

# Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 8 | Issue 1 | January 2020 | 12 Pages | For Free Circulation Only | [www.msdsrtrust.org](http://www.msdsrtrust.org)



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

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An exclusive interview with  
Shri Lakshmi Narayanan



## FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Greetings!

Entrepreneurship is assuming a greater role around the world due to its positive correlation with innovation and economic growth. Developing nations have been slower to understand its importance but are now realising it. Support for innovation will enhance entrepreneurship development, which will in turn accelerate economic growth.

India has a large, demographically diverse population, with many young people seeking employment. Entrepreneurship development is one of the mechanisms adopted by the Government of India towards the creation of job opportunities. Questions are being raised as to whether copying the entrepreneurship models of the West would best serve their interests. Researchers have opined that countries like India need not apply the models developed and implemented by developed nations such as the United States. They argue that we should instead try to conceptualize our own growth models which can be customized and adopted.

Despite having a large publicly funded science and technology infrastructure and a sizeable education base, our country has not been able to realize its innovative potential due to its fragmented innovation ecosystem. If this issue is addressed, we hold potential for developing entrepreneurship and providing growth and job opportunities that our country needs.

An entrepreneur is an innovator who introduces something new in an economy. Innovation involves problem solving and an entrepreneur is a problem solver. As individuals, we are all innovators as we adapt well to our needs and create our own solutions. That means we do have the entrepreneurial traits within, but do not realise our potential.

It is time we look into the social issues around us and come up with innovative solutions to address them. The changemakers featured in Conversations Today have used innovation and entrepreneurial ways to bring about social change.

Read, be inspired!

Marie Banu

## Suffering is a choice - create a mindful difference

*“When I look back on my knee-jerk reactions now, I realize I should have just taken a breath.”—Fred Durst*



Suffering is what happens when we have an expectation about how things should turn out or when we have a judgment. Struggles and challenges are inevitable. However, one can “invite” suffering during the period of struggles, in the form of piled up feelings of anger, resentment, sadness that arise during struggles or our judgments such as blame, guilt, shame and worry. The degree to which we manage the suffering in our lives drives the level of happiness and enhances the meaning of life. It is important to realize that the damage we do to ourselves in our minds often far exceeds that of the actual events.

### The 90 10 Rule

10% of life are things that happen to us. We have no control over these events. 90% of our life depends on how we react to the things that happen to us. We can have total control over our choice of reaction to the things that happen to us. The choice of suffering falls in the domain of our reaction to the things that happen to us.

A reaction is instant. It's driven by the beliefs and biases. A reaction is based in the

10%  
of life is made up of what happens to you

90%  
of life is determined by your reaction to what has happened to you

moment and doesn't take into consideration long term effects of what one does or says. A reaction is survival-oriented but often a reaction is something one can regret later.

The 90% comes from deliberately choosing to pause and distance from reaction and suffering. In the pause, bring to your conscious mind your values and the long term view of the current situation. Take a deep breath and give yourself the opportunity to respond. This is a moment of emotional independence that grants one the power of choosing the response!

### Yours Energetically

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

She can be contacted at [bhuvaneshwari@teamthink.co.in](mailto:bhuvaneshwari@teamthink.co.in) for arranging Positive Energy training and Coaching sessions.

## EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh  
Marie Banu



# A Certain Cure

We may have to start with a change in our own mindsets. The kinds of diseases are overwhelming and therefore people's anxiety and irrational beliefs must be handled with awareness. Swastava Cancer Care has been trying to do this in the context of cancer care.

One significant change in a family ecosystem that has extended to larger society is the notion of good health. The consequent behavioural changes and adoption of new habits related to fitness are laying a stronger foundation for the next generation. At this juncture, it is imperative to look into factors that either contribute to or become an impediment to early diagnosis and recovery from life threatening diseases. "We may have to start with a change in our own mindsets. The kinds of diseases are overwhelming and therefore people's anxiety and irrational beliefs must be handled with awareness. Swastava Cancer Care has been trying to do this in the context of cancer care," says Dr Vasudev Chaturvedi, Founder Secretary of Swastava Cancer Care in Hyderabad, Telangana.

Swastava Cancer Care 'emerged out of pain of a group of people' who were either directly or indirectly affected by cancer. "Our life experiences and the loss of dear ones not only forced us to promote early diagnosis but also come to terms with the fact that cancer is curable. We had to say it aloud to ourselves first. We didn't want to see others paying the price we did in order to learn this," says an emotional Vasudev, who lost his wife to Ovarian Cancer. Surviving Colon Cancer, he himself is a standing example to the promise of cancer cure.

Vasudev's successful career in hospital management took on a new phase when he learned about his disease. He is both proud and content that his disease never changed his personality. "I was always a workaholic. I just couldn't let surgery and chemotherapy affect my efficiency at work. It gave me the motivation to remain organised and committed. Having lost my wife, all these occupations helped cope with the need for companionship, but never made up for what I missed in my life. I wanted to do as much as I can to stop others from going through what I did," shares this poignant sexagenarian.

Founded in 2016, Vasudev and team at Swastava Cancer Care gave a serious thought to women above 30 years of age as they felt that women's health was not an immediate priority in rural families. High rate of prevalence of cancer among Telangana women was also a caveat that forced them to look into women and the cancer they were vulnerable to. "Whether we accept or not, we all know the treatment given to women's health in all social classes," laments Vasudev, who feels that women are the most denied community within families.

Awareness is a key component of Swastava Cancer Care's field presence and intervention. Reaching out to remote rural areas where people hardly know



anything about cancer was an urgent need because unless aware, they consulted doctors only in final stages where no medical help could promise recovery. "Cancer is curable. We cannot let them die because of their ignorance. It is a responsibility to create awareness and we are on to it," he says with commitment. Vasudev explains that three forms of cancer are more prevalent among Telangana women – cervical, oral and breast cancer. "When educated people do not know about self-examination of breasts, what can we expect from uneducated masses? We have a huge responsibility," he insists.

Supported by its network of hospitals and medical colleges, Swastava Cancer Care has established itself as a bridge that connects people needing treatment and the source of treatment. Awareness campaign in the villages is soon followed by a screening camp where tests are administered. Based on the results women are advised further diagnostics and medical treatment is offered at hospitals that are associated with the organisation. On an average, Vasudev says that six to seven percent cases are suspected in every camp of which two percent are proven to be suffering from one form of cancer.

Awareness is a holistic process and timely diagnosis is only one end to it. There are other significant outcomes and the team's intention is to reach the young and empower them with correct information. Educating our youngsters about substance abuse, menstrual and sexual hygiene is as critical as educating them about food and nutrition. "We must nudge their behaviour towards good health as early as possible. Their diversions and temptations need to be put in perspective so that they can make their

**"A crucial step forward can come from the state or central government by introducing vaccines to prevent cervical cancer in girls/women."**

right choice," he says.

Swastava Cancer Care is now promoting the concept of 'no tobacco school' where the entire school administration takes an oath to prevent tobacco reaching their premises. This effort received a new impetus when the Government of Telangana decided to collaborate with Swastava Cancer Care to organise awareness programmes in Government Higher Secondary Schools in Hyderabad and Sangareddy districts. "This is a big recognition for us! Building cancer ambassadors in every school, training teachers who can take the message forward to future batches will certainly reach out to a large student population. Such collaborations strengthen our resolve to widen our horizon and reiterate our responsibility," he shares.

The Swastava team also takes efforts to present its work and perspective at significant gatherings like the SAARC Federation of Oncologists' Conference in Bhutan and NCC camps in Telangana and



Andhra Pradesh. They feel that every platform is a promise to let people know the value of prevention, early diagnosis and available treatments. Their commitment has taken them to more than 95 villages in 12 districts of Telangana where they have organised 2042 awareness sessions covering 14,962 children, youth and women. Screening camps in 21 villages have benefitted more than 400 women.

"It all began when I hardly knew anything about management of non-profit organisations. I recently completed the yearlong programme on Social Entrepreneurship and NGO Management from CSIM Hyderabad. Before the course I was ashamed of asking for help. I wrote tenders and earned so much personally but building resources for a cause proved to be difficult. I have now gained the confidence to seek help for my cause. I have learnt the modalities of fund raising. I have built a network of like-minded doctors and entrepreneurs. We all know the value of marching together for a cause," shares Vasudev.

He feels that all these efforts are focussed on the reach their resources promised. A crucial step forward can come from the state or central government by introducing vaccines to prevent cervical cancer in girls/women. "It must be given in two shots in a gap of two months before girls reach 18 years of age. Unaffordable for the masses, only government's intervention can make the difference and save our next generation from cervical cancer. We know the imminent threat and the solution too. Is it not wise that we do what we can?" he quips, adding that the responsibility is on all our shoulders.

Shammuga Priya.T



# A hundred years and counting! Rotary in India

Today there are over 3000 Rotary clubs across the length and breadth of India doing significant work. That the organisation has stood the test of time, embraced change and adapted itself to a changing world is truly remarkable.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who once said that “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” Service organisations have for long played a very supportive role in helping Governments enable people to uplift themselves in a variety of ways. One of the oldest service organisations in the world is the Rotary.

And it was roughly a 100 years ago that International Organization Rotary came to India with the first club in Calcutta. The Rotary club of Calcutta started in Sept 1919, received its charter on 1st Jan 1920. It was organised by R J Coombes, an Englishman introduced to Rotary while on a business trip to Michigan. It had all white members until 1921 when the first Indian member was admitted.

At its inception it was the only Rotary club between the English Channel and the South China Sea with two others in Asia - Manila and Shanghai being installed a few months later but having to suspend operations due to the World War II and other reasons.

The Rotary movement was incidentally founded by a young law graduate of the Iowa Law school named Paul Harris who was feeling lonely and bereft of like-minded friends for company in the USA's second largest city of Chicago (fourteen years before that). This prompted him to get three of his clients to meet with him and together they brainstormed and mooted the idea of a club where they could meet with one another in friendship and service.

One of the reasons the movement was called Rotary was because in the early years they met by turns in each other's place of work. The initial four grew to 200 in three years and from America it spread to Canada, Ireland, England and Scotland. It officially acquired the “International” tag in 1922. Incidentally during World War II Rotarians in England held a conference on education and cultural exchange and sowed the seeds for UNESCO.

Harking back to India and Calcutta where Rotary's initial footprint was marked - from Calcutta the Rotary movement spread to other parts of India like Lahore, Bombay and Madras. The Rotary Club of Bombay and Madras (port cities) was founded due to the





initiative of the inveterate traveller and Rotarian James Wheeler Davidson (Jim Davidson) and his travelogue writer wife Lillian author of "Making new friends" almost a decade after the Rotary club of Calcutta. Davidson was earlier a reporter for the New York Herald. Apart from being part of an expedition to the North Pole he had covered wars as a reporter and clocked many miles to establish Rotary clubs between Europe and Asia.

It was also Jim Davidson who encouraged clubs to include among their members local leaders and not have only expats in its fold. (Membership in a Rotary club is always by invitation.)

From stoutly opposing the entry of women until the late 1980s the Rotary movement now boasts of approximately 10% women members. This is apart from the Inner Wheel for the lady spouses of male Rotarians. In addition there are Interact clubs for school students and Rotaract clubs for college students and community based ones which strengthen the hands of Rotary members.

Rotary has wonderful systems in place for its administration and efficient running - not to forget many admirable lessons to offer for service organisations. Its official mottoes "Service above self" and "He who profits most who serves best" are pithy slogans that can serve as a guide post for all those engaged in welfare and service work.

It's Four-way test – a crisp four-point touch stone which reads "Of all the things we say and do - Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Will it be beneficial to all concerned?" is a litmus test that people from all walks of life can apply to each of their actions.

From the first rest room project (called comfort stations back then) to working to eradicate debilitating diseases like polio and measles and pitching in during calamities like floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and creating awareness about road safety, child sexual abuse, malnutrition, avoidable blindness, environment protection and the like, Rotary's service projects run the entire gamut and cover a wide swathe that includes education, health and environment among other areas. In recent times the organisation has worked in partnership with NGOs and social entrepreneurs who have a good connect with the local populace and supported them with funding and by providing infrastructure for many socially relevant projects. It has certainly been a win-win for both.

For an organisation to survive 100 years in a country like ours is no mean feat. And Indian Rotarians have also



Rotarians of Rotary club of Madras at the site of a restored Puduthangal Lake in Tambaram.

occupied high offices at the International level - Nitish Laharry the Calcutta club's first Indian Secretary went on to become the first Indian to hold office as Rotary International President followed by others like Raja Saboo, Kalyan Banerjee and K.R. Ravindran.

Today there are over 3000 Rotary clubs across the length and breadth of India doing significant work. That the organisation has stood the test of time, embraced

change and adapted itself to a changing world is truly remarkable.

When service is the motive this perhaps becomes a little easier.

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## Centre for Social Initiative and Management

**C**entre 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, please visit our website [www.csim.in](http://www.csim.in)

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# FORD’S CSR JOURNEY IN INDIA: BEYOND CHEQUES AND CHARITY



Ever since its foray into the Indian market, in the mid-1990s, the Ford Motor Company has stood out as a prime example of an automobile giant, leveraging the massive market for automobiles in India. In so far as that potential is concerned, the company has dug in deep into the manufacturing framework of the country, even as Ford’s cars have the ‘Made in India’ stamped on them. What isn’t as well-known about Ford and its Indian sojourn however, is its deep commitment to corporate social responsibility, specifically in states of Tamil Nadu and Gujarat.

“The biggest inspiration behind our efforts has been Ford’s decades-old legacy of building strong communities wherever we do business,” says Gazal Raina, Lead, Corporate Social Responsibility, Ford Motor Company, “From the beginning of our operations in India, the endeavour of all our projects has been towards empowering communities in areas related to Education, Health & Safety, Environment and Women Empowerment, with a strong focus on employee-volunteering and engagement.”

Broadly, Ford has laid focus on three categories when it comes to CSR: education, women’s empowerment and primary healthcare. But by its own admission, the company’s focus is on ‘enhancing school education’, largely because it wants to use improve the Teaching-Learning process at schools for children, and create what Ford describes as a “future-ready world”. It is the key to making lives for children and young adults better, thereby creating social change and building sustainable communities. All Ford projects are in rural and urban geographies that aim to provide holistic education to children studying in government-run schools.

Ford partners with multiple NGOs to create a social intervention model to address identified gaps in academics, health nutrition, infrastructure, teacher-training, learning methodology and girl-child education across primary and Secondary schools. It is heartening to see that the program has impacted the lives of children, especially girl children, across 50 government schools in Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Gurgaon today. But the company’s initiatives don’t end here.

Ford’s Women empowerment initiatives are conducted with the aim to allow girls create opportunities for a better future. Ford manages to pull this off by honing the talent of young girls, knowledge, skills and scholarships included, which in turn helps build confidence. Supporting their families and encouraging schools to provide a more nurturing environment helps a great deal. Ford employees also provide mentoring to the girls, helping them to tackle challenges and keeping them motivated. The program is currently running in Tamil Nadu.

While education and women empowerment are no doubt, two of Ford’s strongest pillars, the company has also seen intervention in other areas that continue to remain ever so important. Ford Driving Skill for Life or Cartesy program on Road Safety has educated more than 50,000 drivers about the importance of being safe while driving since 2009. Their employee and public service campaigns focus on improving road safety through making essential behavioral changes in drivers and pedestrians.



While a number of these initiatives have gone on to become the backbone of Ford’s corporate social responsibility in India, they have all come with a fair share of challenges. Over the years, challenges like selecting the right partner identifying the scale of intervention, and identifying areas that require the most attention are some of the bigger challenges that the company has had to contend with. Finding projects that are sustainable and aim to create a long-term impact for the people, planet and communities is also a constant effort that Ford hope to get better at. Their endeavor is to empower than just merely fund.

Along the years, Ford has notched up many a milestone while working in each of these areas. On Community Life, Ford has been supporting a primary health care centre, Sanjeevi, in Chennai for 19 years. This programme has provided medical care to more than six lakh people in surrounding villages. Aside of medical care, the project has resulted in awareness camps courtesy of the primary healthcare centre, which has helped with community outreach. Ford’s volunteers have actively participated in each of these camps.

Not to be forgotten, Ford’s Digital Literacy programme, launched way back in 2007 has helped strengthen its resolve to provide access to computers and computer skills to thousands of youth who have been devoid of basic infrastructure and access to the same. The program has empowered close to 10 lakh people from diverse communities across India and beyond — like in Sri Lanka — from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, by providing technology that is accessible and affordable.

Reiterating its commitment to holistic corporate social responsibility, Ford believes it is committed to more than just “cheques and charity”. “Whether we are providing scholarships for girls who aspire to study further or improve access for quality education and infrastructure or helping communities rebuild themselves in the wake of natural disasters, we aim to help people in need and strengthen communities to make people’s lives better,” says Gazal.

While public-private partnerships are crucial to doing quality CSR, the fact remains that a majority of Ford’s projects are carried out independently but with government support on the approval front. As the space of community work evolves, Ford ensures the model to be perfect for sustenance. This will also give companies

the opportunity to do more across the spectrum.

Ford’s big CSR goal is to help make people’s lives better. Like its business, where Ford aspires to create more future ready vehicles for the world, the company wants to focus on not just solving the current societal challenges but participating in predicting what can create a better world. However, this has to be done in line with the changing times. The enthusiasm of the Millennial generation is creating a new movement toward social entrepreneurship. Millennials want to invest time and money in causes they can personally lead or be involved in. They want to take on age-old problems in new ways. That is where Ford looks to expand beyond, to find new ways and new areas to make an impact.

**Ford’s Women empowerment initiatives are conducted with the aim to allow girls create opportunities for a better future.**





# City of hope — turning Bali's 'disgrace' into pride

Nyoman's decade-long struggle with schizophrenia almost cost him his family, but Rumah Berdaya helped him reclaim his life.



**S**chizophrenia is not crazy", 45-year-old I Nyoman Sudiasa proudly declares.

Powerful words from someone who, up till four years ago, didn't realise that he had been living with the disorder for over a decade. Sitting under the Bali sun, he recalls how his symptoms surfaced at age 27.

"I felt something strange in me. I began to get nervous, feel anxious and suspicious of others, including my wife. I felt that everyone around me was always watching me and I felt so depressed."

His wife, Ni Putu Sri Ayu Astuti, became distressed as she struggled with his mood swings, mistrust, and inability to hold down a job. The emotional and financial strain almost caused her to leave him but she persevered for the sake of the children, and because her family convinced her to stay.

Despite numerous visits to the hospital, Nyoman and his wife were left

baffled as to what was causing the changes in his behaviour and his ability to think and reason.

It was only when he met psychiatrist Dr I Gusti Rai Wiguna, that he finally found an answer to the mystery causing him and his family so much anguish — schizophrenia, an extreme mental health condition that affects an estimated 21 million people worldwide.

## A meeting that changed lives

Encounters with individuals like Nyoman made Dr Rai realise that more needed to be done to support people living with mental health conditions, which is a highly marginalised community. He was especially moved to help when he discovered that one of his neighbours had locked their children in their rooms.

"There were two of them - one with schizophrenia and the other child had severe mental retardation. Both were confined in their rooms and I saw that as my calling."



The lack of understanding about mental health issues, compounded with cultural beliefs and customs, has led to what is locally known as "pasung" or shackling.

Many individuals with mental disorders have been found in appalling conditions while being chained up in rooms, and they often lose the ability to walk because their muscles atrophy. A Human Rights Watch article reported that such cases dropped from 18,800 to 12,800 between 2016 and 2018, due mostly to concerted efforts by the Indonesian government and outreach groups. But more needs to be done.

With the help of artist-activist Budi A K Kabul, Dr Rai started Rumah Berdaya in 2015, a community where people with schizophrenia could gather, learn to express themselves, and be taught a new trade with the help of volunteers.

Its 76 members learn crafts skills like painting, incense-making, silk-screen printing, coconut oil production, and baking, which helps them generate an income for themselves. Many of them rely on costly medication to treat their symptoms, so the added income helps ease some financial stress on their families. Having started some of these programmes, Budi sees the more long-term benefits, beyond the financial support.

"There is a very positive impact when our members' products are sold. It raises their confidence levels. That's because they feel their work is appreciated by the public despite the fact that schizophrenia has a stigma in society," he says.

## It takes a village

An equally important part of Rumah Berdaya's mission is to foster better interaction between its members, their families and the public. This is particularly crucial when it comes to understanding the complexities of shackling.

Dr Rai, who has dealt with shackled patients, cautions against solely blaming the family, "I know that the family is also a victim. If they had a choice, they would not shackle a family member". Often

times, the family locks them up to protect them from harming themselves or getting lost. Despite the government banning the practice in 1977, the issue still hasn't been eradicated, putting some 14 million people who suffer from mental disorders at risk.

Hope is in the air, however, as Dr Rai and Budi continue their outreach efforts to "bridge the gap between family, the individual and what society can do to help". They continue to engage with government officials, hospitals and health care workers to further discuss how best to care for people with schizophrenia.

Nyoman, with the encouragement of Rumah Berdaya and his family, has started giving talks to local community groups. He is also one of four members to have been hired by the Denpasar City Social Service. As the coordinator of Rumah Berdaya, Nyoman believes his new employment "acknowledges that we can integrate with society in a more natural way."

As loved ones, members and volunteers dance in unison to a popular folk tune, it's easy to imagine a safer, kinder community if everyone heeds the advice of Nyoman's wife, Sri Ayu, "to be patient, fully supportive and loving". "That kind of family support is very important for the healing process," she adds.

## ABOUT RUMAH BERDAYA

A community initiative in Bali, Indonesia that started in 2015, Rumah Berdaya's volunteers teach skills to people living with schizophrenia in an effort to help them carve out a living. The organisation also provides a safe space for their members to interact, as well as raises awareness of mental health issues by fostering closer ties with their families and the larger community.

**A story by Our Better World**  
(the digital storytelling initiative of the  
Singapore International Foundation  
([www.ourbetterworld.org](http://www.ourbetterworld.org)))



# Uncovering the Hidden Spectrum of Oppression

The tragedy of the 2004 Tsunami that hit the southern coast of India is not one that is likely to be forgotten by an entire generation that lived through it. Thousands of lives were lost, and tens of thousands of families were rendered homeless. Revathi, a film-maker with a background in journalism, was one of the first responders at Nagapattinam district. She started volunteering with the retrieval of the dead bodies amid debris. Subsequently, she continued doing relief work in the region when she was met by a child, begging on the streets. Wondering why in the times of relief and restoration children were still begging, she ventured to see where this child lived. That is how she came upon the Adiyar and Narikuravar communities (nomadic tribes) that were still outside the reach of relief workers, marginalized beyond belief. The Adiyar community, better known as the *Boom Boom Mattukkaar* community, had taken to begging as their traditional vocation, a curse of Lord Venkateswara of Tirupathi. It was a given in this community that every child born would be initiated into begging as soon as they could walk. Revathi could not stand to see the children wasting away in malnutrition and illiteracy and so decided to put the children through school.

Says she, “Vanavil was started as a response to the conditions of the children from these nomadic tribal communities in Nagapattinam district. The young child I met, Lakshmi, was very malnourished and all our attempts to protect her failed; she succumbed to malnutrition.” The grief of losing Lakshmi solidified Revathi’s resolve to find a way out for these communities from their vicious cycle of poverty. She explains, “We realized that most of the *Boom Boom Maatukarar* children and women were begging because they were unable to claim any kind of social security due to not having any government issued identity documents – be it Public Distribution System (PDS) rice or other sustenance benefits. The absence of community certificates meant the children had no access to education either. In order to bridge some of these gaps we started Vanavil as a semi residential school in 2005. In a way these circumstances shaped our mission - Child Protection | Ending Malnutrition | Creative Education.”

Vanavil today runs a nursery and primary school, a children’s home, after-school centres in six villages, a higher education support program and a training centre for employability skills in Nagapattinam. While the school, home and after school programs are focused on the children from the nomadic tribal communities, the training centre is open to all under-privileged youngsters of Nagapattinam.

Over the past decade or so of Vanavil’s existence, the organization has evolved, from addressing the emergency needs of a disempowered community in a Tsunami-stricken area, to steering the community toward sustainable progress. While recounting the journey, Revathi says, “In the initial stages it was a disaster fighting exercise. We were caught up in just getting food to the children and keeping them away from begging. Early on we realised that an exciting and engaging education model can help us sustain the changes we wanted to bring about in the community. So, despite many difficulties we built the Vanavil educational model with a lot of emphasis on arts and performance and experiential learning.” Revathi’s passion for film making and her artistic creativity enables her to come up with truly unconventional ideas to keep the children’s critical thinking, sense of wonder and inquisitiveness alive. Through practical projects, she engages her young learners to keep their focus in learning, which, by all accounts is a tough thing to do,



given the many oppressive distractions their community is prone to. As for nutrition, she’s quick to add, “We supplemented this education model with a robust nutritional program and health support for our kids. A decade after the creation of Vanavil we decided to share the learnings and create impact in other villages where the *Boom Boom Maatukarar* - Adiyars live, through our after school centres.”

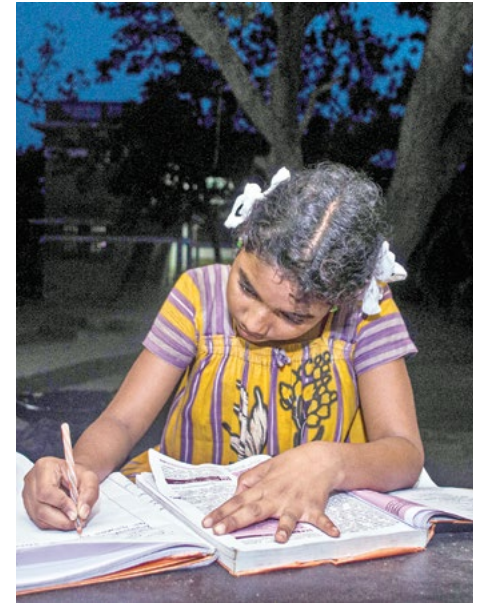
Speaking of some of the major turnarounds along the way, Revathi recounts, “In the initial days when Vanavil was still an experiment, we held a mothers meeting to convince the women from the community to send their children to school. A young mother called Chellammal told me, ‘we are cursed to beg. This is a tradition handed to us. Please don’t waste your life and try educating our children. It won’t happen.’ Today the eldest daughter of Chellammal, P. Sudha who was begging at that time of Tsunami has finished her engineering degree. I’m very glad and proud to inform you that she has secured a job as a software tester in the same IT company she was interning at.”

Sudha, Lakshmi and many other kids who joined Vanavil as 10-year-olds with no formal education have worked hard with Vanavil and have proven to their community that every child can learn and achieve far more than was previously considered possible. Also, Vanavil is helping the young people who have graduated or in college to form a group who can take the community forward.

Vanavil continues to face challenges today. “A very big challenge is the fact that we work from a very backward district that is remote from the urban centres,” Says Revathi, adding that, “This means that we do not attract CSR funding or volunteers. Another challenge is that it is extremely difficult to obtain Community Certificates for our students.”

When asked of her vision for Vanavil, Revathi is ready with a long list of action plans. Chiefly, she explains, “We want to develop a strong educational and nutritional support model for the after school centres and develop the educational capabilities of these children. We want to document and replicate our model in other districts. We are also planning to work on livelihood options, along with awareness programs on gender and health issues for women so that they can get out of the begging practice once and for all.” Into a bold new decade, may we usher some bold new strides of progress.

Archanaa Ramesh



**We want to develop a strong educational and nutritional support model for the afterschool centres and develop the educational capabilities of these children.**





# Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

The Spanish lady, Madam Mercedes De Acorta, has written a letter to Mr. Hague, the American mining engineer who is here as a temporary resident for the last two months. She has raised a few questions there: "If the individual Self merges into the universal Self, how can one pray to God for the uplift of humanity?" The question seems to be common among the thinkers of the West.

Sri Bhagavan said: They pray to God and finish with "Thy Will be done!" If His Will be done why do they pray at all? It is true that the Divine Will prevails at all times and under all circumstances. The individuals cannot act of their own accord. Recognise the force of the Divine Will and keep quiet. Each one is looked after by God. He has created all. You are one among 2,000 millions. When He looks after so many will He omit you? Even common sense dictates that one should abide by His Will.

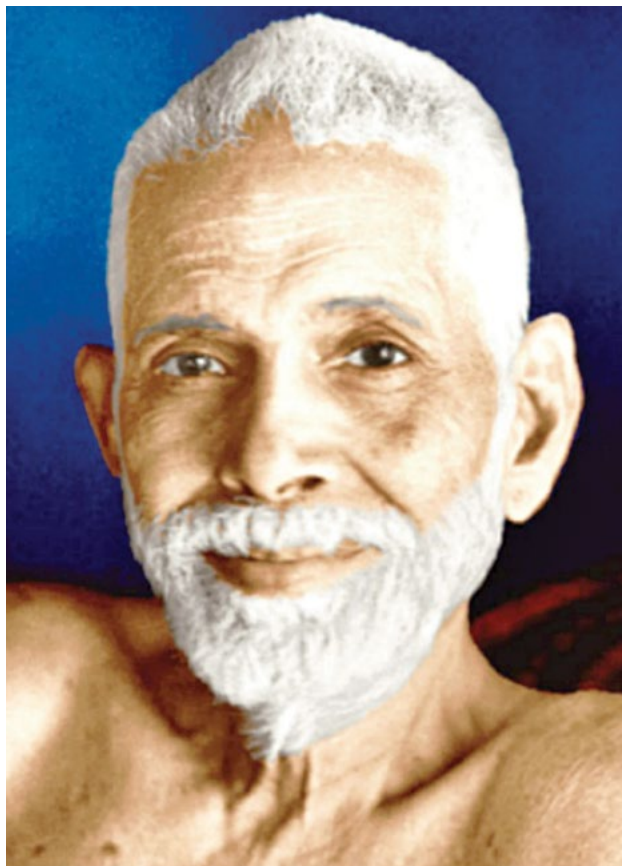
Again there is no need to let Him know your needs. He knows them Himself and will look after them.

Still more, why do you pray? Because you are helpless yourself and you want the Higher Power to help you. Well, does not your Creator and Protector know your weakness? Should you parade your weakness in order to make Him know it?

**D.:** But God helps those who help themselves.

**M.:** Certainly. Help yourself and that is itself according to God's Will. Every action is prompted by Him only. As for prayer for the sake of others, it looks so unselfish on the surface of it. But analyse the feeling and you will detect selfishness there also. You desire others' happiness so that you may be happy. Or you want the credit for having interceded on others' behalf. God does not require an intermediary. Mind your business and all will be well.

**D.:** Does not God work His Will through some chosen person?



**M.:** God is in all and works through all. But His presence is better recognised in purified minds. The pure ones reflect God's actions more clearly than the impure minds. Therefore people say that they are the chosen ones. But the 'chosen'

man does not himself say so. If he thinks that he is the intermediary then it is clear that he retains his individuality and that there is no complete surrender.

**D.:** Are not the Brahmins considered to be the priests or intermediaries between God and others?

**M.:** Yes. But who is a Brahmin? A Brahmin is one who has realised Brahman. Such a one has no sense of individuality in him. He cannot think that he acts as an intermediary.

Again, as for prayer, a realised man does not see others as different from oneself. How can he pray at all, and to whom and for what? His very presence is the consummation of happiness for all. So long as you think that there are others different from you, you pray for them. But the sense of separateness is ignorance. This ignorance is again the cause of feeling helplessness. You know that you are weak and helpless. How then can you help others? If you say, "By prayer to God", God knows His business and does not require your intercession for others.

Help yourself so that you may become strong. That is done by complete surrender. That means you offer yourself to Him. So you cannot retain your individuality after surrender. You then abide by His Will. Thus Silence is the Highest of all achievements.

Silence is the ocean in which all the rivers of all the religions discharge themselves. So says Thayumanavar. He also adds that the Vedic religion is the only one which combines both philosophy and religion.

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'?



# Social Entrepreneurship: Breaking Myths



A workshop on “Social entrepreneurship : Breaking myths” was organised by Department of Sociology, MOP Vaishnav College for women and CSIM on 17th December 2019. The Chief Guest for the event was Dr. Balaji Sampath, Founder & CEO, AhaGuru and Founder, AID INDIA. Over 150 students participated.

Speaking on the occasion, Balaji shared his initial years of being a social entrepreneur. “We partnered with Pratham and did a national level study to understand the learning levels of children and brought out the ASER report. It showed that more than 50 percent of the children in Tamil Nadu are not able to read a simple sentence. We charged a small fee for the after school tuition centres, but did not charge those who were studying in government schools. Whether it is a donation model or a payment model, what matters is in solving the problem.”

“Another programme was providing proper housing for the communities who lived in huts which had tin roofs. We constructed pucca houses for 408 families at a cost of 1.5 lakh per house. The roof had two layers so that there is no leak during monsoon,” he said.

Ms. Marie Banu spoke about the trends in Social Entrepreneurship and shared a few case studies. She encouraged students to identify social problems and then come up with probable social entrepreneurial solutions.

Mrs. Vaishnavi Poorna Sooraj Daughter & Disciple of Dr. Ambika Kameshwar and Ms. Mathangi Ramprasad addressed the students on RASA way of life. The duo enacted a role play to talk about the

programmes coordinated by RASA.

Mr. Keerthi spoke about Solid waste management and the work done by Earth Recycler in Chennai.

Ms. Lakshmi Kalai discussed about the interning opportunities in one of these organisations during the summer months.





**“It is the responsibility of the society to identify and recognise the potential of each individual and provide the path for them to grow.”**

## Lakshmi Narayanan shares with Marie Banu his message for future leaders.

**S**hri. Lakshmi Narayanan is the Co-Founder and Emeritus Vice Chairman of Cognizant Technology Solutions. He holds a BSc and MS in Science and Electronics from Bangalore University and a Post-Graduate Management Diploma from Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore.

Narayanan has played a leading role in the global information technology industry for more than 25 years, managing divisions and business units in Europe, India and the United States. Since co-founding Cognizant Technologies twenty five years ago, he has been instrumental in formulating the company's strategy and building and managing the organization on a high growth trajectory.

He founded Cognizant Foundation, one of the CSR arms of Cognizant, was on the board of the National Skill Development Corporation, as a representative of NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Service Companies) and served as Chairman of NASSCOM. He is also the founder member of United Way of Chennai and a philanthropist.

*In an exclusive interview Shri Lakshmi Narayanan shares with Marie Banu his message for future leaders.*

### Can you tell us about the Sembakkam lake renovation project?

The Nature Conservation (TNC), a global group has taken Sembakkam Lake in Chennai for restoration and ensuring that the community participates and takes ownership once the water body is cleaned up and connected with other lakes in the area.

TNC approached Mr. Ram Shriram in the Bay area, who always wanted to do something for the city as he grew up here. He is one of the earliest investors in Google and wanted to contribute towards rebuilding societies and general upkeep of Chennai City. He offered to fund the million US dollars project half-way, with matching contribution from others.

The TNC team, Care Earth and the Chennai City Connect team took six months to contact various experts and learnt that we have to work with the Corporation to get the necessary approvals for lake restoration. We associated with the Hydrology Department in IIT, water experts and sewage experts, to put together a sustainable master plan. We knew there will be challenges in working with the Corporation and local government officials. But fortunately, thanks to the support of the local community, TNC and Care Earth made headway in getting the necessary approvals.

Encouraged by the methodology

adapted for sustainable water body restoration, Cognizant made a substantial contribution to the project, because of which TNC managed a financial closure and the project is underway. While the project planning was underway, Mr. Ranganath NK of Grundfos, who has always taken special interest in the city's development, pitched in and contributed over 1.50 crore rupees. Thus, it is a Grundfos, Cognizant, Ram Shriram project and hopes to serve as a model for sustainable development.

The key aspect of this project is to encourage community ownership. This is the largest lake restoration project, and the work and dedication of the IIT staff and students are phenomenal. Particular mention has to be made of the passion and tireless effort of Mr. Vaidhyalingam Pughazhendi an Hydrology expert, Dr. Indumathi Nambi of IIT Madras and others in caring for the resources and environment. We want to see students who have studied social entrepreneurship or college students who are living in and around the Sembakkam area to play a voluntary role in protecting and preserving the lake.

### For being a people's person, in spotting talent, nurturing and empowering it, what is your thrust area now?

My thrust area now is to work with entrepreneurs, particularly those who are fresh out of colleges, offer seed fund, develop those ideas, and make them entrepreneurs so that they are successful. A few of them have failed, but that is okay. I tell them, 'As entrepreneurs don't copy another idea, as it is already there. Look at those that will be 'high-growth areas' in the next ten years.' It could be electric vehicles; battery technology or renewable energy; technology and communication (5G); genetics, healthcare, healthcare devices; space, aviation, aerospace, drones, etc. There is no point for students studying in colleges looking at industries that may reach the end of the road or intelligently automated out.

Education is moving away from regular school education to additional education that will prepare the children for future through new technologies such as robotics. For instance, a startup company SP Robotics engages in teaching school children robotics, artificial intelligence and machine learning. All that is required are hardware kits, training for the school children to make them curious and ask questions and learn by experimenting.

Whether it is commercial entrepreneurship or social entrepreneurship - I don't want to get stuck with definitions. If it is going to help somebody, advantaged or disadvantaged, let us do it! Think a 100 times before



telling someone don't do it. Don't blink your eyelid to say, 'do it'. Encourage people to keep doing - whether it is social or not. I would like to see young minds dream big and realise their full potential fearlessly, by thinking a lot less about the past, except for its lessons and devote far more to the present and the future and the opportunities it offers.

### About United Way of Chennai's focus areas?

United Way of Chennai focuses more on helping the cause of disability for its CSR work, by providing livelihood opportunities for the disabled people. The focus is on innovative solutions. In IIT, there is a Centre for Assistive Devices funded by Mr. TT Jagannathan of (Prestige company) that supports those who are mentally agile, but physically challenged. United Way of Chennai encourages this centre that makes devices that are far more comfortable for challenged people.

For instance, a company Neo Motion founded by IITians, has come up with assistive devices that enables greater mobility to challenged people, with minimal external assistance.

Ms. Sowmya Swaminathan, Chief Scientist, WHO, and daughter of Shri. M.S. Swaminathan has connected the person in WHO, who is responsible for assistive devices, with IIT Madras so that some of their work can be taken to other countries as well. She is interested in the Global Application of ideas and particularly concerned about people affected by war in Middle Eastern countries. If there is some way we can solve the problem and come up with low cost ways of manufacturing these devices

and export them using our country's support, it would be great.

### Your message for future leaders?

I am seeing school children as well as college students who have many great ideas and high potential that anytime we don't provide them with an avenue for their potential to be realized by themselves, it is a wasted potential. This is something I saw early enough in Cognizant.

In first three years, we were a small group of people and nobody knew about Cognizant. In the early days of Cognizant we had to compete with established companies for talent, often without success. But the team worked passionately to develop each and every one who were alright to find a place in a startup like Cognizant, because they had the aspiration and the energy to make a difference. In fact, these are the people, who are still in Cognizant, who have built the company.

Each one has a certain potential and an interest. If we are able to understand it and provide them an avenue and autonomy and set a larger purpose then they are able to contribute brilliantly.

My wife used to work with Madras Dyslexia Association, and help children with learning disabilities and she used to tell me stories about how dyslexic children have succeeded enormously in the creative sphere. This has been another learning. Families and schools have to spend time and effort to understand the strength and aspirations of young minds and guide them to pursue their passion with character, integrity and effort. It is the responsibility of the society to identify the potential of each individual, to recognize, and provide the path for them to be responsible and grow.