

# Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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An exclusive interview with Diederik de Boer, Director, Maastricht School of Management.

# FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In an era where the global community is confronted with unprecedented environmental challenges, the role of individuals in fostering sustainable economies has become more crucial than ever. The collective impact of individual actions, choices, and initiatives can shape the trajectory of our planet's future and determine the viability of sustainable economic systems. As we navigate the complex web of ecological issues, it is imperative to recognise and harness the power that individuals possess in steering our societies towards a more sustainable and resilient future.

At the heart of a sustainable economy lies a profound understanding that individual actions reverberate through the entire economic ecosystem. From the products we purchase to the energy we consume, individuals wield significant influence over the demand and supply dynamics that govern economic activity. As conscientious consumers, individuals can drive the demand for eco-friendly products, encouraging businesses to adopt sustainable practices and reduce their environmental footprint.

Furthermore, the power of individual choices extends beyond consumer behaviour. The adoption of sustainable practices in daily routines, such as reducing energy consumption, minimising waste, and embracing eco-friendly transportation options, can collectively lead to substantial positive impacts. As communities become more conscious of their environmental impact, the demand for sustainable technologies and solutions increases, fostering innovation and driving the development of a green economy.

Education and awareness play a pivotal role in empowering individuals to make informed and sustainable choices. Governments, non-governmental organisations, and businesses must collaborate to provide accessible and comprehensive information about the environmental consequences of various choices.

In the pursuit of sustainable economies, it is essential to recognise the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental factors. A holistic approach involves addressing issues such as social inequality, poverty, and access to education, recognising that sustainable development is not just an environmental imperative but also a social and economic one. Individuals, as active members of society, can contribute to the creation of a more equitable and sustainable world by supporting initiatives that prioritise the well-being of people and the planet.

The role of individuals in sustainable economies cannot be overstated. Through conscious consumption, responsible choices, and active participation in shaping policies, individuals have the power to influence the course of economic development towards a more sustainable and resilient future.

By recognising and embracing this collective responsibility, we can pave the way for a harmonious coexistence between economic prosperity and environmental stewardship, ensuring a legacy of sustainability for generations to come.

*Marie Banu Rodriguez*

## EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh  
Marie Banu Rodriguez

# TALKS WITH SRI RAMANA MAHARSHI

Sri Bhagavan explained to Mr. MacIver the first few stanzas of Sad Vidya as follows:

1. The first stanza is the auspicious beginning. Why should the subject-matter of the piece be brought in here? Can knowledge be other than Being? Being is the core - the Heart. How then is the Supreme Being to be contemplated and glorified? Only to remain as the Pure Self is the auspicious beginning. This speaks of attributeless Brahman according to the jnana marga (method of knowledge).
2. The second stanza is in praise of God with attributes. In the foregoing, to be as one Self is mentioned; in the present one, surrender to the Lord of all.

Furthermore the second indicates (1) the fit reader (2) the subject-matter (3) the relationship and (4) the fruit. The fit reader is the one who is competent for it. Competence consists in non-attachment to the world and desire to be liberated.

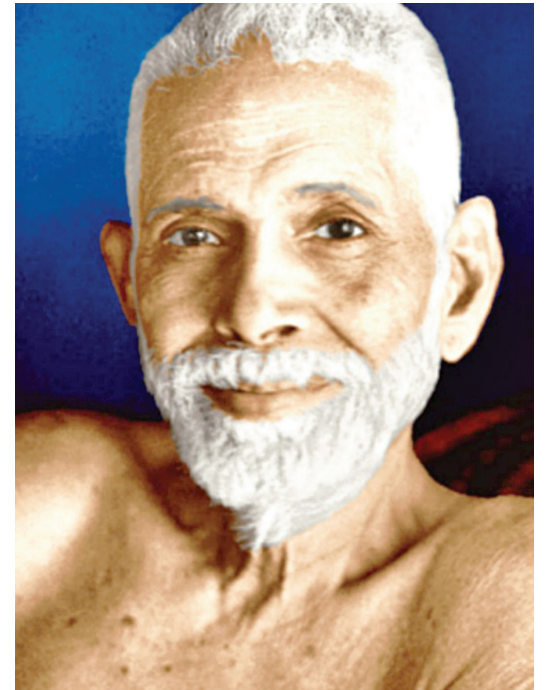
All know that they must die some time or other; but they do not think deeply of the matter. All have a fear of death: such fear is momentary. Why fear death? Because of the 'I-am-the-body' idea. All are fully aware of the death of the body and its cremation. That the body is lost in death is well-known. Owing to the I-am-the-body notion, death is feared as being the loss of Oneself. Birth and death pertain to the body only; but they are superimposed on the Self, giving rise to the delusion that birth and death relate to the Self.

In the effort to overcome birth and death man looks up to the Supreme Being to save him. Thus are born faith and devotion to the Lord. How to worship Him? The creature is powerless and the Creator is All-powerful. How to approach Him? To entrust oneself to His care is the only thing left for him; total surrender is the only way. Therefore he surrenders himself to God. Surrender consists in giving up oneself and one's possessions to the Lord of Mercy. Then what is left over for the man? Nothing - neither himself nor his possessions. The body liable to be born and to die having been made over to the Lord, the man need no longer worry about it. Then birth and death cannot strike terror. The cause of fear was the body; it is no longer his; why should he fear now? Or where is the identity of the individual to be frightened?

Thus the Self is realised and Bliss results. This is then the subject-matter: freedom from misery and gain of Happiness. This is the highest good to be gained. Surrender is synonymous with Bliss itself. This is the relationship.

Fruit is to reflect on the subject-matter and gain Knowledge which is ever-present, here and now. The stanza ends with "the immortal ones."

3. The five senses mean the subtle functions (tanmatras), namely, hearing, touch, seeing, taste and smell. Variations of these form the whole universe; they vary according to the three gunas as follows:
  - by tamas (dullness) the gross elements;



- by rajas (activity) the instruments for knowing objects;
- by sattva (clearness) the different kinds of knowledge of the senses; also;
- by tamas - the gross objects i.e., the world;
- by rajas - the vital airs and the karmendriyas
- by sattva - the sense organs of perception (jnandriyas). Karmendriyas are organs of holding, walking, speech, evacuation and reproduction.

Now consider the ringing of the bell; the sound is related to hearing; the bell is the object, the modification of tamoguna. The rajasic tanmatras, changing as the vibrations of sound, extend round the bell, then as ether get connected with the ear in order to be felt as sound. The knowledge recognising it as sound is the sattva tanmatra.

So also the other senses: Touch (vayu) - air tanmatra; form (rupa) - tejas tanmatra; taste (ap) - water tanmatra; smell (prithvi) - earth tanmatra.

To understand the tanmatras as the subtlest particles of matter is not right, for it is incomplete. They are only the subtle forms of sound, touch, sight, taste and smell, which form the whole components of the universe. Such is the creation of the world.

For want of proper terminology these ideas cannot be rightly expressed in foreign languages.

4. This stanza says that all are agreed on one point. What is it? The state beyond duality and non-duality, beyond subject and object, beyond jiva and God, in short, beyond all differences. It is free from ego. "How to reach it?" is the question. By giving up the world, it says. Here "the world" stands for thoughts relating to it. If such thoughts do not arise, the ego does not rise up. There will be no subject nor object. Such is the state.

*Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*

# HOPE AND BEYOND

Child care is not a straight forward process. It involves various factors, contexts and considerations. They have diverse needs and every child is unique with their own temperament. When someone outside the family, completely new but extremely caring comes by, children experience a wide range of emotions and dynamics. “For children who face abandonment, for reasons they don’t even know, it is not easy to understand care. They have reservations, they create imaginary boundaries as a matter of caution, and above all, they take time to trust people.

Genuine care can be demonstrated in multiple ways. Combined with consistency and reliability, care goes a long way in making them feel secure and assured,” shares Captain Gurinder Virk, Co-Founder of Rays – Asha Ki Ek Kiran, an organisation that provides care and support for HIV infected and affected children in Rajasthan.

With an intention to work for children, Gurinder and his friend Rashmi Kuchhal visited many government homes and organisations that worked for children welfare to learn their needs and nuances in this space. “We wanted to see for ourselves and understand how we can make ourselves useful for children in need.

The moment we saw a child being refused in a home because she was HIV positive, we made our minds,” recalls Gurinder. The first home was established in a rented space in 2010 with only three children in Jaipur. Working in the National Capital City of New Delhi, Gurinder travelled every weekend to spend time with the children. Soon, he decided to quit his job and permanently shift to Jaipur to work closely with HIV infected and affected children. Today, Rays – Asha Ki Ek Kiran runs two homes for boys and girls, accommodating 54 children.

Stigma is something Gurinder and team deal with on a daily basis, so much so that it has also become existential in many occasions. “We have shifted our homes eight times because not all landlords like HIV positive children and adults to live in their properties,” he says. Supported by a strong team of House Mothers, who are HIV infected/affected widows with no livelihood, Gurinder has figured out a comprehensive care and support strategy for all of them. 11 House Mothers, 2 counsellors, doctors – all of them managed by a project coordinator in each home, come together as a complete team to make every decision regarding the welfare of these children.

The homes are managed with donations from family/friends and also funds from the government. Efficient management of resources is a very critical factor at Rays for they have to prioritise health at all times. As these are children with compromised immunity, their diet and medical needs are meticulously planned. “A simple cold can be a nightmare for them as they can easily contract infections,” he adds.

Children are sent to schools and also taken to hospitals when needed. Not all schools and hospitals have been accommodative. In spite of all these challenges, Gurinder and team have managed to build the world around these children. “All our children, from day one, are prepared to understand integration and the obstacles it comes with. Our homes are here to guarantee that they traverse the first phase of their lives. As they grow older, they learn to be independent and confident to be themselves. It is in this process that we felt the need to work extensively on awareness,” he introspects.

Acknowledging that we have come far from the days when adults refused to visit clinics for treatment fearing disclosure about their disease, his team also warns us that abandoning HIV positive children has been easier than taking care of them. Street plays, bike-a-thons and a variety of programs are planned regularly to educate communities about the diseases and demystify all the myths around it. “The best part is that our own children contribute to this process,” he informs proudly.

After schooling, children are encouraged to decide about their pursuit. While some go to colleges for graduation there are also others who prefer to take up vocational courses. And all those who had left for jobs, often come back to Rays. “They



like to remain associated. Rays is a part of their identity now. They gracefully embraced their lives with all its adversities and are hopeful to build integrating, supportive systems for their children,” he shares.

According to Gurinder, the biggest challenge in this journey has been ‘acceptability’. In the initial stages, there was a lot of effort from government and civil society to educate the public about HIV, AIDS, the anti retro viral therapy, modes of disease transmission, etc. He feels that all this education is still incomplete and

did not continue, to morph into supportive systems. Yet, he appreciates the transformation he sees in his immediate community. Donors who once left now come in and spend weekends with the children here. He also recalls about a school principal who decided to expel one of his teachers who tried to mobilise parents group against the admission of HIV positive children in the school. “Collectively, we have all started looking ahead,” says Gurinder hopefully.

*Shanmuga Priya.T*

# SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP- THE NEW NORM?



It was an interesting and thoughtful evening. I sat by my office balcony thinking what my life would have been like if I had continued as a Senior HR executive and climbed the ladder in the corporate to become a Director of HR. It is amazing how the Universe picks our deep thoughts and allows us to surge our search to find additional inputs to make our lives more meaningful. I walked my young friends, earlier students of our EQUBE program in schools. The smile from their hearts reflected in the twinkle in their eyes bringing me back to the room with the thoughts I was following trailing behind inconspicuously.

These were two people who had dared to move from college life into social entrepreneurship after graduation and were seen as a different breed altogether. While their friends went the traditional way picking up jobs in MNCs or other corporates, these two youngsters picked up to work with underprivileged students from rural areas and give them academic support to score higher marks at the secondary school level. They started their own NGO Trust and took on to be the change-makers in the social sector. But to start, run, and sustain is not an easy path.

Entrepreneurship is accepted as the current trend. It is even seen as more cool



and fashionable to say I run a start-up. But Social entrepreneurship is not yet seen the same way.

In reality, social entrepreneurship, with its unique blend of business acumen and social impact, has the potential to address some of society's most pressing challenges. From the opportunity to make a positive impact on society to the potential for personal growth and fulfillment, social entrepreneurship offers unique advantages for youngsters. Due to the focus on position, paycheck, and brand name association of the Gen Y, they still do not accept wholeheartedly people wanting to work on social issues as someone equal

to a corporate employee or a business entrepreneur. There is a hidden skepticism that waits for the ideas to fail.

I think we have not understood social entrepreneurship well enough to trust it. Social entrepreneurship has several roles to play. It empowers the marginal communities as well as the entrepreneurs who are working for them. It has a very wide range of spaces to work with which are critical to addressing like education, healthcare, rural development, economic stability, clean water, sanitation, green environment, and many others.

Social entrepreneurship fosters innovation like in any other field. Every

solution found needs to be sustainable and attainable by the marginalised communities. Social entrepreneurs bring fresh perspectives and creative solutions. Today, due to techies entering the development sector, several solutions leverage technology, design thinking, and business models to develop scalable and sustainable solutions. These innovations not only solve immediate problems but also create new opportunities for economic growth and social progress. The idea is to address the root cause of the problem. Social entrepreneurship also brings diverse stakeholders, including government, corporations, and local communities, to collaborate towards sustainable solutions.

Just like in business, in social entrepreneurship too, the impact can be seen on the ground with the right assessments. They are not measured only in financial returns but also by the number of lives it has improved. By prioritising social impact, social entrepreneurship contributes to the overall well-being of society.

In the current times, social entrepreneurship has leveraged public-private partnerships (PPPs) to maximise its impact. The collaboration with government agencies, corporations, and

non-profit organisations is yielding a higher sustainable impact. Therefore, social entrepreneurship fosters a better ethical environment for business since it considers profit along with people and the environment.

What inspires the youth of this world and more so India to pick up social entrepreneurship? The youth of today who are Gen Z seek purpose-driven careers and therefore a meaningful life. They want to innovate, seek solutions to problems they see around them, and want to make a positive impact. They are not much attracted to financial gains or corporations anymore. Instead, they are looking to be part of a startup or be employed in one. The youth want to experience a direct impact of their work, be it social or business. They want to work in smaller teams with more ownership. They seek satisfaction from the time and energy invested. When a certain level of empathy is kindled in them, conviction and clarity become their forte, the youth do not hesitate to create a path for themselves. Other youth soon realise the futility of pursuing a robotic job and move to the social sector seeking to combine their business acumen with social mission drawing innovative solutions. The social media has also enhanced their efforts to reach out and make a difference. Today's mantra for youth is to Disrupt and Create a new norm. The Covid pandemic experiences have given them ample examples and hope to pursue social entrepreneurship.

Contrary to the popular fear, the social sector too is financially sustainable. The availability of several grants, cohort learning spaces from prestigious universities, and an increase in better CSR utilisation have thrown open new doors to social entrepreneurship. The youth who seek an alignment with one's passion and values look for careers that allow them to live their dreams. Social



entrepreneurs often face challenges and setbacks, but the ability to overcome these obstacles and witness the positive impact of their work brings immense personal fulfillment. The journey of social entrepreneurship provides continuous learning, personal development, and a sense of accomplishment for the youth. Social media and virtual networking have converged many minds and

efforts for the youth. They can leverage resources, expertise, and networks to scale their initiatives and create a more significant impact. The collaborative nature of social entrepreneurship allows youth to build valuable relationships and expand their professional network.

Having shared these perspectives, my heart wells with pride and hope to meet my young social entrepreneurs. They have their own set of start-up challenges but their inner soul is watered when they experience the gratitude and growth of the rural children who benefit from their program. I have seen them intrinsically motivated and can stand the societal pressure to fall in line. They stand at the edge since their decisions in life are governed by sustaining their passion and dreams.

I have not once regretted choosing not to take up a career with the corporation and remaining to work in education and social sector building social entrepreneurs. I feel naturally motivated to contribute to the future of a better world, although indirectly. I think I am getting to work in various ways of making a difference by encouraging these youths. I think my experience sharing has added value when I reach the social entrepreneurs. My dream is a world where every business incorporates social sustainability and thinks holistically from profit, people, and planet dimensions. Every educational institution builds individuals who are going to be change makers and not mere employees earning their bread, bedding, and boots. Every household proudly accepts the youth moving ahead with their education to make a difference in society. Every youth views their life with a sense of clarity, conviction, and convergence.

Freedom in life lies not in doing what one wants to but in choosing what one needs to do!

*Dr. Kalpana Sampath*

# CHILD MARRIAGE: FAR CRY FROM HAPPILY EVER AFTER

It takes a village to raise a child."

For non-governmental organisation Aangan Trust, this is the adage that guides their work in building communities which protect children from trafficking, child marriage, hazardous work, violence, and exploitation. A once unimaginable partnership, Aangan Trust brings together social systems that previously didn't collaborate — think schools, police, village councils and others — to ensure the safety of vulnerable children in their communities.

One of the issues that the organisation focuses on is preventing child marriages. Despite being illegal, over 100 million girls are at risk of child marriage over the next ten years.

Helming this movement is a team of steadfast, skilled volunteers, all of them women, some who were child brides themselves.

Aangan Trust is headquartered in Mumbai, but works in nine districts across India with some of the highest rates of child trafficking,



hazardous labour, early marriage, and violence in the country. It provides rigorous training for volunteers, equipping them with the confidence to hold their own when speaking with people in authority.

"Earlier I would feel scared to go to such places because I was unsure about how I would speak, what I would say," shares volunteer Piyali Mondal. "Now I don't even have to think before going to the BDO office, the police station, or the panchayat (village council)."

Piyali has been a volunteer for eight years. She was a child bride herself, and had a desire to help others in the same situation. Many other

volunteers in the organisation have similar histories.

"Many of these women have themselves been in those situations. So their interest, their empathy and the way they come forward with their response, that is very important," explains Srabonti Ghosh, one of Aangan Trust's state coordinators. She is part of the team that trains the volunteers.

Aangan Trust chooses to work exclusively with women. Not only because many of them understand — often, intimately — the risks that vulnerable children face, but also to put the power of decision-making back in their hands, making it possible for women to drive change in their

own communities.

During the year-long training, volunteers learn about the issues that have been normalised since their childhood, and are encouraged to consider how and why such customs and practices have become so prevalent in their own areas. They are also trained in data collection, communication and public presentation.

Armed with the necessary skills, the women walk the neighbourhoods with a newfound sense of purpose, tapping into unofficial networks called "whisper circles" — informal, safe spaces for sharing information about potential child marriages, child labour and domestic violence — to quickly identify children at risk. Srabonti adds, "The safety network is strengthened through [these unofficial] networks."

As the Aangan Trust volunteers gain trust and respect within their communities, Srabonti believes that the women are changing the old status quo — where domestic violence,

abandonment and child marriage were a "normal" part of life — and building a better, safer future.

## About Aangan Trust

Aangan Trust is a non-governmental organisation that works across six states in India, to protect vulnerable children. It empowers women to become volunteer leaders to educate, advocate, and effect change to end child marriage, and other practices that harm children. Over five years, Aangan Trust has trained an estimated 15,000 women, who now manage their own networks in their communities.

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

# EMPOWERING DREAMS

## *The Akanksha Foundation's Journey to Transform Lives Through Education*

In a nation facing learning crisis and educational disparities, the Akanksha Foundation emerges as a beacon of hope, dedicated to transform the lives of children and young adults hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds. Established with a visionary goal to equip all children with the knowledge, skills, and values needed for empowered lives, Akanksha's journey unfolds as a tale of innovation, impact, and commitment.

India, with its staggering number of schools and students, faces a severe learning crisis despite efforts to ensure universal access to education. The National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021 exposed the significant learning losses exacerbated by the two-year pandemic-induced lockdown.

Inspired by the US charter school model, Akanksha pioneered the public-private partnership in Maharashtra's main cities. The Full School Adoption Model, operating in Public-Private Partnership mode, involves collaboration between the government, corporate funding partners, and Akanksha. While local government bodies provide necessary infrastructure, Akanksha takes responsibility for hiring and training educators, implementing innovative curriculum and pedagogy, and working closely with parents.

The heart of Akanksha's mission lies in creating 'proof points' through its schools, students, and alumni. "Empowering children with knowledge, skills, and values is not just our mission; it's the cornerstone of transforming communities and breaking the chains of generational poverty. At Akanksha, we believe in creating 'proof points' that demonstrate the extraordinary potential within every child, showcasing the transformative power of education as a catalyst for change," says Shraddha Agarwal, Communications Manager at The Akanksha Foundation.

Educators and school principals are pivotal in Akanksha's model, serving as catalysts for change. Rigorous training and upskilling empower them to address challenges like bridging learning and nutrition gaps post-COVID-19. Akanksha aims to overcome these gaps within the next two years, recognising the importance of nurturing social consciousness among students, creating open-minded, secular, and socially aware individuals.

Akanksha Foundation places a strong emphasis on socio-emotional and 21st-century skills. The 4Cs of 21st-century learning—Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity—along with Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills such as self-awareness, management, and compassion, form the foundation. These skills, integrated into classroom learning, enable students to build confidence, communicate effectively, and confront challenging ideas.

The impact of Akanksha's efforts is palpable in the lives of over 14,000 students benefiting from its formal school-education program and nearly 5,100 alumni across Mumbai, Pune, and Nagpur. The 'Project Setu' initiative, launched in collaboration with Nagpur Municipal Corporation and Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation, aims to extend these practices to nearly 200 public schools.

Success is measured not just in academic



achievements but also in holistic development. Akanksha's sports program, with 33 different sports introduced, has seen students winning medals at various levels. The robust art program, Art for Akanksha (AFA), empowers children to express themselves through visual language, reaching global platforms like the United Nations General Assembly.

The Alumni Support and Engagement (ASE) team plays a crucial role in guiding alumni towards empowered lives. A comprehensive study conducted by research firm 4thWheel revealed that 84% of

alumni have higher education levels than their parents, contributing over 40% of their income to household incomes. These outcomes underscore the transformative power of quality education.

Looking ahead, Akanksha envisions scaling its impact by starting more schools under public-private partnerships, strengthening existing schools, and deepening support for alumni. Bridging learning gaps, focusing on foundational literacy and numeracy, and fostering innovation in classrooms are their key priorities. Additionally, Akanksha aims to redesign schools to integrate new competencies,

facilitate pathways for alumni, and strengthen government schools, ultimately building an agile organisation through knowledge management and technology.

"At Akanksha, we envision a future where every child, regardless of their background, not only dreams big but achieves those dreams. Our commitment extends beyond the classroom, aiming to build empowered individuals who not only break barriers but also redefine what's possible. Education is not just a pathway; it's the key to unlocking a world of opportunities and shaping a future where

every child's potential is realised," says Shraddha.

As Akanksha Foundation continues its journey, it stands as a testament to the transformative potential of education. In the pursuit of its vision, the foundation exemplifies the power of collaboration, innovation, and unwavering commitment to breaking the cycle of generational poverty and empowering generations to come.

PK Surya



# BRIDGING FUTURES



The Grade 8 students of Sirius Wing at Lalaji Memorial Omega International School embarked on a transformative journey into the realm of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during a specially curated workshop organized by the VBSE Department on 21 December 2023. The event featured Ms. Marie Banu, Director of the Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) in Chennai, as a guest speaker. Her extensive knowledge and passion for social change created a dynamic platform for the students to explore the significance of SDGs in a student's life.

She captivated the young minds, offering profound insights into the interconnectedness of global challenges and the crucial role each individual plays in addressing them. Through thought-provoking discussions and interactive activities, she effectively conveyed the urgency of the SDGs and their impact on creating a sustainable and inclusive future for all.

The workshop not only educated the students about the importance of

SDGs but also empowered them with a sense of social responsibility. The discussions inspired a newfound awareness of the students' roles as global citizens and agents of positive change. Real-world examples and case studies highlighted the tangible outcomes of collective efforts in achieving the SDGs, fostering a belief that even small actions can contribute to significant global transformations.

Moreover, the workshop provided practical strategies for seamlessly integrating SDGs into the students' lives. Marie encouraged the students to identify opportunities for sustainable practices in their daily routines, emphasising the idea that small, consistent actions could have a cumulative impact. From reducing carbon footprints to promoting social equity, the students gained actionable insights into how they could actively contribute to the SDGs in their personal and community spheres.

The impact of the workshop extended beyond the classroom, leaving a lasting impression on the students. Many expressed a

heightened sense of purpose and a commitment to incorporating sustainable practices into their lives. The ripple effect of this newfound awareness reached families and friends, creating a positive momentum towards a more conscious and responsible community.

The students were so inspired that they almost immediately got the ball rolling. They took the initiative to educate and raise awareness on Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) among their peers in lower grades - inspiring to be the \*Youth as Change makers\*. Students conducted interactive sessions, engaging presentations, and encouraged their juniors to take simple actions towards the goal that was important to them. In their own way they wanted to ensure we "Leaving no one behind" reinforcing \*We are one family, one world.\*

A truly beautiful beginning towards achieving SDG 17: Partnership for the goals.

*Prema Sankar*



# VISION INCLUSION UNVEILED



Parenting a special child is a very unique experience that connects aspirations of both parents and the child. While parents aspire to see their special children able and independent, their children aspire to excel in activities that they enjoy doing. It not only calls for patience and perseverance, but also an ecosystem of support services that collectively focus upon mainstreaming these children. “How might each of these factors complement each other?” wondered Dr Sushama Nagarkar, a Psychologist and Managing Trustee of Yash Charitable Trust in Mumbai, Maharashtra.

With an experience of over fifteen years in the United States, Sushama returned to India in 2013 only to realise that children with intellectual challenges, Down Syndrome, Autism, Cerebral Palsy do not live the same quality of life as others. “There were exclusionary spaces built for them. Programs tried to fit them into the system. As a practitioner, I have clearly seen why it should be the other way round,” she says with her experience as a practitioner and as a parent of a person with autism. “In the U.S, my daughter Aarti had a support system that included medical insurance, a stipend from her workplace. But she was lonely and missed having people around her. The move to India connected her to our families and friends, fulfilling her social needs,” she adds.

Yash Charitable Trust was founded in the year 2014 and the team decided to work with the challenged adults, particularly those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Efforts were streamlined to build/create systems around them. “We follow a strength-

based framework and the values of acceptance, inclusion and empowerment govern our work,” explains Sushama.



Beneficiaries, their family members, parents, supporters and well-wishers – all those who fit in the client’s inner circle are offered training and support services customized to suit client specific needs. As intellectual and developmental disabilities are unique to every child and have a large spectrum of consequences, it becomes important to build programs that accommodate their interests appropriately. Having organized and participated in over 80 seminars, workshops, trainings and advocacy sessions through YCT, Sushama feels that a lot needs to be done for parents, caregivers to understand more about the unique needs of every individual. “First and foremost, parents and caregivers need to understand that these disabilities are lifelong and we need to plan for adulthood. Every person is different, has a unique set of strengths and

support needs and therefore life planning, including employment, has to be done on an individual basis,” she says. “There is no one size fits all in this world,” she adds.

YCT’s programs are planned across two main verticals – (a) skilling and supported employment (SSEP) and (b) adult support Kendra (ASK).

Under the SSEP vertical, staff at the skill development centre trains team members (as they are called) to engage in food/beverage sector and also imparts basic employment readiness skills that can be useful in a variety of work environments. There are also beneficiaries who only approach YCT for employment support. They undergo this basic skills training program and are also offered opportunities at Arpan Food Services, which is a chain of outlets consisting of both differently abled and non-disabled adults. This model demonstrated the strength of both diversity and inclusion at work place. “We started with a small dabba service in 2015. The team’s success not only gave visibility to the program but also new opportunities for growth. Our beneficiaries were out in the communities buying things, planning and delivering food, managing income, etc. Community was wary about this initiative but we did it!” shares Sushama.

With intellectually challenged adults prepared, engaged in the complete process chain, she not only saw their empowerment but also the community’s acceptance. The change in their mindset and attitude towards these beneficiaries was the benchmark for YCT, prompting them to further the scope of their intervention. “A person

affected with cerebral palsy finds it difficult to use both hands effectively. But we have someone who can work on Microsoft excel with one hand. He is also very polite over phone and is good at keeping accounts and becomes a valued person at our workplace. A person with autism closes daily accounts and shuts our café every night. As our primary phase focusses on assessing their strengths it becomes possible to engage them in tasks they enjoy and are capable of carrying out,” she adds.

Under the second vertical, Adult Support Kendra, all other ancillary services including therapeutic recreation are provided. Mental health support is a major component here and the team has also built a strong public awareness campaign. Besides workshops and seminars, parents are also mentored to prepare life plans for their children. Their public interest litigation against a lobby of doctors and clinics who mislead families by promoting the idea that stem cell therapy cures autism has gained momentum due to increased awareness.

Sushama and team wants to see adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities live and work in the community of their choice with dignity and self-respect. “We help them navigate systems, but wish to see communities actively engaged in taking up this responsibility. It surely is a long, continuous process that needs consistent effort and commitment. YCT is at it,” she promises.

*Shanmuga Priya.T*



# A TALE OF TWO FRIENDS

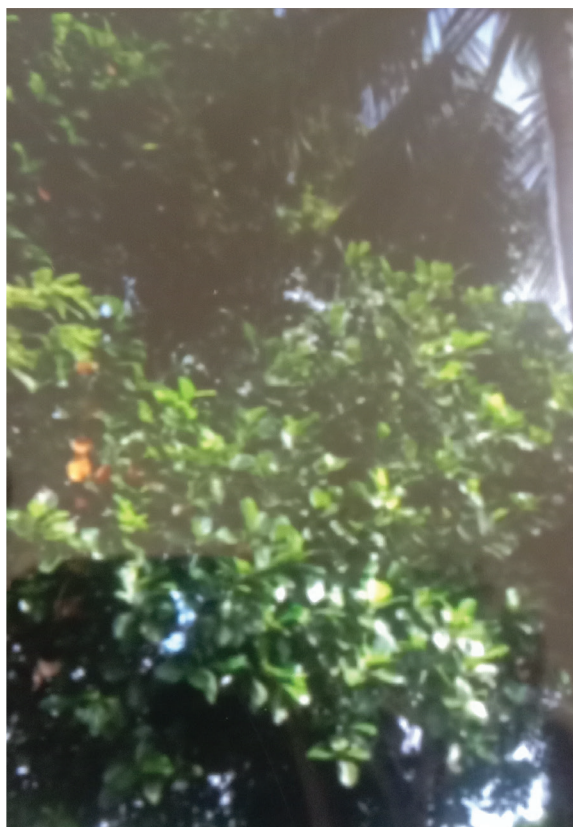


We're all just about recovering from the negative impacts of Cyclone Michang. While it was going on, my daughter and I had placed our sofas facing the windows, and sat side by side watching the sky. Through the unaccustomed hours that were free of phone calls and messages, we reminisced about earlier storms and cyclones that we had seen, especially ones that we had experienced at the multi-cropped organic farm that we sometimes work and stay. I'd like to share one such lived story with you today.

Once upon a time, two friends decided to settle down side by side on a piece of land near a jasmine farm. When the jasmine was in bloom, they would both enjoy the fragrance-laden breeze, and when the summer came, both would wait together through the hot nights for the precious morning dew. When the rains arrived, they would luxuriate in the life-giving showers, and when Margazhi came, both would watch the jasmine plants slowly prepare to flower. Thus a good many years went by, and soon both the friends were bigger and needed more space.

They started jostling each other for a place in the sun. Their tussles were slow, and somewhat chess-like. It was almost as if when one produced a new leaf, the other was watching, and it then produced its next branch-bud and leaf with the next four leaf-positions of the opponent in mind. They continued to grow in this way, putting out leaves and branches, and then flowers and fruits, big juicy jackfruits, and sweet green mangoes. They expanded their girth till their trunks were only a foot apart. Somewhere across the years, they evaporated their differences, and their leaves grew close together, sharing cheerfully all the sun that there was. So close were they that people were often startled by what looked like mango leaves growing on a jackfruit tree!

Then came the second half of October 2012. The weather turned sulky and wet. The nightly rustle of the breeze in the coconut fronds acquired an ominous



overtone. As the rough wind pushed their branches, the two friends seemed to huddle close together in apprehension, trying to reassure each other.

31st October. The whole day went murkily by, with dust, leaves and debris flying everywhere all the time. Towards evening, suddenly all went quiet. Only a cold still menace hung in the air. This wasn't a calm before the storm - there is nothing calm about a moment so full

of dread that no sound or sight could penetrate it. Then Cyclone Nilam broke on us. The wrenching, tearing sound of the roof flying off the shed was drowned in the unbelievable roar of the wild wind. We could not hear each other over the sounds of destruction. The soil seemed to rise up in protest, and we were caught in a dark swirling war as the soil and the wind fought it out above the ground.

The two friends stood together, no longer apprehensive, but accepting, standing tall to support each other through this onslaught. Each bolt of lightning lit them up, still standing, still surviving. Thunder, and an undefined, undefinable roar that was the voice of the Cyclone tried to browbeat them into submission, but still they stood, trunks straight, leaves flying above them in a brave halo, roots straining to hold them up. Hour upon hour they stood, as the long night passed. Wild gusts chased quieter moments, as the sounds rose and fell. Cracks appeared in both tree trunks. And slowly the cracks widened. Countless branches broke. After many hours of stormy waiting, the eastern skyline began to lighten. Its friendly warmth seemed to lull the cyclone to slumber, and there was quiet. The birds were silent.

The morning light showed an unfamiliar silhouette of tilted trees, branches at impossible angles and strange shapes that had been buildings. And then, with hardly a sound, the trunk of the mango tree broke about 7ft off the ground, and started to fall. Slowly, inexorably, it began what threatened to be its collapse to the ground. But it didn't fall - the jackfruit tree stepped in and held it up, taking on all its weight, halting its downward trajectory. The entire crown of the mango tree leaned deep into the jackfruit, amidst a shower of leaves and twigs of both trees. It looked as if every falling mango branch, large and small, had its own customized support ready in a perfectly angled, upright jackfruit one. As if this was the moment they had been preparing for through all their apparent rivalry in the past years. After



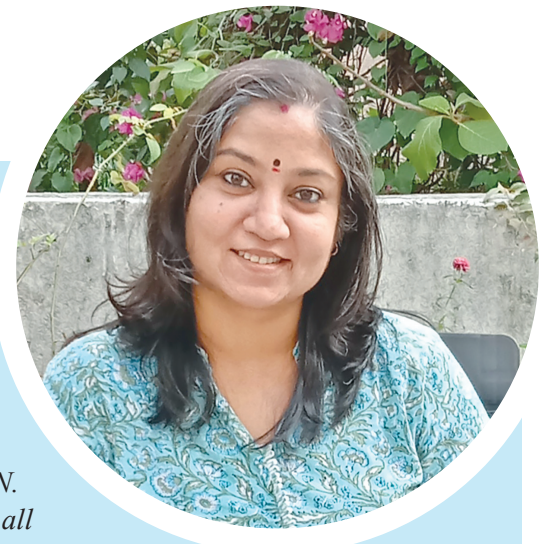
many agonizing minutes, the downward movement stopped, and the mango crown stayed suspended sideways on the jackfruit. Leaves and twigs continued to spiral downwards, but the trunks seemed steady for the moment.

After we found the right machines and people, the mango tree was pulled upright again. A big poultice was tied around the crack, to help it heal. The jackfruit tree had multiple bruises too, and many broken branches. It got its own share of poultices. We did not know if they would heal, but we had hope - after all, they had made it thus far, and there were two of them. Neither was alone. Perhaps they could see each other through this.

For many days, leaves and twigs continued to fall. Soon both trees, those erstwhile kings of lushness, looked bare. The weeks and months went by in a steady stream. Then one sudden and glorious day, we noticed a new green tip on the end of a dead-looking mango branch. We all rushed to cluster around the trees, and found a few more new green tips on both. If I was reporting this in a medical text, I'd have to say that from this point on, their 'recovery was uneventful'. But since I'm not, I'll say that both trees grew valiantly, wonderfully and vibrantly, back to their old glory :-)

I'm looking at them as I write this - these two friends who still stand side by side. They look as if they extend a protective, reminiscent arm around each other. As if Michaung had reminded them too of Nilam.

*A. Ramashree*



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## Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS). It is a learning centre that promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship.

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non-profits to facilitate them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives. [www.csim.in](http://www.csim.in)

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# “The symbiotic relationship between CSR, brand value, and shareholder capital underscores the pivotal role responsible business practices play in the modern market.”

## Dr. Diederik de Boer shares his global CSR perspective with Marie Banu Rodriguez

**D**r. Diederik de Boer is Director of the International Projects and Consultancies Department and Associate Professor Sustainable Business Development at Maastricht School of Management.

He holds a PhD from the Erasmus University (the Netherlands), an MPA from Leiden/Rotterdam University (the Netherlands), an MBA from Bradford/Tilburg University (UK/The Netherlands) and a Minor in Small and Micro Credit Schemes from Harvard University Boston (USA).

He worked for seven years for the United Nations and the Dutch Ministry for Development Cooperation in Cambodia, Mongolia, Korea and Palestine. As director he is in charge of more than 30 programs worldwide focusing on capacity building, research and education. His research focuses on partnerships and cluster competitiveness in developing countries in Asia and Africa.

*In an exclusive interview, Dr. Diederik de Boer shares with Marie Banu Rodriguez his global CSR perspective.*

### About the Significance of Impact in Global CSR Transitions?

Global transitions in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are inherently entwined with the profound impact organizations and companies can have on society. It is imperative to demonstrate the nature of this impact, whether it be social, environmental, or ethical. As we delve into these issues, the critical challenge emerges: How do we measure these impacts effectively? The journey toward establishing a Theory of Change capable of measuring these impacts comprehensively is ongoing. Engaging in conversations with numerous companies, banks, investors, and local governments across Europe, there is a collective desire for a Theory of Change grounded in diverse impact indicators, allowing for meaningful comparisons. While this remains a challenging endeavour, our commitment is to develop systems that not only measure the impact of the organizations themselves but also evaluate the broader impact of interventions on society.

### How do you perceive the enforcement of CSR, considering the interplay between frameworks and companies seeking loopholes?

The enforcement of CSR is a delicate balance between frameworks and the actions of companies. Often, companies seek loopholes within the framework, challenging the efficacy of enforcement. From my vantage point as a researcher, I advocate for a comprehensive framework that minimizes such loopholes, ensuring a sustainable path forward in both scientific and societal realms. While short-term gains may not always result in a win-win situation, the longer-term vision revolves around creating a better world for the entire private sector community. The transition from voluntary standards, now acknowledged as insufficient, towards more compulsory and stringent measures is a positive shift. This evolution not only places greater responsibility on companies but also integrates CSR as a fundamental part of their strategy, ultimately benefiting society as a whole.

### Do you think CSR adds brand value and increases shareholder capital?

Yes, the integration of CSR undoubtedly contributes to the augmentation of brand value and the bolstering of shareholder capital. In a world where trust is paramount, the ability to showcase responsibility becomes a key differentiator. I observe that this phenomenon is indeed occurring, and it holds significant importance to transition from a "trust me" world to a "show me" world. What you express should be under constant monitoring, allowing for recalibration as needed.

Consumers, including myself, are more inclined to support companies that actively demonstrate their commitment to societal and environmental welfare. The positive perception of a responsible company translates into higher values, influencing not

only consumer purchasing decisions but also shareholder investment choices. The symbiotic relationship between CSR, brand value, and shareholder capital underscores the pivotal role responsible business practices play in the modern market.

### How do you see the extension of the relationship with companies that understand societal issues?

The depth of the relationship with companies extends beyond profit when they demonstrate a profound understanding of societal issues, particularly in areas like climate change. Companies that lack strategies to contribute to addressing climate change are likely to face consequences.

This shortfall not only affects their ability to attract and retain top-tier talent but also influences the investment landscape. The growing consciousness among investors regarding issues like climate change places a premium on companies with robust strategies in place. As a result, the integration of sustainable

practices becomes not just a choice but a strategic imperative for companies aiming for long-term success

### Does the Netherlands government have any mandate or priority areas of the SDGs to focus upon in the coming years?

Yes, the Netherlands government is actively involved in breaking down Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into mini-components, aligning with the United Nations' directive. This initiative, commenced in December 2023, aims to identify the skills and knowledge required for our society and students. For instance, in the textile sector, where water scarcities are not a significant concern, the government is channelling efforts into the promotion of circular economy thinking within the CSR landscape. This underscores a commitment to aligning national strategies with global sustainability goals.

### What are your key learnings from CSR practices in other countries, and how does cultural context influence priorities?

From a European perspective, certain aspects such as public health, security, food security, and literacy are often taken for granted, given the active role of the government. However, in countries where governments may not be as affluent or equipped to provide all services, philanthropy in these critical areas becomes more significant. The essence of CSR extends beyond the establishment of indices and standards. It necessitates a focus on raising awareness, providing training, and fostering education on sustainability issues. Understanding the intricate balance between profitable, environmental, and social sustainability is essential for organizations and businesses to genuinely contribute to a better world.

