks later, and Alom’s outlook is considerably sunnier. Armed with a business idea and the knowledge to put his plan into action, his newfound confidence reflects his hope for a better tomorrow.

“[SDI Academy] taught me where to start, how to start, how to be successful,” Alom says. “Before that I was scared.

“I will go back to Bangladesh, and start a mushroom [culture] business.”

Alom is not alone in despairing over his prospects after years of toiling in Singapore. According to SDI founder, CEO and Singaporean Sazzad Hossain, migrant workers spend an average of eight to 10 years working in Singapore. “They don’t know how to plan their career...they don’t have a plan when they might be sent back home,” he notes.

Business know-how is a powerful tool to free workers from career stagnation, and diminished prospects in their home



➤ Sazzad Hossain
Founder, SDI Academy

Founded in 2013, SDI is a social enterprise offering affordable education and livelihood skills to marginalised communities such as low-wage migrant workers.

countries where rural unemployment rates can be high.

“If we could actually train them with business skills, we can reduce or minimise the risk and help save their hard-earned money to get them to the next stage,” Sazzad says.

A BOY, A BENCH, AND A MISSION

This is how the journey to help people



➤ Volunteers play an important role in SDI’s activities

like Alom began: with a boy giving informal lessons at a neighbourhood park bench to migrant workers, who lived in dormitories near his home.

As the friendships grew, Sazzad began to understand their daily challenges — struggles that mirrored his own when he relocated from Bangladesh to Singapore with his family. Barely able to speak or write English, the 11-year-old who loved

playing cricket with his friends back in Bangladesh felt isolated and alone. When he finally gained admission to a primary school, he had to drop two grades.

“If a privileged person who is here with his parents, is having so much trouble because of the language barrier, what about the migrant workers who face constant problems and struggles at the workplace?” Sazzad says.

“They can’t understand the safety instructions at the workplace, and they don’t even understand a lot of the contracts they sign. So they are very prone to exploitation.”

Empathising deeply with the workers’ plight, Sazzad’s vision soon outgrew free English lessons for just a few.

At age 19, he cobbled together S\$600 (US\$440) from his savings to rent a space, create teaching materials, and print a small batch of a textbook he wrote himself.

SDI Academy was born.

BREAKING BARRIERS, BUILDING BRIDGES

SDI’s first lesson saw 134 eager students turn up. Today, the academy has trained more than 7,500 students, delivering over 200,000 hours of lessons. Students are charged a nominal fee of S\$3.50 (about US\$3) per hour to foster ownership and commitment.

Making up over 15 per cent of the total population, there are close to one million low-wage migrant workers in Singapore. Earning as little as S\$18 (US\$13) a day after employer deductions for levies and housing, the financial burden of attending courses can be considerable. To ease this, flexible payment schemes, subsidies and scholarships are also available at SDI.

But the work doesn’t end with uplifting the migrant community through education and skills. A key part of SDI’s mission also includes lowering the barriers separating migrants and locals.

“Migrant workers live at the outskirts of Singapore society. They live in dormitories that are far away from the main cities,” says Sazzad. “And that’s where volunteers come into play.”

Volunteers help facilitate group discussions at English classes, allowing students to practise their English with native speakers from different races. They also organise events for migrant workers to mingle with local communities, helping them become a part of society by reducing stigma and building friendships organically.



For volunteer Christy Yip, overcoming her preconceived notions of foreign workers proved the biggest challenge. As she laughs and banters with one of SDI’s students, it’s clear that her perceptions have changed.

“Migrant workers being foreigners, I felt that they were strangers and didn’t see the need to approach them,” Christy shares. “When you start volunteering here, you watch these students go from having dreams to actually turning them into reality.”

Nazrul Alam, a former SDI student, says the classes “transformed my life”. “There was a time, whereby my English was too bad, so when I spoke to people they actually [could] not understand what I’m talking about,” he recalls.

Like Sazzad, Nazrul arrived in Singapore with no grasp of English. His first memory of the city is being stranded overnight at Changi Airport for 14 hours, with only the little food his compatriots had brought — and no way of asking for directions or help.

Now Nazrul is not only understood,

but comfortably conversant with the locals — who are floored by his fluency. “I say I’m from Bangladesh. [And they reply], oh, how come your English is so good?” he shares.

Beginning as a manual labourer, Nazrul went from strength to strength: completing his English courses, finishing his diploma, and recently earning his degree. He is now employed as a safety officer. No simple feat, as foreign workers work almost seven days a week — so taking the time and energy to attend classes is a remarkable commitment.

“It’s very good to see someone who barely completed his O-Levels back home, come to a country like Singapore, and have that kind of drive and motivation,” beams Sazzad. “We’re very, very proud of him. He’s an inspiration for everyone.”

Nazrul now mentors group sessions at SDI’s English classes. Paying it forward, his journey has now come full circle.

“We shall transform obstacles into opportunity,” Nazrul declares with conviction. “If you want to learn, there

will always be a way.” SDI Academy founder Sazzad Hossain is an alumnus of Singapore International Foundation’s Young Social Entrepreneurs programme. Through mentorships, study visits, and opportunities to pitch for funding, the programme nurtures social entrepreneurs of different nationalities, to drive positive change for the world.

This International Migrants Day, we honour the contributions, sacrifices and rights of low-wage migrant workers as they toil behind the scenes. Explore more of their stories here, and find out how you can support the dedicated communities giving back to them.

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



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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.

For more information, visit www.csim.in

Contact Persons:

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

LIKE MOTHER



R, LIKE CHILD



Since 1974, Child in Need Institute (CINI), a registered not-for-profit organisation, has been working in urban slums and villages. It began with these settlements along the outskirts of Kolkata. “In the beginning, we were working with children and women who had malnutrition, and as a result of that, high incidence of gastro-intestinal diseases such as diarrhoea and chest infections leading to death in children during infancy and early childhood,” says Samir, “The situation has improved over the last few decades with implementation of government sponsored Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and access to early treatment at local government and private healthcare services.”

A lot has changed since 1974. The overall improvement in socio-economic conditions, improved literacy, improvements in transport and communication infrastructure and overall development have been some of these factors. As a result, nutrition and health indicators are in a much better place, today. “In 2020, the nutrition and health indicators are better and CINI has worked extensively with the government in adding value to ongoing programmes, training of front line government and NGO workers over the last four decades,” says Samir.

But the journey to getting here has been far from easy. In fact, challenges ranged from winning over the trust of local villagers to picking the right team to get the job done. “Overcoming the suspicion of local villagers as we were outsiders who came from the city, and subsequently winning their confidence was our first major challenge,” says Samir, “Another big factor that we had to contend with was the process of selecting and training our first health workers.” This was especially crucial since it was among that this group that Samir had to pick from those who would be acceptable and thus play a crucial role in building a network of strong local self-help groups of women. These groups would in turn go a long way in spreading messages on preventive measures that are required to maintain good health and nutrition. “Furthermore, assisting them to access local services from government such as schools, hospitals/health centres and government homes also improved their confidence,” says Samir, “Our work with the poor also attracted many national and international donors to support our work over the decades.”

Although several improvements have come into place since five decades ago, some statistics remain. “India still harbours the largest numbers of malnourished children and adolescent girls in the world,” says Samir, “Both boys and girls from poor families drop out of school between the ages of 14 and 16 — the girls get married off early and give birth to low birth weight children who continue to remain this way throughout their lifecycle, perpetuating the vicious cycle of malnutrition related deaths.”

Samir’s team at CINI has worked in an integrated manner by way of providing knowledge and skills to women, children and adolescents to access existing government services in nutrition, health, education and protection through what Samir calls a “rights-based approach”. He adds: “we call this the CINI Method.”

By way of these strategies, pregnant women are provided nutrition and healthcare services during the term of their pregnancy. “When it comes to children, this care is especially provided during the first two years of life, when their mental and physical growth is fastest,” he says. This is part of CINI’s “1,000-day approach” in government sponsored ICDS and ASHA programmes, where the organization works closely with front line workers. “CINI has also formulated a low cost nutritious supplement known as CINI Nutrimix which is now supplied to both government and NGO run child care centres,” Samir adds, “Parents are motivated to keep children in school, delay marriage and not to send them out to work as domestic child labour or be trafficked.”

Over time, through a number of projects with women and children as the target group, the organization has grown in reach and numbers. A large part of the work CINI does is also centred on community participation, and isn’t just restricted to health and nutrition. Another project that has drawn praise from several quarters is CINI’s ‘Adopt a Mother, Save a Child’ programme, which has laid focus on safe pregnancies for better motherhood and attended deliveries. Keeping children in school, preventing early marriage, trafficking and various forms of physical and sexual abuse, re-uniting run away and missing children with their families are some of the other areas where CINI has strived to bring about change and succeeded rather well.

Through these efforts, the fact remains that India has robust policies in place by way of the National and State Plan of Action for Children. “There are government programmes being implemented all over India as part of national programmes to empower women and adolescents,” says Samir, “Particularly in West Bengal, there is the Kannyashree programme to provide cash incentives, bicycles if they remain in school, not get married early and later pursue higher education. Unfortunately poor implementation is a major problem.”

To bridge this gap and ensure adequate and appropriate implementation, CINI is working closely with the governments in the centre and state to improve access and utility of these services. The organization has worked closely with elected bodies like Panchayats in villages, and urban local bodies in urban settings in order to improve the reach and quality of these services. “Finally, the game-changer will be to improve budgetary allocations to health, nutrition, education and protection services as has been done in other Asian countries, which in turn has dramatically improved the lives of children and women,” says Samir.

In terms of targets and expansion, CINI has set itself a geographical focus through its “look east” policy. The idea is to serve deprived children and women in east and North East India through a rights-based approach. “CINI is already present in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Assam and Odisha,” says Samir, “Within the next decade, all efforts will be made to reach out to other states such as Sikkim, Tripura, Arunachal, Mizoram and Nagaland, as we begin working closely with respective state governments to improve nutrition, health, education and protection of vulnerable children and women.”

CINI has worked in an integrated manner by way of providing knowledge and skills to women, children and adolescents to access existing government services in nutrition, health, education and protection through a “rights-based approach”

Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

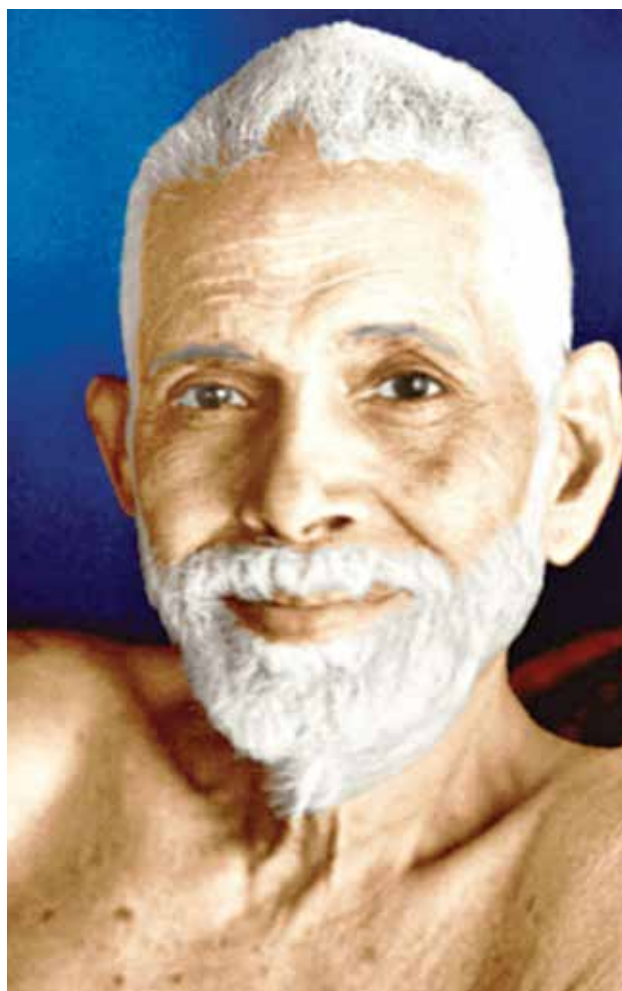
The audience in the hall were very attentively listening. One of them, a sincere devotee of Sri Bhagavan, was so impressed by it that he soon lost himself. He later described his experience as follows:

“I was long wondering where the ‘current’ starts, within the body or elsewhere. Suddenly, my body grew tenuous until it disappeared. The enquiry ‘Who am I?’ went on very clearly and forcibly. The sound of ‘I-I-I’ alone persisted. There was one vast expanse and nothing more. There was a hazy perception of the occurrences in the hall. I knew that people stood up to salute at the end of the Vedic chant. I wanted to stand: the thought soon deserted me. I was again lost in the one expanse. The experience continued until I heard the voice of Sri Bhagavan. That made me collect myself. Then I stood up and saluted. A strange feeling continued for more than half an hour. I cannot forget it. It is still haunting me.”

Sri Bhagavan listened to his words and was silent for some minutes. A few observations fell from his lips:

One may seem to go out of the body. But the body itself is not more than our thought. There can be no body in the absence of thought; no outgoing or incoming in absence of body. However, owing to habit, the feeling of going out arises.

A particle of hail falling on the surface of the sea melts away and becomes water, wave, froth, etc., in the sea. Similarly, the subtle intellect, rising up as the tiny dot (ego) from the heart and bulging out, finally enters into and becomes one with the Heart.



Though milk remains as wide as the sea, can you drink it with a mouth as wide as the sea? You can suck it only through the tiny capillaries of the paps.

Nammalvar, the Vaishnavite saint, has said: “Only my Self is you”. What does it mean? “Before I realised my Self I was wandering looking out for You; having now realised my Self I see that you are my Self”. How will this fit in with qualified monism? It must be explained thus: “Pervading my Self you remain as the antaryamin (Immanent Being). Thus I am a part of your body and you are the owner of the body (sariri)”

Having given up one’s own body as not being oneself why should one become another’s (God’s) body? If one’s body is not the Self other bodies also are non-self.

The protagonists of qualified monism think that individuality is necessary to experience the Bliss. Individuality, i.e., ‘I-ness’ should not be lost. Aha! The Self is not the body but your Self becomes the body of God! Is it not absurd?

Or if you make prapatti (surrender yourself) to God, you have made yourself over to Him and you are His and no longer yours. If He is in need of a body let Him look out for Himself. You need not say He is the owner of a body.

Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi

Social Learning



In a jungle the three most disliked creatures were the snake, the tortoise and the rat. The snake was too sensitive, and would reply to the merest touch with a bite. The tortoise was too withdrawn. He would draw into his shell, unconcerned about his surroundings. And the rat was too inquisitive-nosing and bumping into others all the time.

One day the three gathered and discovered that if each one of them learnt the qualities of the other two, they could become more sociable. So the snake taught his two friends to be sensitive, the tortoise taught how to be oneself, and the rat taught curiosity.

Now each of them, with all the three qualities, had become a more desirable character and soon all the three were part of the jungle’s social life.

Explicit Learning

- A balanced person is one who knows how to be the snake, the tortoise and the rat.
- Being sensitive to others is as important as being sensitive to oneself and being sensitive to oneself is as important as being inquisitive.
- We have something to learn from everyone around.

Introspective Learning

- What does social learning mean to me?
- How do I learn from people around me?
- What is the nature of ‘Social Learning’?

Brightening Lives

“The unselfish effort to bring cheer to others will be the beginning of a happier life for ourselves.” – Helen Keller. In keeping with this quote, a group of like-minded individuals got together and established Cheer- an umbrella organization that is working towards “common goals for the society as a whole”. Led by social workers, advocates, HR professionals and people from diverse sectors, Cheer was formally registered as a society on in 2011 after months of extensive field work and research. The organization over the years has been engaging audiences with unique sensitivity and awareness programs. Speaking with Mr. Gopi, Project Manager, we find that Cheer has a longstanding partnership with some of the most marginalized individuals - homeless transgendered persons and rural children.

A campaign for the social and economic rehabilitation of transgender persons was kickstarted with the launch of a PSA. ‘Sadhayai Meeri’, a music video, illustrating the lives of transgender persons from their birth into a loving family to their adulthood, by when the expectations of their families and society become too different from their gender identity. The video mirrors how we as a society have an influential role in the choices transgendered people make. With the video campaign Cheer garnered public support towards integrating transgender persons in workplaces and institutions to pursue their career aspirations.

In the future, Cheer intends to train and help transgender persons acquire employment, primarily in food kiosks, housekeeping services and in any other sectors that fit their skill, interests and/or education. Selected beneficiaries will receive intensive training and counselling from professionals in their fields of interest before they are assigned responsibilities. Those who choose to be entrepreneurs will be appraised monthly for a term of one year and based on their performance and commitment, additional responsibilities will be provided. At the end of the appraisal term, the successful candidates will be fully equipped to control their businesses, independent of Cheer. Recently, Cheer has started a shelter home for members of the transgender community. Cheer hopes to minimize the apathy and intolerance that society bears towards this vulnerable section of our population. “You can instead, help them lead a better life. You can give them the choice of leading a self-reliant and dignified life,” says Mr. Gopi.

The second project is the establishment of Rural Learning Centres (RLCs) for children in two villages in interior Tamil Nadu. These RLCs provide a holistic environment for the children to learn, retain concepts and avoid dropping out from school. Each year Cheer conducts a two to four week summer camp where children are engaged in activities on

topics ranging from arts, sports, photography, martial arts, handicrafts, community development to environment preservation. Excursions are organized to places of historic interest, cottage industries, the zoo or to a movie. As part of its community mobilization work, in 2019, Cheer organized interactive sessions on waste management, building emotional quotient, team building and leadership skills.

RLCs has a well-equipped library and reading space, where children are trained in using computer applications, implementing realistic environmental projects in their locality, vocational skill development, sports etc. with the help of local trainers. “We are proud to share that for many children in the neighborhood, the RLCs have become the go-to place to spend their spare time. We celebrated the third anniversary of the Rural Learning Centre at Katrampatti. The RLCs are fully functional on weekends and weekday evenings. Resource persons have been appointed and are directed by the Cheer board to conduct regular activities for children. We see a marked improvement in the skills and learning capacities of children, although they are not evaluated by formal methodologies yet” says Mr. Gopi.

In 2002, the State of Tamil Nadu enacted ‘The Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Smoking and Spitting Act’. Awareness around the issue is still lacking. Cheer organized a road campaign to publicize this law. Around 40 volunteers occupied 10 signals in South Chennai during peak hours, carrying the message that smoking and spitting in public places were offences that would attract penalties. With four colourful human silhouette boards, the volunteers marched before the stop lines during red signals drawing the attention of passers-by. While some were aware of the law, many wondered if it was or if it could ever be enforced effectively.

Cheer is involved in raising awareness on current social issues through puppet shows, debates, discussions, workshops and camps for various organizations, corporate, educational or social. Cheer has performed puppet shows on topics such as: Child Sexual Abuse, Breast and Cervical Cancer, HIV Prevention, Road Safety & First Aid, Prevention of Dengue Fever, Child and Bonded Labour, Alcoholism, Women Empowerment and Waste Management.

As a novel attempt, Cheer NGO organized SocioFest, a “cultural” event aimed at bringing people together for fun, frolic and competition while tackling social issues. Senior public service officials and veteran human rights activists spoke at the festival, inspiring the audience to conduct their own lives with a sense of social responsibility.

Recounting their successes so far, Mr. Gopi says, “We have successfully placed some of our Transgender clients in



employment and some others to pursue vocational training that leads to a job. Mx. Gopika is a successful Sculptor; Mx. Afrin completed her Diploma in Cosmetology at VLCC; Mx. Anusha is an Accountant and Administrative staff; Mx. Anjana Devi is an HR Recruiter at a leading company; Mx. Arunarani runs a Food Kiosk at Adyar and Mx. Anu who is a Beauty Therapist at a popular beauty salon.”

Running this entrepreneurship/educational project for transgender persons can be quite challenging, in terms of scale. It requires long-term commitment from the beneficiaries and is therefore a slow yet steady development process. The organization currently has a single mobile kiosk that is leased out to individual

entrepreneurs on a rotating basis, provided they employ transgendered persons to run the kiosk.

Challenges with their other projects include finding qualified managers for the RLCs, identifying donors for various projects, transportation and accommodation for resource persons who help out with the RLCs and so on.

“We hope to gain more public support and commitment from beneficiaries to further implement the project” says Mr. Gopi, adding that, “our vision is to have an equal, compassionate and tolerant society, and justice for all”.

Archanaa Ramesh

Water Governance – Inclusive Development Aspects

A Sixth two-day foundation day symposium was conducted on 13th & 14th February '20 by DMI Patna, in collaboration with UNICEF on a very alarming topic of today's world; Water Governance – Issues and Challenges. The topic gets more relevance when we are witnessing shift in climate all around the globe, leaving no community and country unaffected. The attendees were senior bureaucrats, academicians, civil society organizations, action research fellows, upcoming PG students in development management and young professionals of social development organizations.

The chief guest for this symposium was Shri Rajendra Singh, an Indian water conservationist and environmentalist from Alwar district, Rajasthan in India. Also known as "Waterman of India", he won the Magsaysay Award in 2001 and Stockholm Water Prize in 2015. He runs an NGO called 'Tarun Bharat Sangh' (TBS), which was founded in 1975 and is one of the members of the National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) which was set up in 2009, by the Government of India as an empowered planning, financing, monitoring and coordinating authority for the Ganges (Ganga), in exercise of the powers conferred under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. In the UK Shri Gajendra Singh is a founder member of an NGO called the Flow Partnership which aims to counter the negative effects of soil erosion and flooding.

He vibrantly brought out the philosophy of BHAGWAN – 'Bha' Shows Bhoomi (Mother earth), 'Ga' shows Gagan (Sky), 'Wa' shows Vaayu (Air) and 'Na' shows Neer (Water). He further explained that water is core for any climate, as it affects all types of life, local ecosystem, climate and even economic condition of any place. Further he added that today we treat water as a free infinite commodity, may be because we were told that 70% of earth's surface is covered with water, leaving the fact that only 2.5% is drinkable, out of which only 1% is easily accessible. In essence, only 0.007% of the planet's water is available to fuel and feed its 6.8 billion people. We see water as a cyclical form of natural resource, which as a process is infinite in nature. But, we do not consider growing population while assessing the situation of potable water which remains constant throughout, as the competition for drinking water is increasing each year. One more aspect that we missed in our classroom learning was the understanding of the inter-dependability of rain, pollution and population.

UN-Water accepted that water is major influencing factor for climate change in any place. It also plays an important role in demography and socio-economic development of people living in the ecosystem. All ancient civilizations were evolved, developed and strengthened in and around river valley systems. Water helps in



developing a conducive ecosystem for any form of life systems and helps in its growth through other support mechanisms. In these two days, I saw water in its various Avatar. Availability of water table and its distance from earth's crust determine the vegetation of any place, availability of river and structure of land around it can help us determine the size of population; availability of water and agriculture land around it can give us an understanding of its population, prosperity and food habits; and water when combined with the kind of soil, distance from equator and other physical features give us an understanding of types of crops and prosperity of people living there.

I got to know some important facts in these two days.

1. According to WHO, increasing temperatures on the planet and more variable rainfalls are expected to reduce crop yields in many tropical developing regions, where food

security is already a problem.

2. UN in 2018 stated that more than 2 billion people live in countries experiencing high water stress. The situation will likely worsen as population and the demand for water grow, and as the effects of climate change intensify.
3. According to UNCCD, with the existing climate change scenario, by 2030, water scarcity in some arid and semi-arid places will displace between 24 million and 700 million people.

4. FAO envisages that by the 2080, land unsuitable for agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa will die due to severe climate, and soil or terrain constraints may increase by 30 to 60 million hectares.
5. UNICEF in 2019 said that climate change will have its most direct impact on child survival through three direct channels: changing disease environments, greater food insecurity, and threats to water and sanitation.
6. UNICEF in 2017 estimated that by 2040, one in four of the world's children under 18 – some 600 million in all – will be living in areas of extremely high-water stress.
7. WEF in 2015 said that scientists, farmers and the business community

consider variability, casted as 'extreme weather events', as one of the most likely production risks over the next ten years.

8. Looking at the trend, humans have proved to be inefficient water users. (The average hamburger takes 2,400 liters, or 630 gallons, of water to produce, and many water-intensive crops, such as cotton, are grown in arid regions.). According to the United Nations, water use has grown at more than twice the rate of population increase in the last century. By 2025, an estimated 1.8 billion people will live in areas plagued by water scarcity, with two-thirds of the world's population living in water-stressed regions as a result of use, growth, and climate change. The challenge we now face as we head into the future is how to effectively conserve, manage, and distribute the water we have.

Some solutions can be reconsidered, which we left in the race of becoming a modern society:

- Wash a tub-full clothes only, to make optimal use of water
- Use small tanks with western toilets, to flush out less water
- Plant more trees
- Revive wells, ponds, small water structures and lakes
- Conserve waste water coming out of water purifier
- Use solution/s to bring up underground water table

Dr. Agyeya Trippathi

Enabling a sustainable planet



The devastation that climate change has unleashed on the already vulnerable small holder farming across the developing world, especially in India, is well documented. The crisis is too deep and it hurts women first - worst and hardest.

In the last decade I took Gandhian inspired walk across the world and particularly in India, in the Western Ghats – from the seashore of Bay of Bengal to the Blue Mountains of Ooty – walking along the plains of Tamil Nadu.

In all these walks I have spoken about the critical role of Fairtrade that goes a long way in supporting Adaptation to climate; recovering from Market injustices and providing sustainability for agriculture through Fairtrade.

I have now taken 3 crore steps and have met more than 340,000 people telling this story and influencing consumers, business, policy makers, schools and colleges.

I do my walks to demonstrate the urgency and the sufferings but do it with a message of hope, promise and possibilities that are real. Indeed, my next walk like all its previous ones are timed when world leaders meet for the Conference of parties (COP). At the time of COP 26, I am planning to walk from London to Glasgow and yet again my storyline is the same – “Fair trade offers a great and practical way for all”.

Fairtrade- enables sustainable planet. It transforms business which has only for-profit motive into agents of transformative and sustainable business.

Schools and colleges become front line agents of sustainable economy by talking about sustainable consumers who facilitate a fair

agrarian landscape and also questioning: “Who made my food, clothes and things I use?” during the Fairtrade week organised in the country during November each year. In 2019, more than 13,000 school children participated, someone buys a Fairtrade cotton shirt every two minutes in India. That is the change happening in our country over the last 4 years.

Consumers are becoming powerful instruments of change in providing a way that is fair; sustainable and wholesome.

Every chocolate or Chikki that you chew; every t-shirt you buy; every cup of coffee or tea you drink will no more contain elements of poverty and suffering. Instead, it will eliminate child labour; unfair wage and unhealthy condition to workers; reduce poisoning of the agriculture and provide a decent livelihood to farmers. In short, it is a fair economy that is sustainable.

From Airports to super markets in Metros – fair trade products are being sold in India and there are more than 2 lakh fair trade consumers in action.

For more fair-trade consumerism, we need every household; ward; Panchayat; towns and cities to be a fair-trade place. We urge you to join the global movement of creating Fairtrade towns.

Are you ready Chennai? Let us walk/talk and make a City that is fair.

Pushpanath Krishnamurthy

www.gopushgo.co.uk
<http://fairtradeindia.org/>



“A compassionate approach is a path to better quality of life.”

Shri Prasanth IAS shares with Marie Banu the initiatives he had launched during his tenure as District Collector of Kozhikode.

Prasanth Nair is a civil servant and member of the Indian Administrative Service. He graduated with in Law from the University of Kerala. In 2007, he was selected to the Indian Administrative Service (4th rank all-India) and borne on the Kerala cadre. He has served in various capacities in various sectors including Tourism, Taxation, Roads, Water supply, Skill Development etc. He headed two World Bank Projects, viz. Jananidhi and Kerala State Transport Project.

Presently, he serves as Managing Director of Kerala Shipping & Inland Navigation Corporation (KSINC). He is also the Managing Director of Kerala Irrigation Infrastructure Development Corporation (KIIDC). He graduated with in Law from the University of Kerala.

As District Magistrate in Kozhikode District of Kerala he earned the moniker of ‘Collector Bro’ for his citizen friendly and participative approach in governance. He initiated ‘Operation Sulaimani’ to eradicate hunger under the umbrella project named ‘Compassionate Kozhikode’. Internationale Tourismus-Börse Berlin chose it as one of the 50 inspirational projects from around the world. Digital Empowerment Foundation and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation selected it for the social media for empowerment (SM4E) award.

Prasanth is considered as a pioneer in using social media for governance in India. Even now, Collector Kozhikode Facebook page is the most followed District Administration page in India.

In an exclusive interview, Shri Prashant IAS shares with Marie Banu the initiatives he had launched during his tenure as District Collector of Kozhikode.

What motivated you to join Indian Administrative Service?

When I was around 10 years old, I had accompanied my mother to meet the Principal of the Government Medical College at Thiruvananthapuram as she had to get a service related issue solved. I can recall even today the arrogance I saw on the Principal’s face. He never acknowledged my mother’s presence in his room and she had to go through a lot of bureaucratic processes to resolve the issue. This led us to the office of the Health Secretary in the Secretariat. What I witnessed here was quite different. There was a cheerful bearded gentleman who seemed quite powerful, yet courteous and generous towards us.

When I asked my mother who this gentleman was, she said that he was a civil servant and did what a civil servant was supposed to do. I turned back to look at the name board and I saw ‘IAS’ written after his name. This incident inspired me to become an IAS officer.

You are known as Collector Bro. How did you get this moniker?

I don’t know. It came naturally. These

days I’m surprised if someone doesn’t call me bro. I don’t insist on people addressing me as ‘Sir’. It feels good to see my chauffeur or my gunman call me bro. I feel good.

Generally, in India, saying ‘Sir’ to express ‘official’ respect has been set as a divine rule.

But, I took a conscious decision to break it. There’s a different language in social media and I noticed more bonding when people started responding the same way to my Facebook posts. Quite amusingly, the moniker, “Collector Bro” was coined through these various FB exchanges, when people started addressing me as ‘Bro’ instead of ‘Sir’. The name stuck.

It was a great learning experience for me to work in an environment where you consider each other member as your equal and not seeking to desperately prove at every moment that you are the boss every time. As a junior IAS Officer, I headed two World Bank Projects where we all addressed each other by first name and no sky fell upon us.

What are your thoughts on humour in work culture?

Good humour is the best medicine to beat dullness at work. Not only does this open up doors for cordiality and directness in an organisational structure, but it also helps dissolve the hierarchical gap that has always remained between higher and lower echelons.

Breaking the hierarchical divide, using humour as a tool, has been one of my fundamental obsessions. This I believe, has enabled people working in my team, irrespective of their position, to feel free to pitch in their ideas and offers suggestions without feeling scared or apprehensive of rejection.

Not only have I received some of the best feedback and advice through this process, but I have also observed that our workspaces showcased better productivity and happier staffs.

Not being scared of failure is tough in government because you have no incentive for innovation, but plenty of penalties for even bonafide mistakes. Taking up initiatives as a team makes the risk seem lighter and having open informal channels of feedback communication makes failure less probable. Humour even helps the team take failure in the chin. This could be cited as another instance of how approachability and friendly work culture can do the spade work for innovative and effective output.

For India to have an enhanced work culture that rises above dense and rigid working environments and pave the way for a friendlier atmosphere and satisfied employees, the first step for organisations and its management is to break barriers between its echelons by encourage collective participation. Every voice has to be heard and acknowledged. We need



to understand and attune the language of administrative communication according to the popular culture and ethos of the mass. Creativity should be unleashed and innovation should be encouraged. Humour and informality should be in the air.

Any memorable incident during your stint as Collector of Kozhikode?

A week into taking charge as District Collector, I visited the Government Mental Health Centre at Kuthiravattam. In the middle of a prosperous city, there is an asylum where people are deprived of everything and are not anyone’s priority. Most of them are abandoned. Their food menu was something that was decided way back in 1975. The staple diet was a soup made of broken wheat, which wasn’t particularly very tasty.

There are two groups of people, who have no control over the kind of food they get to eat—the prisoners and the mentally ill. While the former can raise their voices and put their demands across, the latter can’t even imagine doing so. This was very depressing.

It was at this point in time I launched the Compassionate Kozhikode project. After that, the situation improved tremendously.

Can you tell us about the initiatives you launched as District Collector of Kozhikode?

We should realise that we have a fair share of tensions and violence in our society, many of which wouldn’t have happened had we placed ourselves in the shoes of the other person. Therefore, a compassionate approach is a path to better quality of life. This was the idea behind launching ‘Compassionate Kozhikode’. We realised that there are

people in Kozhikode who are willing to give and there are many who really need help. We acted only as a facilitator.

This initiative is all about attitude. It’s about the culture of sharing; sharing for the betterment of people and places. Compassionate Kozhikode serves as a platform to celebrate the lives of people and to bring together like minded persons who can create a holistic destination out of Kozhikode. One of the projects is ‘Operation Sulaimani’ that is coordinated in association with the hotels and restaurants and provides food to the needy in mental health centre institutions, children’s home, old age homes and palliative care centres.

Compassionate Keralam is an extension of this project. It is about bringing volunteers together. During the floods, it was the youngsters who came together quite organically through social media. During the crisis, there was a lot of work that had to be done like collating the SOS, duplicating it and compiling. But they did it through something as simple as spreadsheet and slack. This was very impressive. We have offered scholarships to 25,000 children and a lot has to be done still. We aren’t collecting money here, but people are helping each other. This requires a lot of effort.

In 2015, we launched the official Facebook page for the District Collector, Kozhikode. It was one of the first official social media engagements of that nature and we could establish it as the preferred mode of communication by citizens to sort out their problems -whether suggesting an idea or marking a protest.

These were some of the key initiatives that I had launched.