Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

Cover Story - Pg 6
The eye opener

About Sankara Eye Care Institutions and its services

**Alumni Talk
Pg 3**

Reaching out
Shaik Rahim's efforts to rehabilitate street children.

**Profile
Pg 9**

Evolving Continuously to Empower the Differently Abled
UDIS Forum's mission to employ persons with disabilities

**Chit Chat
Pg 12**

"Don't think that Civil Service Examination is meant only for intelligent persons."
An exclusive interview with Shri. Israel Jebasingh IAS

From the Editor

Dear Friend,

Education is the Backbone of a Nation. It is indeed the most important weapon which can be used to bring about social change. Education is a key to unlock the door of freedom and self-confidence and create sustainable communities.

Albert Einstein has rightly said, "Education is not the learning of facts but the training of the mind to think." What India needs now is a generation of educated people who will steer the socio-economic growth of India.

India's performance over the past decade in literacy has considerably improved. Census 2011 data shows the effective literacy rate has increased by 9.21 percentage points over the decade to reach 74.04 per cent. This growth reflects the significant steps India has been taking to create a more literate society.

Learning gives creativity; creativity leads to thinking; thinking leads to knowledge. The social change agents featured this month are all following this mantra stated by Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam and are gearing India to become a developed nation by 2020. May all their efforts be fruitful!

Read their stories and be inspired by their work!

Happy reading!

—**Latha Suresh & Marie Banu**

A Stitch in Time Saves Nine – The Positive Energy Perspective
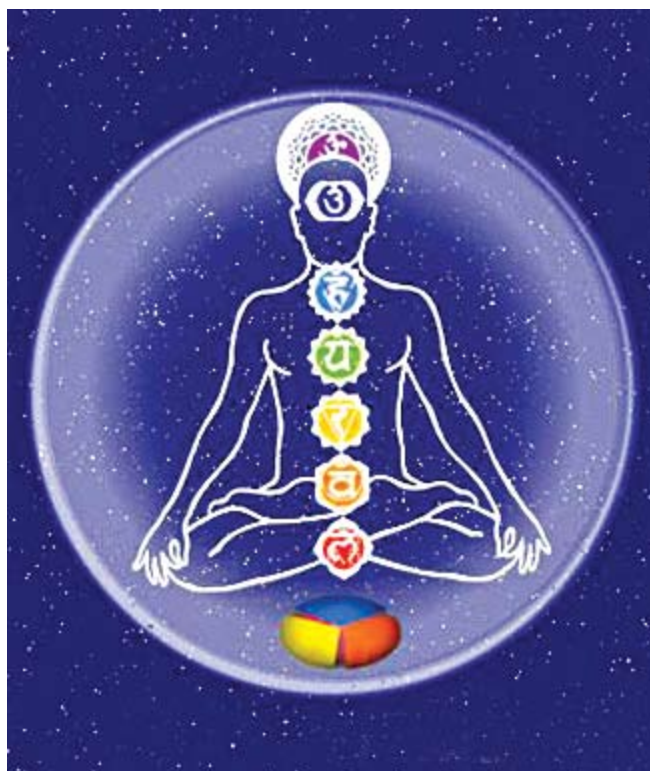
From this series onwards, we intend to interpret 'sayings' from yesteryears through Positive energy lens. The first in series is about—'A stitch in time saves nine'.

We all know that a stitch in time saves nine. Then, what stops us from pursuing timely effort?

1. Our mind is 'full' of thoughts without clarity about what we need to do
2. With the intent of saving nine, in other words, pursuing a big picture, we do not even take the first, small step
3. Limiting beliefs which create fear, doubt, anxiety, worry and stop us from being in the present
4. Need for perfection

Being in the present

Being conscious about time restricts actions and creates a sense of finiteness. We go about our daily lives with long to-do lists every single day, carry-forward tasks from previous day/s, unanticipated requirements cropping up, leading to plans being messed up. Some people seem to be handling all these demands with great ease, while some others are rattled and pressured with such situations.

A rather typical explanation we all make is that those who respond to such situations with ease are good at multi-tasking or have greater control on the situations due to their position, or they manipulate people to getting things done, etc. All these explanations assume that for these people everything gets done to completion and therefore they are happy people. This may, however, be far from truth in most cases. Such explanations are directed towards the results or outcomes. However, in reality, their ease comes from a simple truth – doing their bit for the task at hand, in a timely manner, in other words being in the present moment, moving things forward to the best of their ability, and leaving it for others to take over. The energy of such people is flowing vigorously and with a positive charge. This dynamic and positive energy inspires and motivates others around and creates a momentum that conserves one's energy and enables smooth movement forward.

A stitch in time, a small action to move things forward, can help our energies and support the completion of tasks as well. Such timely action saves much extensive work at a later point in time.

Releasing energy blocks

Most people complain of unfinished work, unsupportive colleagues or friends, insufficient resources, paucity of time, etc. They become immobile and inactive when they encounter situations that are seemingly not in their control or are difficult, or involve interaction with a difficult person. The pause, thus created, blocks some energy in each such situation. They tend to procrastinate and thus delay acting on such tasks. Such energy blocks pile up and over time they create a drag on the person. These energy blocks add weight to our existence, our being, thus turning us into passive casualties. And when this gets repeated frequently, then we pile up blocked energy throughout our journey in life.

As we operate in clock time, which includes contributing to the task in the present moment, we enjoy greater productivity and a single pointed focus in each of our actions. Those who operate in psychological time, where one is either experiencing a tug from behind due to a bad past experience, or feeling anxious about the future, do not act decisively in a forward moving manner. In either of such cases, an energy block is formed, which impedes any form of forward movement. This zone of inaction and postponement can potentially broaden or deepen the issue, thus placing greater demands on the person at a later point in time.

Pursuing excellence, which means giving our best, honestly and with trust is a critical support in taking timely action. When we deeply immerse ourselves in giving our best, we are in the present moment and are joyful about taking actions that matter.

Summing up, the positive energy lens helps to avoid the idiomatic nine stitches where only one would suffice and that is to act to one's best ability in the present moment.

The Positive energy lens ritual: "Breathing in, I calm my body and mind. Breathing out, I smile. Dwelling in the present moment I know this is the only moment."-Thich Nhat Hanh

Reaching out

Bangalore is home to more than 1.1 lakh street children. Rehabilitating and retaining them in safe and secure environments is a daunting task.

Reports have repeatedly revealed that the state and its machinery do not take all the requisite efforts to protect and promote child rights. There are children everywhere, needing care and protection. One such category is the runaway children, most of whom are found on the streets or living on the platforms/railway stations.

"52 percent of the street children are not literate and 92 percent of them are friends with drug addicts. With majority of them unemployed, it is only likely that they manage their drug expenses by stealing. This is roughly the life that children living on the streets are pushed into. There have been a number of programmes and projects intended to rehabilitate these children and reduce the number of children landing on the streets. Need Base India does precisely this,"says Mr.Shaik Rahim, Founder Director, Need Base India, Bangalore.

Bangalore is one of the most prominent transit and destination point for child trafficking in the Southern Region. Evidently, the number of children (especially girls) who go missing in and around Bangalore is on the rise. Against this backdrop, it becomes imperative to rescue and rehabilitate the children when they are on the streets or other places. Rahim has grown observing children around the railway platforms, having nothing to do and getting addicted to the carefree life. "My father was working with the Railways and we were living at the Railway Staff Quarters. Every time I had to step out of my home to go to school or anywhere else, I had to cross the railway station. My passion to work for these children started from here," shares Rahim.

A Post Graduate in Commerce, Rahim decided to explore the option of working with organizations that worked with street and runaway children. "I worked for Sathi, an NGO that focused on children living around railway stations. I joined as an accountant, and later on learning my interests they promoted me as their Programme Officer," he recollects. There

were about 100 to 150 children who took to railway platforms every month. With the interventions being more strategic and spread out, the number of older children living on the streets and railway platforms reduced remarkably. These children who were into begging and addicted to drugs finally gave up street life. This is when Rahim decided to work with many more vulnerable children, like children from the slums and missing/runaway children.

Bangalore is home to more than 1.1 lakh street children. Rehabilitating and retaining them in safe and secure environments is a daunting task. Rahim chose to handle the challenges by establishing Need Base India – a foundation for child care and development, in 2009. "It was during this time I started interacting with corporate houses to raise funds for Need Base India. When I consulted Utopia, I met Ms. Rizwana, who connected me to Mr. P.N.Subramanian. He not only introduced me to CSIM Bangalore, but also sponsored my course here," reminisces Rahim.

For Rahim, CSIM provided an opportunity to understand the world of

NGO management with all the nuances. A number of friends from the IT sector who came forward to share their social thoughts also helped him understand different models that were in play in the development sector. On an experimental basis, he started the School Motivation Camp in 2013 to readmit drop outs and out of school children in government schools. These camps were designed and structured under his leadership. "We decided to learn the best possible way to readmit drop-out children; prevent children run away from their homes and get them to be interested in studies. 25 such children were identified and brought to Urban Deprived Children," he elaborates.

The camp was designed with modules for four weeks. In the first week, the children were oriented about street life and its consequences, with special references to behavioral aspects through moral stories. The next three weeks concentrated on :creating interest in education, understanding society and family, and personality development. After the camp, it was observed that the tendency for children to runaway had declined.

The children are then enrolled in bridge courses that prepare them for mainstream schooling. Thereafter, the rehabilitation of the children is worked out on a case-to-case basis. Wherever the families could be traced, the children were reunited. In other instances, the children were admitted at hostels run by the Government. A rigid follow up by Need Base India helps them intervene if the children face any problem at school.

CSIM students are now involved in evaluating these camps, which have completed two rounds. The evaluation has also brought them in touch with Pratham and the staff were trained in Mysore to use their study and evaluation kits in Kannada.

Currently there are two projects that Rahim is focusing upon– Rainbow Home for Girls and Urban Deprived Children (UDC) Centre for Boys, both in Bangalore city. The centres are now home to 65 girls and 12 boys. More than 45 girls have been admitted at hostels run by the Department of Social Welfare. "We do not keep the number of children in our homes as an indicator of our reach. All we aim to achieve is education for all children, no matter where the child stays. Recently, one child who was a rescued child labourer was given on foster care to a family through the Child Welfare Committee in Bangalore.

Rahim has been the member of Bangalore Child Welfare Committee for the last three years. Acknowledging that the Committee in Bangalore has been more active than in other districts of the state, he also opines that there is no need to amend the Juvenile Justice Act in its present form. "I think we must revamp the whole network to implement the current provisions in the Act," he says.

—Shanmuga Priya.T

Educating children in villages:
Shadab Hassan

"India's freedom struggle triggered commitment not only from Indians in urban areas, but also from the people of rural India."

Introduction: It is challenging enough to be born to a humble family in a rural village, especially in a developing country like India. When a person without ambition is born in such a place, he would find it difficult to avoid going through life whiling away time, even as his urban counterparts go to school. If such a person has a bit more discipline, he may become a child laborer. On the other hand, there are those people who fight all odds to achieve an education in a town. They may need some good fortune in getting someone to give them a ride everyday to school and back. If they are extraordinarily fortunate, they may find some relatives or friends who are kind enough to provide them accommodation and food, thus enabling them to avoid their daily commute. Normally, such people are keen to move up in life and benefit themselves, their immediate families and their proximate societies. There are innumerable cases of such people struggling through to become doctors, civil servants or IT professionals and settle down for good.

Here is one such person Shahid Shadab Hassan, who came from a humble background, climbed his way to a leading institute for his Master's in Business Administration and decided to dedicate his career to building up school education in his home village, 20 kms away from Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand.

Childhood days: Though Shadab was born in Ranchi, he spent his initial childhood days in Brambe until he started going to school. His family is one of those typical traditional families of rural India. His grandfather, (Late) Hamid Hassan, was a freedom fighter. His father, Dr. Shahid Hassan during his school days odd jobs like selling balloons and setting up bicycle stand in the village. The village had no school, but he was determined to study and come up in life. He somehow managed to complete his school and used to go on free rides with his uncle, who was a mechanic working in a garage for a businessman in Ranchi . He grew up to become a professor, and is now imparting knowledge st the Post Graduate Department of Psychology at Ranchi University.

His father's efforts enabled Shadab to enjoy better comfort in life. Though the family lived in Brambe in the initial years of his childhood, they later moved to Ranchi. This helped Shadab to obtain superior education at one of the best schools and colleges at Ranchi. However, he usually spent weekends at Brambe with his family.

He felt disturbed by how his cousins and friends lacked the schooling opportunities he was availing of. His grandfather and father were his heroes. In fact, his grandfather was a father figure for the whole of the village for having had the courage to educate his son. He was unassuming, but in high demand in his society because of his leadership and his ability to mentor families and help them resolve their issues. Almost as a hereditary trait, this built up aspirations in Shadab to do good to the society that looked up to his family and to respond in all possible ways to meet the needs of the people of Brambe.

Shadab was a boy scout at the school and liked going on service-oriented trips to schools where specially abled children were studying. These trips taught him compassion, and he began to think in terms of helping the specially abled children to study better.

Trigger to make a difference: It pained Shadab to see children doing odd jobs in his village. It is not only illegal to make children work in stalls and households, it also cheapens the value of human resources in the economy through inappropriate deployment of resources for less productive work. If this trend is to be broken, the "Right to Education" policy must be implemented with more vigor, and village populations must be made to absorb and accept the concept of sending children to school. Shadab felt that there was a lot of propaganda about compulsory education, but there was no matching effort at ground levels. Second, he also felt that a drive to improve literacy could not be handled by the government alone. The effort needs social entrepreneurs and individuals with a social bent of mind and a determination to build future of India to jump onto the bandwagon. Shadab was influenced by Gandhian thought. He said, "India's freedom struggle triggered commitment not only from Indians in urban areas, but also from the people of rural India. Only when everyone gets involved on such a scale will transformational change of society happen. Otherwise, the deprived would continue to stay in their rut! Intervention through education is important to harness youth power and take advantage of the demographic quotient. "I felt that I must do something at my level which could impact my village and a few more villages around. More importantly, I would be happy if I could motivate more youths to commit themselves for a social cause.". These are excellent words of wisdom from Shadab in his mid-twenties, a young age.

Initial steps for a concrete action:
About to complete his Master's, Shadab found himself in a catch-22 situation. He could opt to work at some job for five years or more and save enough money to start a school at his village. However, his inner voice told him that if he delayed the school plan by five years, many of the children in his village and other villages around would be deprived of a potentially life-changing opportunity. Moreover, whatever money he managed to saved in five years would at best be seed capital; he would have to raise much more money to finance a complete school. In any case, a financial management skill set would be required of him in the longer term. He decided to ignore the jobs available through placement at the college campus and launched his project to set up a school in Brambe.

He first started the school in a small plot of land owned by his family. There was no proper building or infrastructure. His mother gave him a lot of confidence and support. There was no classroom, board or teacher. The school lacked other support services. He enrolled a few students and enlisted the services of a few like-minded friends who wanted to teach in their leisure times. He selected a few of them and initially engaged them in full time teaching. He started off on January 16, 2010, with open-air classrooms , no desks, no chairs, no benches. Instead he had a couple of woven carpets hired on rent, a few black boards, a semi constructed structure and the willingness to teach.. From that humble beginning with 80 kids, he was able to steadily build up this idea of social improvement. As of September 2013, the school had around 500 students enrolled for the ongoing academic year.

Shadab says, "In a social venture, it is not starting an initiative but keeping it going that is the challenge. Once started, it must be sustained, as expectations from the beneficiaries are high. Hence, it is important to keep this in mind and work at running an institution, not a job or an alternate career. Second, unlike private businesses, which face the challenges of tough competition, in social ventures there is no competition. The challenge for me is to ensure that my co-workers stay equally excited day in and day out so that all of us, as a team, bring the same kind of energy and spirits and take the initiative ahead. That was my prime focus in the initial days".

Challenges faced: Shadab faced many challenges in keeping the school going. Every idea faced challenges to its implementation. First, there was no culture or tradition of sending children to school in his village. People were poor, and their priority was not schools! He had to go on a door-to-door campaign pleading with parents to send their children to school. One of the obvious questions he had to answer was, what would the children do after schooling? Though a better answer would come with experience, Shadab had to speak in general terms, giving pep talks on the benefits of education. He also used this campaign to understand the expectations of the people around him. Initially, about 30 students were willing to register with the school. It was not easy, as there were rumors about his intentions behind wanting the children to study. He was literally seen as a spoiler of the labor quotient! The only thing that sustained him in approaching the families and fighting their fear of the "unknown" was his family background and the goodwill his grandfather carried. In fact, Shadab named the school after his grandfather. The first challenge to be faced was admissions.

The single parent or extremely poor kids were taught absolutely free of cost, but the second challenge was collecting a fee of Rs.100 per student per month from those who could pay. Though this was a nominal fee, it was something folks could ill afford in this kind of village in India. But then,

how could Shadab run the school without revenue? Moreover, he also felt that collecting a fee was important because that brought the onus onto the family to support their children's education and stay inquisitive about what the children were getting in return for the money spent. Typically, many of these families would not know whether their children were really going to school, and even when the children were going to school, they may not bother to actually make the effort and learn. Shadab had to insist on payment of fees. But as Shadab puts it to the parents , he always said, "If a child does well, HE is responsible. If he doesn't, WE are responsible.". This assurance imposed a very high demand on him and his teachers! He first had to win the support of his teachers. However, he incentivized fee payment by using certain novel means. If parents did not have the money to pay immediately, they could pay whenever they did get money. He also gave free education to the third child in a family, especially if girl students accompanied a boy student. He also felt the need to support children who were orphans or single parents, especially mothers. He made education free for them. It may be noted here that at least 20 per cent of the children in the school studied absolutely free of cost.

He also made some innovative moves to educate the illiterate rural women on the importance of education. He started a program called "Maatri" for this purpose. Volunteers reached households and taught women to read and write. The women of Brambe and the surrounding villages were deeply appreciative of this effort. Shadab showed visionary thinking in getting even elders to read and write without looking for government support. They in turn supported Shadab in his mission—his social venture of running a school.

The third challenge was finding teachers and volunteers. There were quite a few volunteers who were willing to come from Ranchi to Brambe to teach. The major issue was that they could come only at odd timings, whenever they were free, whereas schools have to operate on fixed schedules. While Shadab initially recruited a few teachers, he and his mother also had to teach full time at the school. This consumed a lot of his time and adversely affected his efforts to raise funds and develop the school further. He was of the view that if he set up

the model with the right momentum, building up further could happen later.

The fourth challenge was getting students and parents to spend on books. He recommended the parents to buy textbooks at the full prices and resell them at the end of the year at half value. Thus, they would benefit by half the cost of the books, while the subsequent buyers would also benefit just as much. Though these issues may look very simple, he had to work personally on even such mundane activities to make the movement successful.

Far more enterprising at a village:
Shadab set up means of having online classrooms. There was no sophistication involved. He kept a LCD monitor on a table and connected it to his laptop. He also arranged external speakers and cameras. He requested those volunteers who could not come to the school to logon and teach over video calls. At times, such sessions lasted three hours. This was a phenomenal approach in a rural school—scheduling with limited resources using technology was an amazing approach that demonstrated his commitment and innovation in driving learning through reach-out programs. It could enable broad bases for children's learning and also motivate them. He ensured that any sponsor who spends on a child's education could come online and observe the progress of the program. These steps all demonstrate Shadab's ability to convert instincts into action for a larger purpose.

Shadab participated in the Jagriti Yatra - 2012. The Jagriti Yatra is an annual train journey taken by highly motivated young Indians. It is organized by the Jagriti Sewa Sansthan, a non-governmental organization that promotes entrepreneurship. This specially hired 18-wagon train takes 450 young men and women, including students, and entrepreneurs, including a few rural entrepreneurs. Selection is based on a highly competitive selection process. During the Yatra, Shadab was given an opportunity to address all the other passengers and tell them about himself and his initiative. As he moved through the compartments of the train as it was on the move, he met with a professional from Google's India office based in Bangalore. This person got excited by Shadab's initiatives, and after the Yatra, a team of Google employees from Bangalore

volunteered to teach the school kids at Brambe over Google Hangout.. The fact that he achieved all of this within three years of starting the school shows Shadab's spirit and drive.

Shadab made sure that the children had fun while learning. He screened several educational, motivational or animated movies for the school children. He also ensured more all-round learning by encouraging the students to participate in Inter-school competitions. It may be

worth noting here that the school students won the 2nd prizes in the Inter School Quiz competition organized by the Jharkhand government in February, 2010, merely a month after it was started. He took the students out to Ranchi to expose them to real world concepts and events, including visit to film festivals, science city, State museum etc.. He demonstrated excellent leadership traits in building up the futures of these children. The big moment came when former President of India, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, recognized his efforts and felicitated him with Yuva Prabhodhan during the launch of What Can I Give Mission in Jharkhand..

Shadab constantly monitors and encourages his students to outperform themselves each day. He draws the attention of the media to the children when they do exceptionally well. In particular, the performances of girl students have attracted great attention, as they scored high marks. Shadab feels the school will revolutionize the village, bringing about the right thinking and approaches towards ensuring decent livelihood prospects for children, instead of encouraging child labor!

Apart from purely academic aspects, he also focuses on making sure the children develop good health and hygiene practices.

He conducts free health checkup camps and invites qualified people to come and speak of good preventive care and appropriate habits for good health. Further, one of the important initiatives he has undertaken is 'Freedom Heroes'. This initiative recognizes and felicitates ordinary people who have shown extraordinary traits and have helped bring a positive change in and around the school. He believes that rather than worshiping film heroes, it is more important for the children to identify real life heroes and be enthused by them and follow in their footsteps! At times, he prefers less known performers because they strike a chord easily with the students. Such thinking is really worth emulating.

Family support: His family has been of great support. His parents and his wife stood by him, allowing him to pursue his ambition to build a school as a social venture actively. Additionally, his mother got directly involved in the school's operations right from the beginning. His wife Neha, who is an Assistant Professor in the Central University of Jharkand supported him in every possible way and this made for great moral support for Shadab, and proved the family's commitment to progressive action and uplifting of the society to the villagers.

Conclusion: Shadab strongly believes in action, because he senses that deeds are worth more than words. He also believes that selective insulation from the rest of the world is important for success, and that sometimes one need to be selfish to pursue what one desires. He narrated an event when a well-placed person in society denounced him and his actions, mentioning publicly that his efforts to provide education to children were of no use. Shadab never gets swayed by such comments and stays clearly entrenched in his initiatives and actions. He advises other youth to do undertake similar socially beneficial work wherever they are and in whatever way they think they can impact society most. This world would improve in leaps and bounds if only more Shadabs surface.

— This is part of the book "Incredible Champions" authored by N. Chandrasekaran and published by Partridge Publishers 2014.

THE EYE-OPENER

"I chose to run an eye speciality hospital for two simple reasons. The first was simply because India, being home to nearly one quarter of the world's visually impaired population, needed it the most. The second reason was because helping someone to see the world around him."

—Dr. V. Ramani

It was Dr A P J Abdul Kalam who said "Giving light to the blind is the greatest service to humanity". The former president was referring to Sankara Eye Care Institutions, visibly taken aback by the service to society that the hospital and its institutions thereafter, had provided. Today, that's a mission that the group continues to work towards. But learning the story of Dr V Ramani and how he went about establishing an impressive network of eye hospitals requires some re-winding. "My father was one of the few doctors who stayed back when Coimbatore was suffering from a plague in 1942, in order to treat patients who fell victim to illness and disease," says Dr Ramani, tracing the origins of his medical empire. "This continued to an extent that the people around him began showering him with so much love, affection and support." When Dr A Ramanathan breathed his last in 1966, it was Dr Ramani's plan to start a private practice in Coimbatore in his father's honour. With his wife, Dr Radha, the medical duo established a private practice that would go on to signal the rise of Sankara Eye Care, to where it stands today – a colossus in the field of providing quality eye care to the masses.

It was 1972 when Dr Ramani and Dr Radha began their private practice in Coimbatore, when the former chanced upon a temple started by the Kanchi Sankaracharya. "When the Sankaracharyas came to Coimbatore, they met with a number of doctors and explained the importance of utilizing medical expertise in the service of the deserving," Dr Ramani explains, "A chance meeting with one of the senior members of the mutt led me to understand that while a number of doctors agreed in principle, to do their bit for society, little had been done thereafter." That was when Dr Ramani decided that he would spearhead the service that the Kanchi Sankaracharya had spoken about. "I chose not to start right then, though," he says, "I called together a few doctors of my age group and spoke about what we could do, do fulfil the Sankaracharya's plan. I did not want to include doctors who were very senior since I was a bit wary of what they might think."

That was how the Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Medical Centre came to be, in 1977. It was Coimbatore's answer to its genuine dearth of quality medical care. "The relevance of the medical centre was very important," Dr Ramani explains, "In India, back then, you had

government medical centres and hospitals on one hand... and you had private hospitals on the other. There was no middle ground. I hoped that the medical centre that I helped build would take care of that gap." Starting off with just 10 doctors involved in the operation of the medical centre, Dr Ramani was careful not to take any title in the functioning of the medical centre. "Calling myself 'president' would have automatically meant an invisible line between me and the other doctors," he says, "I decided to merely be a coordinator, and thus work with the others in fulfilling a common interest."

Over the next few years, 10 doctors became 75. And over time, the Sankaracharya advised Dr Ramani to disengage the medical practice from the affairs of the mutt, and run it as a separate trust. That was how the Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Medical Trust came to be established in 1982. "Medical facilities across the country saw a great improvement around this time. The government was doing its bit to ensure that people had access to better healthcare than there was," recalls Dr Ramani, "And that's why I figured that the time was ripe to specialize in one field. I chose to run an eye speciality hospital for two simple reasons. The first was simply because India, being home to nearly one quarter of the world's visually impaired population, needed it the most. The second reason was because helping someone to see the world around him, made for one of the best feelings anyone could ever have." That was when Dr Ramani decided to establish Sankara Eye Hospital in 1985.

Over the last two decades, Sankara Eye Hospitals have cropped up in several States across the country. "The vision is to ensure that by 2020, we have a hospital in every Indian state," says Dr Ramani. For every surgery performed at the hospital, four surgeries are performed free, a practice that the hospital refers to as 'the see-saw effect'. Just last year, the chain of hospitals had successfully performed one million cataract surgeries across the country. Its welfare initiatives included a number of medical check-ups for

children, free surgeries and yeomen service to the betterment of ophthalmologic health. "We began collecting donations for different purposes," Dr Ramani explains, "We allowed our donors the option of choosing what they were donating for: cataract surgeries, surgeries for children,

development of infrastructure, and so on." The hospital also made an active move towards educating the public on the importance of making small donations towards the noble cause on special occasions like birthdays and weddings. "Just the thought that your donation has made a

difference to somebody's life, can make so much of difference to your life. And it doesn't cost as much as celebrating your birthday at a star hotel."

The future looks bright for Sankara Eye Care. With its focus firmly set on improving quality of eye care, and health in general, the challenges

that lie ahead never seem to run out. Perhaps the biggest is establishing a hospital in every Indian State by 2020. There's no doubt though, that Dr Ramani's establishment is certainly heading in the right direction.

> *The vision is to ensure that by 2020, we have a hospital in every Indian state.*

Volunteer, Fighter, Survivor

Subburathinam Uday Shankar picks up his phone-calls with the customary "Sai Ram", before he exchanges pleasantries. To describe him as a veteran volunteer would just fall short of stating the obvious. "Volunteering is in my blood," he proudly proclaims, as he begins to explain how he can't think of a life where he isn't involved in doing his bit for society. "Even before I took voluntary retirement in 1998, I used to engage in the smallest form of volunteering at the factory." Shankar worked for Eveready Batteries (erstwhile Union Carbide) as a superintendant, for 25 years, until 1998. "I used to take time off from work even back then, to look into mobilizing some sort of assistance for those factory workers who needed help." That was an internship of sorts. In 1998, he took the plunge into full-time volunteering, and is today nearly 16 years old in the business of making the world a better place.

Shankar's day starts with a long list. It is a list of names, addresses, contact numbers and other personal details like medical records. For the last 16 years, he has assisted the Sathya Sai Trust in mobilizing blood donation. "There's quite a bit of work involved," he explains, "We schedule weekly blood donation drives. There might be a situation where somebody may not be able to make it, for donation. In such cases, we need to find somebody else to donate blood. It's a process that requires a great deal of networking." When in 1998, soon after retirement, Shankar walked into the Sundaram Sathya Sai Temple in R A Puram, the bhajans of Sathya Sai Baba captured his attention and devotion. He decided, then, that he would spend his energy in extending the Sathya Sai Baba mission in his own way. "Blood donation was the ideal avenue to achieve this, since there were so many myths and misconceptions about what it took to donate blood," he says. All it took was his presence at a counter outside the temple, and some patient explaining to the public about blood donation and its many benefits. "There were around 900 donors back then. Today, nearly 8000 donors have registered with us, ready to donate blood as and when the need arises." However, that still doesn't take away the importance of maintaining a database of donors — extensive records and research that

Shankar has nearly mastered. "There are several aspects to blood donation, which we need to look into," he explains, "You can donate blood only once every three months, you can't donate blood if you have diabetes, you can't donate blood if you suffer from high blood pressure. So, maintaining a database of donors also calls for keeping tabs on these aspects as well." But a database of blood donors isn't Shankar's only contribution to society.

Between 2002 and 2005, Shankar volunteered at the Cancer Institute in Adyar. His area of volunteering lay in helping cancer patients see a glimpse of hope on the horizon just up ahead. "It involved reassuring them, helping to accept the illness and believe that they would emerge victorious in the fight that would follow," he says. Call it cruel irony, but only last year, Shankar himself was diagnosed with Hodgekin's Lymphoma, which effectively meant he suffered cancerous growth in his liver, spleen, under his skin and within his bones. "When you are told you have cancer, it's something that begins to sound completely unbelievable at first," he says, "But in due course you have to accept it. My good fortune meant that I was diagnosed when the cancer was in stage two. So, chemotherapy cycles and the blessings of Swami have helped me overcome my illness." How does it feel to fight cancer, especially after engaging with patients over the years? "How do you explain it? Suffering from cancer is something you can't explain. I was told the chemotherapy would be the worst," he says, "I was told that most chemo subjects suffer from the inability to control their bodily fluids such as bowl movements. But good fortune, again, ensured that I only suffered from a fever and not much beyond that."

Cancer may have had an impact of Shankar's life, but it hasn't changed his approach towards volunteering. "I still go about maintaining my blood donation records," he says chirpily, "That can't stop simply because helping society is in my blood." Through it all, some pain and loss of feeling in his knees, is perhaps the only impediment to his voluntary service to society. But that's not got him too worried. "I will keep doing what I do, and I feel youngsters should also take up the cause of helping society out in some way or the other." He goes on to explain himself: "A week has 168 hours. Feel free to minus 10 hours a day for work, and you're still left with around 100 hours. Take away time needed for your daily routines, and you have already accounted for 148 hours. That leaves you with 20 hours, which can easily be spent towards making society a better place to live in." And that, in many ways, is how Shankar continues to live even today.

I will keep doing what I do, and I feel youngsters should also take up the cause of helping society out in some way or the other.

Evolving Continuously to Empower the Differently Abled

Working for the welfare of disabled has seen many approaches over the years. But there are few organisations that have focused on empowering the differently abled to work for them. "A sense of economic independence for an individual is still incomplete when the community does not realise its capacity to sustain itself and fight for its needs", says Mr. S Subramania Shiva, Chief Executive Officer of UDIS Forum. The name itself signifies the lack of integration of differently abled with the mainstream society. "UDIS can mean two different things. You and Disabled or Understanding Disability. Our founders felt that there was no integration of differently abled in our society and that they were always identified as a separate group who were in need of care and attention. Thus, the name UDIS emerged to show our intention to bridge the differently abled and the society," explains Shiva.

UDIS Forum was started as a foundation in 2006 by Dr M.N.G.Mani, an expert in the field of disability. Differently abled need special care since childhood, assistive devices to aid their mobility and specific health care facilities. All these needs are largely met by government and NGOs. However, when they become adults, they remain dependent, without realising economic independence. With a comprehensive understanding of the macro picture, UDIS set out to do something unique—creating employment opportunities for the differently abled. "It was all based on a strong conviction that economic empowerment will automatically lead to social and political empowerment," says Shiva.

Employment opportunities for the differently abled in government enterprises were very limited. The 3 percent reservation that was introduced by the government came in after a long struggle by like-minded groups. Yet, its implementation calls for better coordination and execution. Given this scenario, UDIS decided to focus on promoting employment opportunities in the private sector. "Self-employment ventures were also tried out, but we did not succeed. It suited only those with locomotive disability. Marketing and Resource Management was also a concern in these ventures. We therefore remained fixed on employing differently abled in the private sector," elaborates Shiva.

UDIS approached many enterprises and sought opportunities for the differently abled. Although there was hesitation in the beginning, these companies have now started recruiting people with disability. Private companies have also begun to associate this section of work force as a very secure base as there is no trade unionism that would disturb their productivity. The tendency of the differently abled to continue in a job that suits them has worked out to be in their favour.

In 2007, UDIS Forum set up a small office in front of the District Employment

Head Quarters in Coimbatore, so that differently abled can approach them to explore opportunities in the private sector. While field workers went out to convince the employers, those in office followed tedious procedures to gather as much details as the Employment Exchange did.

Beginning with only four staff, a German based organisation named CBM came forward to fund the administrative expenses of UDIS. "Mani's extensive networks helped us in every stage. He was an Advisor in CBM for Education. With everyone critiquing our movements, we were determined to employ at least 100 people in the first year of operation," says Shiva, who quickly added that they managed to place 140 people in jobs.

Alongside the Employment Guidance Programme, UDIS soon realised the need to provide vocational training for those who lacked basic skills. All skills that the staff could impart were managed internally. Training in computers and tailoring were imparted through partnerships with NGOs who were pioneers in this space. UDIS supported the transport costs that the trainees had to incur to attend these training programmes.

The next stage of intervention was advocacy. UDIS realised that there was an urgent need to educate and sensitise the public about the needs and capabilities of differently abled. Coming in contact with college students in the process, UDIS eyed on a different strategy to create platforms for the differently abled. An increasing number of students began to volunteer for their administrative work. Very soon, a training manual on disability was prepared to train students and youth volunteers on disability.

UDIS created the Youth Wing for Disability (YWDIS) in Coimbatore with elected office bearers who planned their own activities for the differently abled and also carried out advocacy campaigns. Their engagement ranged from doing training programmes in schools to reference management for job opportunities and teaching spoken English/Computers to the target group.

UDIS came up with a new intervention at this stage. Learning that the non-disabled cannot always advocate for the disabled, it was imperative that the disabled were empowered to represent themselves in any forum. Soon, they also examined that the already existing associations of disabled were functioning without any legal status. UDIS brought these associations together and trained them on organisational management, fund raising and finance management.

When lack of coordination amongst groups that focused on a specific type of disability became an issue of concern, UDIS came forward to be a nodal agency and coordinated these groups. UDIS's work in the district of Coimbatore grew to be an exemplar.

In 2010, Sight Savers International wanted UDIS to reach out to other districts as well. With lack of staff, UDIS decided to create similar groups in other districts too. So, organisations and associations of the disabled in other districts were trained in organisational matters, and also in cross disabilities in order to forge coordination from the beginning.

Thus, district level nodal agencies were created in five districts—Thiruvallur, Namakkal, Erode, Madurai and Ramanathapuram. Later with the support of CBM, district nodal agencies were also set up in Krishnagiri, Tirunelveli and Sivagangai districts. This large network managed to place 900 disabled persons in jobs, train 300 persons in various skills, mobilise 2,500 college students and orient 27,000 school students on disability.

UDIS was conceptualised with three disabled and five non-disabled persons on board. The founder of UDIS wanted this to evolve into an organisation that was run and administered by the differently abled themselves. This transition came in 2013, adding more value to the engagement of UDIS with various stake holders. UDIS also runs a dedicated helpline for the differently abled—9442556168 —providing information services on employment, counselling, marriage, skill training, and a scholarship scheme for visually challenged girls pursuing higher education that was launched with the support of a German through CBM.

UDIS has been transforming from one role to another, leaving no stone unturned in the empowerment of the differently abled.

If you wish to get in touch with UDIS, Please call Mr. Shiva at 9442215014 or write to shivass48@gmail.com.

—**Shanmuga Priya.T**

Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

An interesting conversation with Shri Ramana Maharishi and his disciples.

D.: Does Bhagavan see the world as part and parcel of Himself? How does He see the world?

M.: The Self alone is and nothing else. However, it is differentiated owing to ignorance. Differentiation is threefold: (1) of the same kind: (2) of a different kind, and (3) as parts in itself. The world is not another self similar to the self. It is not different from the self; nor is it part of the self.

D.: Is not the world reflected on the Self?

M.: For reflection there must be an object and an image. But the Self does not admit of these differences.

D.: Does not then Bhagavan see the world?

M.: Whom do you mean by Bhagavan?

D.: A jiva advanced more than I.

M.: If you understand your jiva the other jiva is also understood.

D.: I do not want to discuss. I want to learn. Please instruct me.

M.: Because you desire to learn, discussion is unavoidable. Leave all this aside. Consider your sleep. Are you then aware of bondage or do you seek means for release? Are you then aware of the body itself? The sense of bondage is associated with the body. Otherwise there is no bondage, no material to bind with and no one to be bound. These appear, however, in your wakeful state. Consider to whom they appear.

D.: To the mind.

M.: Watch the mind. You must stand aloof from it. You are not the mind. And the Self will remain ever.

D.: Does Sri Bhagavan believe in evolution?

M.: Evolution must be from one state to another. When no differences are admitted, how can evolution arise?

D.: Why does Sri Krishna say, "After several rebirths the seeker gains knowledge and thus knows Me." There must be evolution from stage to stage.

M.: How does Bhagavad Gita begin?" Neither I was not nor you nor these chiefs, etc." "Neither it is born, nor does it die, etc." So there is no birth, no death, no present as you look at it. Reality was, is, and will be. It is changeless. Later Arjuna asked Sri Krishna how he could have lived before Aditya. Then Krishna, seeing Arjuna was confounding Him with the gross body, spoke to him accordingly. The instruction is for the one who sees diversity. In reality there is no bondage nor mukti for himself or for others from the jnani's standpoint.

D.: Are all in liberation?

M.: Where is all? There is no liberation either. It could be only if there was bondage. There was really no bondage and so, it follows, there is no liberation.

D.: But to evolve through births, there must be practice, years of abhyasa.

M.: Abhyasa is only to prevent any disturbance to the inherent peace. There is no question of years. Prevent this thought at this moment. You are only in your natural state whether you make abhyasa or not.

Another man asked: Why do not all realise the Self in that case?

M.: It is the same question in another guise. Why do you raise this question? In as much as you raise this question of abhyasa it shows you require abhyasa. Make it.

But to remain without questions or doubts is the natural state. God created man; and man created God. They both are the originators of forms and names only. In fact, neither God nor man was created.

—Excerpted from talks with Shri Ramana Maharishi

Belongingness Dimensions – winning, a process of problem solving

Problem solving is an integral activity in a social organization. Representing the causes of many in the society and ensuring the misalignment in the society is addressed, a social entrepreneur is engaged in problem solving on an ongoing basis. According to Asoka Innovators of public, social entrepreneurs find what is not working and solve the problem by changing the system, spreading the solution, and persuading entire societies to move in different directions. They are individuals with innovative solutions to society's most pressing social problems. They are ambitious and persistent, tackling major social issues and offering new ideas for wide-scale change. *(https://www.ashoka.org/social_entrepreneur)*

There are different ways, in which the problems are addressed – from activism to negotiation. They are the stimulation for several change makers to join and support the causes that needs to be addressed. Usually these social entrepreneurs present user-friendly, understandable, and ethical ideas that engage widespread support in order to maximize the number of citizens that will stand up, seize their idea, and implement it.

There are different ways in which a problem may be addressed; from activism to negotiation. While problem solving may be the issue of the field people in the social organization, building the fundamental orientation to problem solving has to be taken up by the HR of the organization. At an organizational level this orientation has to be integrated into the culture such that whether internal or external problems, all are addressed with similar orientation.

Largely there are four fundamental orientations –

1. Win – Lose: This is a typical orientation which runs with the belief that "winning means only one and at any cost I have to win". It also emerges from the belief that "if there is a wrong it is because of others and I need to set it right; that is the winning"; "If I have to win others will have to lose". This orientation is the most common in the world. This causes unwanted competition between the social groups/ society and the social entrepreneur. It also creates a space where people take stands and would want to ensure they are better than the other. This orientation may leave behind negativism or revenge and remain unresolved completely until both are pushed to lose – lose situation.

2. Lose – Lose: This is usually the resultant of the Win- lose and lose – win orientation. When the competition gets bitter and either side is strong and they are not willing to understand or accommodate the other's perspectives, over a period of time the entire effort is rendered waste. Both the parties lose. There is dissatisfaction, disharmony and a lot of frustration as a result. This usually operates on the belief "its fine if I don't get what I want but I will never allow the other to get anything out of this"; "If I can win I will try all means, if I can't I will not allow others to win"; "it is fine even if we cannot do the project but I will not tolerate the other winning and I losing".

3. Lose – Win: This is an interesting way in which the social entrepreneur is willing to just give up and allow the other person's perspective to prevail. It is done when there is a defeatist attitude and 'nowhere to go' situation is perceived. The belief that rules could be "anyway I can't win let them at least have their way"; "I will just put down all my cards so they will feel bad to fight and win against me"; " If I can't win at least I have to make them feel so bad that they have won". This is a self destruction path and closes the space for negotiation.

4. Win – Win: This is the most difficult yet most productive orientation. Both perspectives are examined with openness and focus deriving the best of both. There is a higher level of satisfaction possible and the result will have the best option from all dimensions. This also brings in higher level of ownership, accountability and adherence to the solution and its implications. The belief that guides could be "winning does not mean one, both of us can win together if we are willing to choose the appropriate option together"; " the issue has to be addressed with what needs to be done than what I or the other person want to do"; "for peace and harmony to prevail, I have to ensure the best parts of the perspectives are chosen and negotiated"; "I have to put down my ego and go by the appropriateness of the context and situation if we have to have win-win".

The often considered as utopian paradigm of win-win was answered in a parable that I read long back -

A farmer, whose corn always took the first prize at the state fair, had the habit of sharing his best corn seeds with all the farmers in the neighbourhood. When asked why, he said, "It is really a matter of self-interest. The wind picks up the pollen and carries it from field to field, so if my neighbours grow inferior corn, the cross pollination brings down the quality of my own corn. So I am concerned that they plant only the very best."

Sometimes our own insecurity within comes in the way of choosing win-win. It is very easy to get into two opposite sides and compete; but it takes a lot more effort to stand in humility and reflect objectively on multiple perspectives and choose the best option. It is the responsibility of HR to ensure that the problem solving processes within the organization is guided by win-win orientation. The HR of the social organization has to instil the win-win orientation as the core fundamental orientation which will be used in both internal and external problem solving situations.

Reflections:

1. As a social entrepreneur how much of win-win do I use in my problem solving?
2. What are the predominant orientations of problem solving within the organization?
3. What does win-win mean to me in life as a social entrepreneur?

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath, PhD.

India runs on chai

With over 36 outlets spread across Bengaluru and New Delhi-NCR, Chai Point is looking to capture a sizable share of the Rs. 20,000 crore market for a cup of leisure chai by ensuring a wonderful last mile customer experience.

When Amuleek Singh Bijral founded Chai Point (as a part of Mountain Trail Foods Pvt. Ltd.) in 2010, his business premise was clear; India runs on chai. And as the founder-CEO of the Bengaluru-based tea retail chain reasons, no player has set the benchmark in this vast market, estimated at around Rs. 20,000 crore in India. Today, Chai Point serves a variety of tea at its 32 outlets spread across Bengaluru and four more in the New Delhi-NCR region. In this fiscal alone, he hopes to take the number of outlets to 50. "While we began our journey in Bengaluru; New Delhi and its surrounding regions, has the highest per capita consumption of tea in India and we would like to focus our expansion plans to tap this opportunity. Subsequently, we would also look to enter Maharashtra, Gujarat and Punjab," says Bijral. To fund this expansion, Chai Point raised its Series-A to the tune of Rs. 10 crore from investment firm, Saama Capital, in May 2014.

While he was pursuing a management degree at Harvard Business School (2004-06) (HBS), Bijral nursed the ambition of building a consumer centric business. Post his masters, he spent over five years working in the IT industry and while on the job, his chai break was sacred, akin to a daily ritual. Bijral observed that he was only one of the many thousands who stepped out for a cup of tea at a nondescript tea stall. "Unlike what is happening with coffee there really was no last mile customer experience for tea and in India, the volume of tea consumption is nearly 14 times that of coffee," explains Bijral. He sensed the huge potential that lay in this largely fragmented market and opened his first outlet in Bengaluru in 2011 using his personal capital. In a year's time, angel investors came on board and this allowed the company to gain momentum.

Journey towards consistency

The cost of setting up a Chai Point outlet varies between Rs. 9 lakh to Rs. 18 lakh, depending on its location. A majority of its outlets are standalone while some are located in corporate offices. Chai Point also runs a kiosk at Bengaluru's International Airport. Interestingly, all of Chai Point's 36 outlets are self-owned. "In a retail business, unless you have set up over 100 outlets and built a universally successful model, it is pointless to bring on franchise partners," says Bijral. Much like other retailers, Chai Point faces its own set of challenges including training and management of manpower, standardising product offering and tackling real estate costs. "Early on, we realised the importance of investing in our people, and set up the Mountain Trail Academy to impart training to all our employees," says Bijral. As for building its team, the company looks to hire specialists in functions such as technology and supply chain while it is open to hiring people of varied backgrounds, as long as they are attitudinally aligned with Chai Point.

In terms of standardising its product offering and ensuring quality, Chai Point has invested in sourcing high quality produce and equipment. It has exclusive partnerships with estates in Assam, Darjeeling and Nilgiris to procure tea leaves that are free of artificial colours or flavouring. "In our journey towards consistency, we have had to pay attention to the smallest details; take water for instance, we have invested in industrial water softeners as using hard water significantly alters the output," says Bijral while adding that the company uses sulphur free sugar in its tea. Commenting about the location, he says, "Initially, we looked for the cheapest real estate options. In time, we understood that it is essential to look at a location's sales and cash flow potential and justify its cost accordingly," he says.

While there are operational challenges to face, Bijral says that the tougher challenge is that of modernising the tea drinking experience while endeavouring to be a mid-market brand.

Packed and ready to go

In the next quarter of this fiscal, Chai Point aims to roll out its packaged products including a ready-to-drink iced tea, packaged tea bags and tea time snacks. At first, these products will be available at all of the company's outlets and depending on sales volume, Chai Point will decide if it wants to further its reach through different distribution channels. As of now, to increase its footfalls, the company relies on word-of-mouth referrals and has in place a reward system. "Repeat business is one of the best aspects of our business and to encourage this we have issued pre-paid cards with up front discounts. While we first launched this system through a physical card, we soon figured that taking it to a mobile platform made great business sense," says Bijral. At present, Chai Point's reward system is available on Apple and android mobile platforms. The company has also introduced a home-delivery system in Bengaluru, earlier this year.

Bijral is quick to acknowledge that Chai Point has just made a start and has a fair way to go. "We have more than doubled our revenues, year-on-year, since our inception. I know that does not mean much since we are at an early stage but we certainly do have the potential to sustain such growth rates for a few more years," he states. He also knows that with international players such as Starbucks believing that "tea is sexy", there will be a concerted effort to organise the segment and make tea contemporary. In all, Bijral and Chai Point want to make all the right moves to ensure the cup's brimming.

— **Divya. M. Chandramouli**
This article was first published in The Smart CEO Magazine (www.thesmartceo.in)

"Don't think that Civil Service Examination is meant only for intelligent persons."

Shri. Israel Jebasingh IAS shares with Marie Banu his advice for civil servant aspirants.

Shri. R.A. Israel Jebasingh IAS was born in Chennai, and completed schooling in Don Bosco Higher Secondary School, Perambur. Graduating from Sri Venkateswara College of Engineering in the stream of Mechanical Engineering, he entered into the profession of teaching, serving as Lecturer in Sri Ram Engineering College.

In the year 2000, he wrote the Civil Service Examinations and got selected for Indian Railway Traffic Service (IRTS). In 2004, he appeared for Civil Service Examination yet again and got selected for Indian Administrative Service (All India Rank 59). During his tenure working under several capacities, he has the merit of rolling out the prestigious PURA project of Dr.A.P.J.Abdul Kalam, heading rural infrastructure SREI Sahaj e-Village Limited. He has also served as CEO of Cethar Energy Limited.

He has been felicitated as "Effective SDO of India" by National Academy of Administration in 2007 and 2008. As the Director of Officers IAS Academy in Chennai, he coaches civil service aspirants.

In an exclusive interview, Israel Jebasingh IAS shares with Marie Banu his advice for civil servant aspirants.

About your childhood, family and education?

My father was a Judicial Magistrate and my mother was a school teacher. I have an elder brother and a younger sister. My wife is a home maker and we have two sons.

As a student, I was average in academics, but interested in sports. I represented my school basketball team at the State Level. I wanted to pursue Civil Services while at school and my father motivated me. I did my graduation in engineering at Venkateswara College and worked as a lecturer while preparing for my Civil Service examination.

In 2000, I scored all India Rank 294 and was selected for Indian Railway Traffic Service. I realized that to clear the Civil Service Examination, one need not have to be 'academically intelligent'. When I entered Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration in Mussoorie, I learnt that almost 90 percent of the candidates who made to Indian Administrative Service (IAS) were average students from middle class or lower middle class background, and from rural areas without much knowledge of English.

I attempted Civil Service Examination yet again, and this time cleared it with All India 59th Rank qualifying for IAS. My experience taught me that this examination was not meant for academic gold medalists alone.

My parents were very happy when I cleared the examination. It was their dream!

During your tenure as Sub Divisional Officer in West Bengal, you had launched tribal programmes in naxal affected areas. Please tell us more about this?

In West Bengal I was posted in a place called Midnapur, a naxal affected area bordering Jharkhand. We aimed at rehabilitating the naxals and at the same time worked towards making tribals not falling prey to naxals. The naxals gave the impression to the poor that the government were not taking care of them, hence they were offering support. The tribals reciprocated by giving them food and feeding information. We started filing up this vacuum.

We launched a programme *'Apna dhwarae prashas'*, meaning administration at the door step. I used to go along with my entire team of officers—Sub Divisional Police Officer, Sub Divisional Land Reforms Officer, and Sub Divisional Medical Officer—and camp at the village. The tribals started believing in the administration and were happy to receive their community certificate and ration card at their door step. The government offered reimbursement for medical expenses, but the tribals could not afford to buy the medicines. Being a junior officer, I could not change the government policy, but networked with the local medical shops and requested them to provide medicines to the tribals and claim reimbursement from the government later.

Can you talk about the development programmes in West Bengal and in Tamil Nadu in general?

Tamil Nadu is 20 years ahead of West Bengal. Tamil Nadu is one of the most developed states in our country and can't be compared with states like West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, or Rajasthan.

For example, MNREGA is a big programme in these states as there are not much industries. This is not the scenario in Tamil Nadu.

Can you share your experience meeting Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam and your engagement in the PURA project?

I was implementing Dr. Abdul Kalam's PURA project under public private partnership. Under IAS, we have the opportunity of having lunch or dinner with the President of India. He gave us a lecture on the PURA project and told that if one of us implemented the PURA programme in a district, then his time would have been worth spending.

When I moved to Chennai due to my mother's illness, I had the opportunity to work for PURA programme. PURA is the project of Professor Indhiresan who believed that whatever amenities are available in the urban areas, the same should be made accessible to the rural community. Dr. Abdul Kalam was fascinated by this thought and started propagating it amongst Members of Parliament and administration.

I was involved at the conception stage and the pilot phase was implemented in five states — Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa.This project was aimed at providing basic amenities like: access to good health services, clean drinking water, rural mall catering to requirements like fertilisers, etc. The project also aimed at economic viability where industries would invest and people could offer their quality services at a nominal rate. This led to reverse migration!

What is your guidance for teachers?

It is no longer a time wherein whatever the teachers say, students accept. One has to become a student and talk in their language. You need to know what their expectation is. We can't sit on an ivory tower and start lecturing. Live in their style! Teaching is a continuous process. It does not begin and end in class. We need to be friendly with our students.

I have students clarifying their doubts through whatsapp. It has become a discussion forum. A student should look at a teacher as his role model. Periodic tests and constructive feedback is the success mantra for clearing competitive examinations.

What is your advice for those who aspire to pursue IAS?

My simple advice is: "Don't think that the Civil Service Examination is meant only for intelligent persons." If that was the case, I would not have cleared! You need to work sincerely for one year. Study consistently for 8 hours a day, and read the base books —government budget documents, NCERT books, government of India publications that are available online, India year book, etc.— that are available for rural poor students in their local library.

From Officers IAS Academy, 7 students have cleared the IAS examination this year. They have worked hard and appeared for periodic tests in our Academy which made them succeed.

For qualifying in Civil Service Examination, you need to read with clarity. Instead of reading ten books, read one book ten times. Let that book be a government publication. Understand the question asked, and give the right answer instead of vomiting what you know.