

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Leadership is recognised as an enabler of well-functioning organisations. In the development sector, whether social work organisations or social enterprises, well-led services contribute to improved wellbeing of people, families and communities.

A leader is someone who will inspire, motivate and give a sense of purpose and direction to his or her team. To be a good leader, he should be aware of all the human characteristics in every spectrum of life. He should be empathetic and at the same time should have the ability to take strong, bold and necessary decisions even if it means he will become unpopular. It is at troubling and conflicting times a good leader emerges.

From Nelson Mandela to Abraham Lincoln, everyone has risen to the occasion and been a sense of hope for their followers when people were at their most difficult times. Not all leaders are liked by followers. There will always be someone who is not happy with the leader or his or her decisions and style of leadership. If a leader tries to please everyone, then he or she will become gullible and be known as a weak leader.

It is known that the social sector faces unprecedented challenges when it comes to effective leadership. Delivery of services, coordinating with the government, and managing the grassroot level interventions requires a professional approach. It is therefore vital to have confident and effective social leaders - who can inspire and lead teams and organisations in complex, multi-agency social care systems. This is hugely important to the effectiveness and impact of the services offered.

Conversations Today has started to feature Social Leaders from this issue. We take great pride in featuring these inspiring personalities.

Read, be Inspired!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

WHAT ARE YOU FIXED ABOUT?

*We are designed boundaryless and limitless
in what we can achieve. Unfortunately, we are also skillful
in building boundaries and limits..."*

— Assegid Habtewold, *The 9 Cardinal Building Blocks:
For Continued Success in Leadership*



Are we fixed about becoming someone? Isn't the entire effort of life about arriving at one sure way of living? Recently I was talking to a friend and she shared about some of her behaviors at work which were not bringing results. She is on a path of slowing down at work and was mentioning how slowing down, not pushing for deadlines has resulted in one of the projects getting delayed. However, she said "I'm not going back to my old ways of being—pushy, dominating, using the management's support to get things done and so on". Surely, she had moved the needle in terms of her behaviors of becoming less oppressive on herself and others. She felt that it brought her peace of mind, but I observed this new way of being was becoming a fixed way. At that moment, the metaphor that struck me—she was earlier on a bench, hard, painful and fixed and now with her 'transformed ways' she is on a sofa, soft, comfortable, yet fixed.

As I ruminated on what she said, what emerged for me was that even in the path of personal transformation often one can get stuck to the changed state as a way of being and once again get entangled with it.

The lesson I learnt and share here is that of fluidity. So in the path of transformation one must start

realizing the limitedness of anything that one creates as a virtue.

It is about being in the now, feeling what is emerging and play our part of bringing alive what is emerging from the limitlessness of the moment.

So as we live our day-to-day, let us keep asking ourselves:

1. Am I fixed?
2. What am I fixed to?
3. How many times I act out from fixed ways (even if it is considered virtuous in the society we live)?
4. What is the moment calling out to me?

Fluidity allows us to tap into grace.

Let it come. Get out of your own way.

Let fluidity precede fixedness. And fluidity emerges when we are empty.

When we stop carrying ourselves as a personality but as a possibility that the moment bestows us.

"Life can be found only in the present moment. The past is gone, the future is not yet here, and if we do not go back to ourselves in the present moment, we cannot be in touch with life."

—Thich Nhat Hanh

Yours Energetically

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

She can be contacted at bhuvaneshwari@teamthink.co.in for arranging Positive Energy training and Coaching sessions.

STREETS TO SUCCESS



Dreams and destiny, whether they cross paths or not, it happens to be for a good reason. “At least, I knew I was doing good!” laughs Dr. Mohammed Rafiuddin, Founder of Hyderabad Council of Human Welfare (HCHW) in Hyderabad, Telangana. Brought up in the city of Hyderabad, much like most other students of his time, Mohammed aspired to be a doctor. His rank led him to the only private college in the city at that time. “Everything made me wait. My college was prohibited from admitting students for that year. So I had to wait for a year and repeat my entrance exam. I aspired to be a doctor so the idea of waiting did not scare or bother me,” he recalls.

One year was a long time for Mohammed’s family, who convinced him to take up a Bachelor’s Degree in Science. Just when he had made up his mind to take up BSc, his cousin suggested the idea of joining a professional course in Social Work. “Out of the blue, somebody told me I could study to do something good for society. I was taken aback but eventually wanted to try. I still held on to the thought of giving my medical entrance after a year. But, the one year was life changing for me. Although amused by the idea of being a professional social worker, I felt belonged here,” says Mohammed.

Graduating as a University Topper and securing a Gold Medal, Mohammed was very observant of initiatives in the city and mapped issues, contexts and opportunities to intervene. “At once, it may all seem part of a whole which is true! But, to address these issues, resources restrict our focus. With the holistic picture in mind, it is very intriguing to learn how a social worker decides on a specific approach or strategy,” says Mohammed, who was also aware of the distance NGOs maintained from professional social workers. With field experience, he felt the need to establish his own organisation to be able to act independently. “I did not undermine others’ work. But, what if I wanted to do things or approach a situation in a different way? My organisation would give me that space. That’s why I established HCHW even before completing my Master’s degree,” admits Mohammed. HCHW was founded in 1990 with a vision to rescue, rehabilitate and mainstream children living on the streets. Mohammed took on the responsibility of his NGO with ease. Challenges were plenty when he started. His patience, perseverance and small but dedicated team managed to cross one hurdle after another. His college project with street children made him realise that they were capable, responsible, ready to take on challenges, but lacked direction. He wanted HCHW to fill this gap. “The best thing about social work profession is that each individual comes with his or her own skill set and perspective. I have spent three



The way CSIM worked was in itself a big lesson for me. The ease with which staff can fill in the shoes of each other is something I learnt from here.

decades in this sector, but this thought continues to amuse me,” says Mohammed.

With each child, HCHW also grew in its capacity. As children grew, HCHW began to look at other factors that could help them live an independent life. With street children, Mohammed insists, it is a long journey. It takes time and lot of effort to prove themselves against the place they are from — the streets. They have to prove themselves against all the stereotypes, biases and prejudices. HCHW did all that was possible to keep the children motivated and focussed. Over 40,000 children have been mainstreamed in schools after brief bridge school programmes and more than 20,000 children have been repatriated with their families. Skill development and youth empowerment programs, with a specific focus on children from poor neighbourhoods turned the tide. “While caring for street children is underway, it is also crucial to look at the prevention of children landing on streets. So, poor neighbourhoods with migrants, marginalised population and orphaned children had to be looked at,” he says.

DMR International School was established under HCHW’s management to educate children from these areas. Ensuring quality education for marginalised

children further opened inroads for skill development of youth in a variety of vocations, including banking and insurance services. Younger children in schools, older teenagers engaged in skill training, women trained in vocations to provide alternate livelihood opportunities — HCHW attempted to address a gamut of issues that bought children to streets. “Once the child is on the street, it becomes their identity,” laments Mohammed. From an institution with less than 20 children, HCHW has transformed into a multi-faceted organisation with a strong field presence, facilitated by the beneficiaries themselves. “Their participation is the symbol of our success,” he adds. A rehabilitation centre, mobile clinic, two skill development centres, day school for marginalised children and a wide range of collaboration with national and international organisations — HCHW is a resource centre in itself.

CSIM helped Mohammed see the value of management lessons in his field. “Managing human resources in my field is a challenge. Sustaining a good team that shares the values of the institution is extremely important and difficult too. The way CSIM worked was in itself a big lesson for me. The ease with which staff can fill in the shoes of each other is something I learnt from here. Keeping the whole team informed about work in all spheres is an art and CSIM taught me the nuances of both internal and external communication,” shares Mohammed.

Shanmuga Priya.T

CHANGING HUES: AWAKEN THE QUEEN WITHIN

Sheltering Tree – embracing and accepting

The car wheeled out slowly from the driveway with Padma on the steering wheel. She applied brakes when she saw Reena walking along the apartment wall.

“Hey, Reena! Not seen you last week. How are you? All well?”

“Hello, Aunt!” Reena’s eyes lit up with a beaming smile. “I am fine. Sorry, studying for exams and haven’t stepped out other than classes at college. Today is my last exam, and am free this evening!”

“Good! If you are free, do you want to join me at 4pm for the school alumni meet? I’ll go to the clubhouse straight from work and you can come there after college. You know, Reena, we are meeting after nearly 40 years!”

“Wonderful, Aunt. If I am allowed, nothing like it. It should be so much fun and excitement. I truly want to come, and maybe I will get a story for my book tonight. Wah! Sounds like a plan,” said Reena.

“Okay! See you at 4pm. Ping me when you reach the reception area and I will take you in.”

It was 4pm. Loud chatter filled the room, and small groups stood in the clubhouse’s elegantly decorated old-time antique room which was set up during the British era. The furniture appeared to be refurbished, keeping the ambience intact. As the men and women walked in, one by one hesitatingly, there were loud screams of names with hugs and shaking hands. Interestingly, most had come with butterflies in their heart seeking to meet the yester-year friends with an undying hope of going back to their school days and rewinding the clock for at least a few hours in their otherwise robotic everyday lives.

“Where are Vinoda and Raju,” asked Sheela.

“You should know. You were her best friend in school,” quipped Padma.

Sheela smiled, adding, “Interesting, none of us has seen or met Vinoda after she left school. I bumped into her once before I moved to Delhi post marriage. My aunt told me she is a Psychologist now! Can you believe it?”

“I only remember her thick hair, always grinning mischievous face. She was a real naughty girl and difficult to handle by all teachers! Most days she was punished by visiting the Principal’s room or standing outside the classroom. She must be taking out a leaf from her own school life to learn to be a psychologist,” Suma commented.

“Hey, look! Is that Vinoda? God! She has changed, but the smile is the same,” Sheela exclaimed and quickly moved towards the door to welcome Vinoda.

In strode a huge lady tall, heavy, black trousers and a slightly oversized shirt, cap partially covering stylish short hair and no makeup face, looking confident and a broad smile on her face. “Hey,



guys!” boomed a rough voice, and she gave a pat on Padma’s back. The room went silent for a few seconds. Sheela whispered to Padma, “Vinoda has totally changed? But why that manly outfit? She is so different I don’t know how to relate.”

Suma intervened, “from what I know, she has been through the most challenging times in life and stood firm in the development sector work. I think she’s single and lives with her brothers.”

“No boyfriends too? Is she fine? Still human?” joked Mahesh.

With a slight annoyance, Padma cut the conversation, “Hey, there is enough time to get to know each other. No assumptions. Come on, why pick on her?”

Reena was looking at the reaction of others and at Vinoda, who had stolen the

attention completely. Vinoda’s difference had fascinated her, and she wanted to know more. There was continuous chattering in triads and diads through the starters and soup, each catching up with the other. Rakesh drew the attention of all and suggested, “Hey, let us all share our journey from when we had bid goodbye to school life to who we are now.”

Reena sat in attention when Vinoda began to share.

Vinoda, while at primary school, was the teachers pick for all wrong reasons and eternally in and out of class for the mischief she did. Somehow no one was able to control, dissuade or dampen her energy. She was a happy-go-lucky girl, least interested in studying but immense energy to play the entire day. She was an Army man’s daughter and a sister to two

brothers, one elder and one younger. Her Dad lived most of the time on the border. Therefore, her mom lived with her three interesting bachelor brothers, unique with strong educational background, knowledgeable and activists of their own accord. Vinoda was totally influenced by them, and they were the father figure in her growing years. Her mom was a loving homemaker, large-hearted and most loved by her. Vinoda now says, perhaps she was slightly on an autism spectrum. But no teacher was willing to understand and appreciate her talents. Her academic performance was below average. She was sidelined, scolded and pulled up after every test and exam. Vinoda’s parents decided to change her school after a failure in primary school. Luck favoured her when she entered a girls school where academics was not the only priority. Her talents to sing, act and speak were recognized and nurtured. Her confidence grew, and she went on to become an active, focused student. Her three uncles encouraged her spiritual self and took her to bhajans and group congregations. The political, social and cultural thoughts and rich discussions at home filled Vinoda’s life abundantly.

When she was in her twenties, an unfortunate incident rendered her able-bodied elder brother with a mental illness diagnosed with lifelong care and support. The mom and her uncles were ageing too. Vinoda was disappointed with the way her brother was going through treatment. She took up psychology as her subject of specialization. When she realized her brother can never marry and have his own family, she chose to be single. She decided not to get married and take care of her brothers, uncles, and parents. Marriage, she felt, would be her distraction. She loved her family too much to accommodate another family and move to be a part of them. There were some possible alliances her parents discussed and pushed her to consider. She met some loving young guys who were prospective grooms for her. She was not willing to negotiate her love for her brothers with anyone else. Her bachelor uncles support was garnered. Vinoda’s emotional needs were surrounding her family members. Her firmness was near to adamancy, and her mom knew it was better to allow her to have her life the way she wanted. Vinoda grew to stand as the Tree that will shelter everyone in the family.

In the evening, Vinoda said to Padma, “If you pursue a thought 24 hours passionately, there is no need for marriage to fulfil that life. The thought that everyone is transient and I need to love and live in the present moment is sufficient for me to know that all my needs are momentary. Surprisingly, my physical needs have always been



subservient to my spiritual longings.”

The actual path of transformation and evolution thus began. Initial corporate life gave Vinoda the economic stability and freedom to take care of her brothers' needs. Soon in a few years, she began questioning the value of the work she performed day after day. She had, in the meanwhile, started her own NGO and fundraised for education and health needs for the poor and needy. She spent a lot of time and energy seeking avenues to run her NGO.

But it didn't last long. Vinoda met with an accident, causing a brain injury where only surgery could save her. She had to

close her NGO and grabbed the first opportunity to step into the development sector. This took her to work in villages, smaller towns, live in challenging places and fight for women rights. The activist streaks peeped into Vinoda's personality. Being a good looking single woman became the biggest bane. She was put into situations where protecting her integrity and safety was foremost. Vinoda changed, sporting a new look, short hair, manly outfits, being hard and straightforward with grit that let any man fear to come near her. She fought against gender bias, non-acceptance of the city-bred upbringing. She fell into several

bouts of illness and lung infections. Nevertheless, Vinoda continued undeterred. She had found her comfort zone in her outlook and personality.

After a decade and a half of struggle, Vinoda finally bid goodbye and returned to her home to set up a counselling centre. This was something she had always wanted to do. Having been a certified Psychologist, she began her own centre, helping and supporting people in need. Her mom reached the heavenly abode quite early. Vinoda became the only motherly figure to take care of all the five men in the family. Her writings, lectures, keynote speeches, voice for the downtrodden rose high, bringing her the name and fame. Saving, empowering and finding economic stability for women in distress as well as abused and abandoned women were the ongoing activities. Her warm heart beats for the myriad souls that need solace. Her house was always open, and people from various walks of life sought her help.

Driving back home, Reena was thinking of Vinoda. “Aunty, it is not easy to live a life on our own terms. Vinoda has genuinely inspired me to think deeply about how I see my life and what I want to live by. She has created a new path for others.” Padma had a warmth spread across her heart. She said, “Vinoda is a pure soul within the system. She reminds me of a pearl inside the shell. So much love and affection with a hard exterior. She thinks she is a recluse living in the present and giving her best every day to everyone she meets.”

*Dr. Kalpana Sampath
Illustrations by Pratiksha P*



Reflect:

- Do I own my life and the path that I navigate?
- How much do I embrace the world?
- To what extent do I define how I want to live and the values that govern my existence?

Selfishness



Once a hungry crow discovered a mussel and tired hard to break it open with his beak so that he could get at the flesh. He was struggling without success when a carrion-crow came along and said, “I advise you to use a little strategy, my friend. Carry the mussel into the air as high as you can fly, and then let it drop down on this rock, “You will find that it will break open.”

The crow thanked him heartily and thinking it to be a good plan, flew off. But while he was on the wing, the carrion-crow remained on the ground and ate the mussel himself when it dropped down.



Explicit Learning

- Kindness masked with selfishness is an unkind act.
- The carrion-crow gained the mussel but lost a friend by being selfish.
- Some people are kind to their neighbours for their own sake.



Introspective Learning

- What is the nature of ‘Selfishness’?
- Where does my selfishness originate from?
- How do I deal with my selfishness?

AN ODE TO SOCIAL WELFARE & DEVELOPMENT



Manavlok. . .Marathwada Navnirman Lokayat; where ‘Navnirman’ means Innovation and ‘Lokayat’ stands for Community of People. Established in 1982 as a Non-profit organization for social welfare & development of Rural communities, Manavlok has always been clear about its mission and its goals. The aspect that sets Manavlok apart from others of its kind, is their unshakeable belief that one needs to provide means of development as opposed to putting money in the hands of the people.

Aniket Dwarkadas Lohiya, The Secretary at Manavlok states, “The key to doing good work is proper “Strategic Planning” & the key to successful strategic planning is “Participation”; We at Manavlok, strongly believe in equal participation & ensure we involve everyone, including the board, management & key stakeholders, in our meetings. In order to achieve equality in the lives of women and bring about positive change in the lives of landless laborers &

marginal farmers, Manavlok has and will always be prepared to take a lead role in campaigns, agitations & protests wherever necessary.”

Over the years, at Manavlok, wholesome participation & collective local leaderships have played an important role in mobilization & optimum utilization of resources. “Employing local Human Resources must always take priority over Hiring of outside assistance,” says Lohiya. Saying this, it is no wonder that one of the core beliefs of Manavlok is “Its people are its Wealth” and their Health & welfare is of great importance since if the people are taken care of, they will, in turn take care of their environment.

Mr. Lohiya adds, “Since ignorance and poverty are enemies of the community and our environment; awareness programmes & welfare schemes are staunchly promoted by Manavlok. We believe in sustainable development in association with natural development & ecological restoration.”

Manavlok is also committed to the cause of women empowerment & has a dedicated women-oriented wing; Manaswini Mahila Prakalp (MMP), that works towards fighting violence and discrimination against women. Since its inception, MMP has undertaken several programmes promoting gender equality & women empowerment. It also provides free legal aid & counselling for women facing the aforesaid social evils. The centre also educates women & their families about the Laws prevalent in our country, for domestic violence, women safety, and women empowerment, which instills confidence among these women & improves their mental well-being.

It’s associate arm, Manaswini Mahila Nagarik Patpedhi (MMNP), is a women’s co-operative credit society, which has been set up to provide quick and low-interest credit (micro-finance) to women and motivate them to start small-scale income-generating activities. The ideology behind MMNP is to empower women & inculcate the

value of entrepreneurship & self-reliance among them.

Another of its associate arm viz: Savitri Mahila Udyog (SMU) is an enterprise set up with an aim to improve the status of underprivileged, destitute & deprived women in society. The SMU works relentlessly towards creating income-generating jobs & small-scale business opportunities for women, addressing domestic grievances and acting as a support system for oppressed women. The SMU also helps these women by providing necessary assistance in improving their children’s health & education.

Lohiya adds “We have also formed a Community support Group at the Village level. Currently, this activity is being implemented in over 50 villages of the Ambajogai and Dharur blocks of the Beed district. To date, more than 7,000 cases have been registered at this centre, out of which 70% of the cases have been settled.”

Through Manavlok’s ‘Shelter Home’ initiative,

over 400 needy women are given shelter and provided medical and legal aid on a regular basis. “They are assisted with psychological support and are provided knowledge about laws and provisions related to women to enable them to take their own decisions” says Lohiya.

Manavlok operates with a clear Mission & sets Targets for itself to achieve. Some of its most important Targets being: To end Distress migration, Empower poor and marginal farmers, Empower women for inclusive development, Restore ecological balance, mobilize people, Improve water safety and security, and Bring value and respect to the lives of farmers.

The organization carries out campaigns for gender equality and women’s protection from domestic violence at Villages of Beed district in Maharashtra. “Community support groups are formed in each village having 8 women and men members to prevent domestic violence at the village level. Workshops are conducted regularly



at each village level to assist & educate the families,” informs Lohiya.

It is very important to note that Manavlok not only works within Maharashtra but beyond it as well. “We have conducted monitoring & surveys on campaigns like ‘Total Sanitation Campaign’ and ‘Nirmala Gram Puraskar’ in states of UP, MP & Gujarat. We remain open to working across India,” says Lohia

It is worthwhile to note that many projects initiated by Manavlok are adopted by Government agencies as Policy Programmes. However, the organization’s Baliraja Cooperative Society which provided 1,367 families with small and marginal landholdings with financial holdings, will always stay close to its heart.

“Fertilizers and seeds worth about Rs. 1.73 crore were provided to 114 farmer groups in 57 villages at the time of distribution. These farmers agreed to repay the amount to the organization from the sale proceeds of their produce. Out of all the farmers who received this support, 654 beneficiary families were women-run households,” states Lohiya.

One of the main reasons why the project is close to the hearts of those who run Manavlok is that it has lasted all three decades. “In the absence of a recovery officer, our beneficiaries have paid back the total amount upon a simple follow-up, which proves that, if you help the farmers in times of crisis, it is they who faithfully return the favour,” says Lohiya, “Even after the Government implemented two major Debt waivers in the past, not a single beneficiary in the past 30 years, has asked us for a “payment waiver”. The most rewarding feeling for all who work at Manavlok is feeling of satisfaction

that comes from helping people during such exceptional times,” says a beaming Lohiya.

Manavlok has always been recognized for its work & efforts towards community welfare. Mr. Aniket Lohiya, secretary at Manavlok has been recently awarded the National Water Warrior Award 2020 (West Zone) -IInd prize and The Late Shankar Rao Chavan Jalbhushan Award 2020- IInd prize for his leadership in Manavlok’s work & efforts towards Drought solutions.

Manavlok has worked against Drought volumes of 12,076,425 Cu.m. increasing storage capacity for 12076425000 litres of water. The silt excavated is spread over 7200 acres. Minor and sub minor canals are cleaned up to 597 km. thus helping irrigate land even in the tail region of the canal.

To date, Manavlok has been able to reach out to over 4,468 Villages with their welfare schemes & development programmes and aims to reach another 4,000 or more villages in the next 10 years.

“Manavlok was set up with a dream of achieving equality in the lives of women, to empower the women, landless laborers & farmers and improve the lives of their children. Though being a humungous task, We at Team Manavlok are glad, that gradually but consistently, step by step, we have been able to work towards our dream by assisting the rural communities for all these years. We strongly believe that with the undying support of Manavlok’s associates, sponsors, followers and Institutions like yourselves that recognize & appreciate our efforts; we will tirelessly continue to do so in the future years to come,” maintains Lohiya.

PEDAL TO THE METAL FOR GENDER JUSTICE

Getting into the driver's seat of a car and ferrying passengers around the streets of Delhi shouldn't seem like a radical act.

But for Savita and her fellow drivers, it is a mini-revolution on wheels: breaking barriers to enter a profession deemed unsuitable for women, and gaining financial independence in the process.

The catalyst? Azad Foundation, a Delhi-based non-profit that trains women from low-income backgrounds to gain skills in "non-traditional" livelihoods, namely, driving. The driving programme, called Women with Wheels, is one of several ways through which Azad advocates for gender equality in India.

Savita's drive for change began in 2013 when she met a volunteer doing outreach for Azad (which means 'liberated' in the Urdu language) in her neighbourhood.

The timing was opportune — at the time, her husband would beat her regularly, especially if he had been drinking.

"The first time he beat me up he was drunk," shares Savita, now 27. "I went to my father-in-law and told him that I'd been beaten up. He told me to just bear with it, because that is what is supposed to happen to women."

Young and afraid, Savita turned to her parents for help. "My husband heard about this and he came and punched me so brutally that I was unconscious for two hours."

"I survived the blow but I knew I was done."

THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

The women who come to Azad — wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, primary school-educated or college graduates, sole breadwinners or working for the first time — are all united by one goal: to take charge of their futures.

"The communities we come from, people are not educated and are of a patriarchal mindset," Savita, who has a college education, says bluntly. "[We] have the odds set against us."

Communities like hers are where Azad does most of their outreach, through volunteers who visit various neighbourhoods to share about Azad's programmes and impact, and encourage their participation.

It was through meeting these volunteers — called community mobilisers — that Savita found the first step out of her abusive marriage.

She enrolled in Women with Wheels in hopes of becoming a driver, but did not tell her family, as "no one would have allowed it". "I lied that I was taking computer classes," says Savita.

The effort paid off. "After I got my first job and I parked my car outside our house, my mother had tears of joy and my father was also very happy."

SHIFTING GENDER EQUALITY INTO HIGH GEAR

While women are not forbidden to drive in India, it is rare to see women in the commercial driving sector outside of all-female private taxi services.

Despite Venkadarath Saritha entering Delhi's public bus service as its first-ever female bus driver in 2015, she remains an outlier five years on, while bias against women driving professionally remains widespread.

Putting a woman in the driver's seat is not just about equal access to livelihoods, but it is also about changing mindsets, according to Azad COO Shrinivas Rao.

"What Azad does is to go and work with these women and make them understand their life counts. We support them to know what are the livelihood options available to them, and they can do whatever they want to do in their lives," says Shrinivas. "So they are not destined to live in the limited space." He notes that livelihood options for resource-poor women tend to be traditional in nature, such as sewing and embroidery. "Non-traditional livelihoods is something that challenges women to go out, and works against gender stereotypes. They give them agency, and give them [a] chance to grow and empower themselves," he says.

When Azad started its Women with Wheels programme,



scepticism abounded. Parents questioned whether it was safe for women to drive, while companies did not want to hire women drivers. "Most of the market, they gave us a number of reasons why women cannot be drivers" shares Shrinivas. To ensure its trainees would be able to find work after completing the programme, Azad started Sakha Consulting Wings, a social enterprise to connect the women to driving jobs.

Through Sakha, over 1,000 women have been hired to date, driving for airlines, embassies, hotels and as private chauffeurs. The Delhi Commission for Women also employs Sakha drivers to pick up survivors of violence who call their helpline. The women trained by Azad can earn anything between Rs10,000 to Rs40,000 [US\$136 to \$545] each month, and many of them have become the primary breadwinners in their families. The programme has expanded beyond Delhi to Jaipur and Kolkata, and Azad is exploring launching it in Chennai.

Along with driving skills, Azad also holds sessions to teach trainees about women's issues, gender and sexuality, patriarchy, and women's rights. It also runs a Men for Gender Justice programme to engage men on their role in challenging gender-based inequality.

Says Savita, "While I was undergoing my training with Azad, I was also figuring out how to come out of my abusive marriage. The empowerment training we got at Azad has helped me make my own decisions."

SLOWING DOWN BUT NOT STOPPING FOR COVID-19

Roadblocks to gender equality can take many forms; as COVID-19 spread around the world, India went into a strict lockdown in March, plunging livelihoods into disarray. "Almost all women drivers are left without any work," says Shrinivas, noting some women faced more violence at home. "Lockdown has also put many people under misery, food insecurity." After identifying which were the most vulnerable communities, Azad delivered food and sanitation supplies like masks to the households most in need. It also created resources to teach households how to apply for social assistance from the government.

Helping to drive these efforts were some of the women drivers trained by Azad over the years. "What we thought is that why don't we use the energy of these women drivers, the leadership of these drivers to involve them in relief operations," says Shrinivas.

Among them is Geeta, who helped to coordinate the delivery of the relief packages. "When there was no work and everything was shut, Azad came up with the scheme of delivering packages," shares Geeta. "Who has lost their jobs, who needs help, we looked into all this and made a list and relief was given to them."

The women drivers themselves also received relief packages from Azad, and were paid their salaries. "I wonder what would have happened to me and my family

in the pandemic if it hadn't been for my association with Azad," adds Geeta.

MAPPING HER OWN ROUTE

With her husband struggling to make ends meet, Geeta started taking sewing lessons in hopes of helping support her family. It was at the sewing centre that she learnt about the Women with Wheels programme.

"I would look at the pamphlet daily and [be amazed] that women can also drive... I couldn't believe it but still just looking at the pamphlet gave me a lot of happiness," recalls Geeta. Three years later, she saw women drivers featured on television. "I was shocked that these are the same people who had come to the stitching centre and look where they have reached now!" shares Geeta. "The very next day I went and enrolled myself in Azad."

Having been a driver since 2013, Geeta is the main breadwinner of her family. I feel very elated that I am a woman driver and I confidently help other women safely reach their homes," she says with pride.

Calling the women "revolutionaries", Shrinivas says, "They have not only changed their own life but the life of their family, community, and brought in significant change in the ecosystem, because now the ecosystem is accepting women drivers." Savita, who has navigated her separation from her husband with the guidance of Azad, notes that her parents have journeyed with her in her growth. "Whatever restrictions they had placed on me they don't treat my sisters the same way and so there's been a lot of change in their thinking," she shares.

With a new job on the horizon as the lockdown in India eases, she plans to keep learning and take on more opportunities. "Our lives have been full of struggles but this is not the end, this is a beginning," she says. "We still have many roads to travel and take many many more women with us and move forward."

ABOUT AZAD FOUNDATION

Based in Delhi, Azad Foundation is an NGO advocating for gender justice and women empowerment by ensuring women's access to non-traditional livelihoods, namely driving. Working mainly with underprivileged women through its Women with Wheels programme, it trains women not only in driving skills, but also teaches them about their rights and gender equality. It also has leadership programmes for women, as well as a Men for Gender Justice initiative to engage men on gender equality issues. Over the years, Azad has reached more than 600,000 women and families through its outreach work, and helped over 1,000 women find work as drivers through its social enterprise, Sakha Consulting Wings.

*A story by Our Better World
(the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore
International Foundation)*

www.ourbetterworld.org

MAKING AGRI-PRENEURS OUT OF FARMERS



Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh ranks second in terms of aridity, among all the districts in India, having an average annual rainfall of 526 mm. Its climate is characterised by prolonged dry spells, followed by few and irregular days of rainfall. Anantapur has been consistently facing drought conditions over the past many years, causing severe stress on the local economy, especially agriculture.

In the present decade, almost six years were rainfall deficient, resulting in severe drought conditions. These characteristics have forced the farmers in Anantapur to cultivate only those crops which can withstand drought conditions and can be sustained with limited water resources. The rich crop diversity in the district (particularly in millets and pulses that are naturally drought resistant) has eroded over time, giving way to monocropping of groundnut.

Not just Anantapur, farmers across the state continue to struggle to make their ends meet. The situation is even worse for women farmers. As per a survey conducted by Landesa in 2013, only 13 percent of women surveyed, whose parents own land, said they have inherited land or expect to inherit land from their parents. Women inheriting land is so uncommon that 69 percent of the women surveyed said they did not know of a single case where a woman had inherited land from her parents. On the other hand, proportion of women agricultural labour is more than male labour in all the districts of Andhra. Yet, they are at the receiving end of injustice and inequality.

One organisation is trying to change this. Started in 2001, Mahila Abhivruddhi Society (APMAS) by Mr CS Reddy aims to empower women, farmers, and other marginalised communities. It works towards strengthening Self Help Groups for holistic development of the

marginalised communities.

In Anantapur, APMAS started Bhulakshmi FPO which implemented a community based seed system to decentralise the seeds for rain fed agriculture. Seed producers were linked with seed consumers and high quality seeds of multiple crops, and not just groundnuts were produced and supplied. This is just one out of many examples of community-level change APMAS has brought.

What they do?

APMAS expertises in promoting, training and mentoring women SHGs and SHG federations. They also work closely with farmer groups to create agriculture-based livelihoods and promotion of Farmer Producer Organisations (FPO). The organisation has set a momentum for promoting farming as an enterprise.

“Farmers face several issues today, like lack of remunerative prices, unavailability of quality inputs, high cost of cultivation, lack of access to technology and information. Promotion of sustainable Farmer Producer Organisations has emerged as an effective solution to the farmers’ issues in the past decade,” Padmasri Nivedita, Project Coordinator at APMAS, said.

Ensuring the sustainability and business growth of these organisations is a major issue as agriculture is not perceived as a business.

They provide valuable knowledge and crucial information, build social capital and provide capacity building to the marginalised community. The organisation also offers advocacy, monitoring, research, and gender mainstreaming through its various programs. “We have also developed self-learning modules on collective marketing, primary processing and



secondary processing by FPOs,” said CS Reddy, Founder & CEO of APMAS.

The key idea is to make the marginalised community self-reliant and earn through dignity. APMAS has not only promoted over 47 FPOs in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana but is also a leading resource support agency (RSA) of NABARD in Andhra Pradesh & Telangana for training & providing business incubation support to FPOs and for capacity building across the country

The impact

APMAS through its various initiatives has brought the behavioural change in the community. The farmers now see farming as a viable and profitable business and themselves as agripreneurs. The people associated with the organisation have not just witnessed economic prosperity but also improved health, better nutrition, and gender equality in a thick patriarchal structure.

APMAS has trained over 4 lakh professionals and para professionals in SHG and agriculture sector. They have reached out to over 60,000 farm households through FPOs and conducted over 60 research studies and engaged in policy advocacy.

They are also directly promoting 73 FPOs in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana,

including 8 exclusive women FPOs. The FPOs are engaged in various business activities such as collective marketing of inputs and outputs, supply of vegetables to processing industries etc. Through the business taken up by the FPOs, the member farmers are able to avail quality inputs at competitive prices, Nivedita claims.

“Over the twenty years, APMAS has made a successful, yet a very challenging journey, in realising its vision for the empowerment of marginalised women and deprived communities and thereby contributing to poverty reduction initiatives,” said Nivedita.

Thanks to APMAS, several women farmers have found economic and social benefits. They have been able to not just become financially independent, but also enhance their social status in the community.

APMAS has direct presence in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Bihar states and indirectly works in other states through partnerships. The team consists of 105 dedicated staff members (including 15 consultants) who are highly qualified in the streams of agriculture, institution building, capacity building, gender, research etc.

The challenges and road ahead

The organisation receives funding from various national and international donors, including the state and central government and corporates. In spite of regular support from different agencies, the organisation continues to struggle to function smoothly. The legal framework and lack of availability of domain experts are their biggest challenges.

“In the future, APMAS plans to deepen its work in terms of promotion and strengthening of people’s institutions. It will further expand its work towards wealth creation and income increase in rural, urban and tribal areas,” shared Nivedita. Furthermore, it will also focus on creating livelihood options and improving quality of life of marginalized communities through an integrated development approach.

“Over the 20 years of journey we have learned the importance of partnerships and collaborations in implementing development activities at ground level. It is very important to bring synergies among different players who are working towards the empowerment of marginalized communities in order to maximise the benefit,” she said.

APMAS is also working with the government to combat COVID-19 and to provide relief to the communities in the time of pandemic at the state level.

If you want to support APMAS, you can do so by either volunteering with them or by providing them financial support for various activities. To know more, check out their website (www.apmas.org).

Shreya Pareek

SELF-RELIANCE IN SLUMS

We all know how poverty gave birth to slums. We also know how slum populations struggle to manage their basic needs. We have seen the impact of slum rehabilitation projects too. But, Mr. E. Marisamy, Founder-President of APJ Abdul Kalam People's Welfare Association in Chennai, wishes to see self-reliant slum communities. "I have always felt an ineffable sense of insecurity prevailing in slum communities. They don't feel settled at all. Yet, they are a potent human force determined to live better lives. I came to Kannagi Nagar when I was 28 years old. From an outsider, I am now a good friend and guide to many students here. I have seen them transform from being directionless to having big aspirations. Participation and capacity building are powerful tools in building the confidence of any community. I witnessed their potential here," says Marisamy.

As one of the largest resettlement colonies in the city, population here has had to face displacement from job, education, health care and almost everything that they had organised in their previous addresses. As sociologists point out, displacement made them poorer than they were before. Women's labour participation fell drastically. Education was the only hope but aspirations were amiss. Marisamy started by teaching neighbourhood kids. Interacting with them, he learnt issues in the area and why they remained unaddressed. His interactions widened, some more friends joined him and together they addressed one issue after another. "Not that we found solutions. We attempted to show the people that problems can be solved if appropriate steps were taken. This helped build trust and in roads. We wanted to do more," he adds.

Marisamy and team were amused to see how residents enjoyed, valued every program they organised. They felt the need for an organisation to plan strategically and introduce new futuristic programs. Dr APJ Abdul Kalam People's Welfare Association was registered in 2016 and education became the team's focus. "Engaging in education allowed us to analyse everybody's perspective and also communicate effectively about changes the residents must aspire for," recalls Marisamy. There was hardly any little place dedicated for studying in those small tenements. So, the first effort was to organise a place for studying without any disturbance.

Where alcoholism and drug abuse is visible, a place for studying is extremely important to keep the younger ones focussed. "We thought this was important to check dropout rates," he says. Marisamy approached a nearby school and organised evening tuition classes. Good results in the first batch itself demonstrated the need and effect of education support activities. Soon more classes and students were covered.



Local police offered security for the evening tuitions. The positivity encouraged team to dream bigger. "As the first generation of graduates were ready, the association also geared up to train them for Public Service Commission examinations. We wanted to ensure that they got employed. Only then it was possible for the next generation to follow suit," he reiterates.

Vocational skills like plumbing, electric repairs were also imparted with no age barriers. In doing so, they ensured that children who had dropped out also got a new opportunity to excel. Informal education for grandmothers 60 years and older was a surprising success as there were more takers than anticipated. "These grandmothers were once enterprising workers. Their valuable labour had fed their families. As displacement forced them to adapt, they lost their former contacts and enthusiasm. And today, when there is a chance to learn something new and upgrade themselves, they readily accepted it," smiles Marisamy. He remains overwhelmed by their take on issues in the resettlement process. "I wish they were allowed to participate and express themselves. All their ideas and suggestions once again prove that participation, rather partnerships with beneficiary communities is a very powerful tool," he added.

Yoga, sports, self-defence, cultural programs are organised regularly to keep the children motivated. Students' enthusiasm has helped them and the



association reached new heights. Every opportunity, be it the Guinness book of records or World book of records, children have learnt that a genuine, dedicated attempt is the first step. 31 school and college students from Kannagi Nagar were a part of the team that got trained and made hundred satellites that weighed fifty grams. This satellite launch was a big event for entire Kannagi Nagar and people now see education as a path to their future. Marisamy and team are now in collaboration with three schools in Kannagi Nagar to expand their programs. "Step by step, we were able to figure our trajectory. Consistent guidance from Irai Anbu sir (an experienced IAS officer) has been a big supporting force," he adds.

Various art forms like parai are used to spread awareness on key issues like health, environment and people's participation in organising and

attending these programs has had a better impact on the outcomes too. "It makes it easier to get them to think about what they can do at a household level." The pandemic brought in new challenges and the association managed to do its part. Every day, food for 300 destitute people is being provided. They have reached 46,000 people so far. Also over 25 lakh rupees worth provisions have been distributed to nearly 6,000 people, who lost livelihood due to lockdown and its aftermath.

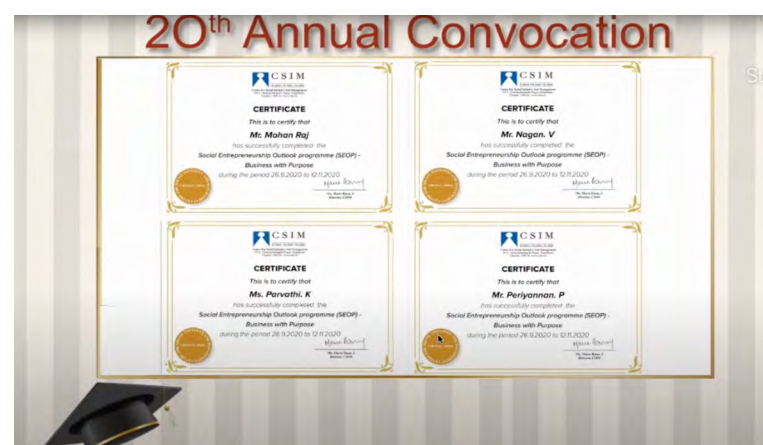
For an assistant director in the film industry, Marisamy finds his journey with the association rewarding and educative. He feels that his perspective on social change is evolving with experience and that the confidence he sees in Kannagi Nagar's children has helped him and the community dream bigger, together.

Shanmuga Priya.T

CSIM 20TH CONVOCATION



Dr. N.S. Rajan (Former CEO - IDFC Foundation & Group, CHRO at Tata Sons)



The 20th CSIM convocation was organised on 3rd July 2021 virtually with technical support from the Media Department of SSS Jain College, Chennai. The live event was broadcasted in CSIM Official YouTube channel.

The Chief Guest for the event was Dr. N.R. Rajan, Former CEO - IDFC Foundation and Group CHRO at Tata Sons.

Speaking on the occasion, he mentioned William Blake quote: To see a World in a Grain of Sand And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour and said how is it we are actually able to look at far scale changes in just one grain of sand which distinguishes our quest. Social Entrepreneurship is a noble aim and students who are now entering a special part of their lives are going to contribute towards nation building."

81 students who pursued the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme were awarded the Diplomas and 5 participants of Social Impact Practitioners Training who had completed writing of the report were awarded the Social Impact Practitioner Certificates.

The **PND pathfinder awards** were awarded to CSIM Alumni Mr. Muthu, Ms. Moni and Mr. Jagadeesan.

Mr. P.Muthu (PGDSIM 2015 Alumnus) is the Founder of SKY Foundation in Madhuranthagam, Chengalpattu district and focuses on welfare of differently abled people and tribal children in Madhuranthagam.

Ms. V Moni (PGDSIM 2018 Alumna) is the Founder of Punitha Arokiya Annai Charitable Trust, Villivakkam, Chennai. Her organisation focuses on welfare of the aged and transgender community. She is also involved in COVID relief work.

Mr. Jagadeesan. R (SEOP Alumnus) is the Founder of Vizhiththezhu Trust in Purasawalkam, Chennai. He registered an NGO Vizhiththezhu in 2008 that focuses on children's education, life skill education for youth. He also runs a home for urban homeless people along with Chennai corporation in Villivakkam, Chennai.

The Chief Guest also launched Unsung Beacons Vol. 10, a compilation of articles featured in Conversations 2019. The foreword for this book has been authored by Shri. Gagandeep Singh Bedi IAS.



Mrs. Latha Suresh
Trustee, MSDS



Mr. R Jagadeesan
18th Batch PGDSIM Student



Ms. Moni
6th Batch SEOP Student



Mr. P Muthu
15th Batch PGDSIM Student



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

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

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

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"CSR is here to stay and corporates are doing their best to meet this obligation."

Gayatri Subramaniam tells Marie Banu about the recent CSR Amendment Rules 2021.

Smt. Gayatri Subramaniam is the former Convenor of National Foundation of CSR (NFCRS under Ministry of Corporate Affairs) and Head – CSR for HDFC Life. She has co-founded international centre for socially responsible businesses (ICSRB) a think tank to provide all CSR and sustainability solutions to corporates. In addition to her role at ICSRB, she also sits on the Board of Association of Women in Business and mentor Women non-profits and Women Directors. She conducts capacity building of CSR teams and Directors for MNCs, Corporate and PSUs.

She has an academic and industrial experience of over 32 years and her main area of work is to contribute towards policy advisory service and undertake capacity building and knowledge dissemination initiatives in Corporate Social Responsibility.

Gayatri has been a part of the evolution of the new legislation on CSR in India representing IICA at various national stakeholders' consultations and has also represented IICA at various international forums. She is also on various advisory committees of leading Corporates and NGOs.

In an exclusive interview, Smt. Gayatri Subramaniam tells Marie Banu about the recent CSR Amendment Rules 2021 and its implications.

Do you perceive that CSR projects would contribute better to the socio-economic development of India?

Yes! CSR is here to stay and corporates are doing their best to meet this obligation. They need to establish mutually beneficial partnerships with implementing agencies and need to create win win situation by integrating their respective strengths together to find good csr projects and implement it effectively."

What Section 135 of the Companies Act is looking forward is a combination of Corporates and NGOs working towards development initiatives. The combination of the project management skills, professional attitude and funds from corporates amalgamated with the passion, connection and communication of NGOs with the community will certainly be beneficial. Believe me, this combination is really going to do wonders and will hopefully change the scenario of social economic development of India for the better.

Corporates are not expected to do CSR by themselves. How can

corporates identify NGO, Trust or Section 8 Company to network with?

True! Corporates are not expected to do CSR by themselves. They can either have their own foundation established as a Trust, Society or Section 8 Company or can use any such independent entity as their implementation partners, provided it has an established track record of three years.

The fact is that there is a huge trust deficit between the corporate and the NGOs. Therefore, corporates would definitely like to conduct a due diligence on the NGO partners before they engage them.

Do you think CSR will enable corporate employees to be sensitive to social needs and respond to it?

That is a very good question! Although the concept of CSR has been advocated for decades and is generally propagated by companies globally, argument on how CSR should be defined and implemented remains a contentious debate. This gap is problematic because corporates are generally being required to align with societal norms while generating financial returns and maintaining balance between the two becomes difficult at times.

Therefore Section 135 of the Companies Act has endeavored to bring CSR from backroom to boardroom. By doing so, many of the corporates have started thinking about CSR and also on how to implement it. Once they get involved in the process, the comfort level between corporate employees and community will increase, thereby resulting in the sensitivity to social needs and forcing them to respond to it.

What are the major social issues that you think that the CSR projects should focus upon?

In India, the gap between "have" and "have-not" is tremendous. The need is huge! Schedule VII of the Companies Act (which the companies have to follow) has taken care of almost all the major social issues on which the CSR projects could be focused upon. Other than this, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs through a clarification (issued on 18th June, 2015) has allowed "liberal interpretation" of Schedule VII.

However, any CSR project should be need based and should focus on all the stakeholders. A good CSR project should have a baseline survey, in consonance with the need of the beneficiaries; a specific timeline; defined objectives; clear milestones;

and specific output and outcomes to have a greater impact.

The Key issues in the recent CSR Amendment Rules 2021?

The "Companies (Corporate Social Responsibility Policy) Amendment Rules, 2021" released by Ministry of Corporate Affairs have further brought some major pathbreaking changes in the way the companies are looking at and are implementing their CSR mandate. Some of the changes are as follows:-

- Annual action plan for CSR by Board every year in addition to CSR policy
- Mandatory disclosures of CSR projects and activities on company's website
- Capital Asset acquisition and its holding restricted to three bodies broadly
- Carry forward and set off of CSR expenditure
- Transfer of unspent amount to government notified fund
- Impact Assessment for big CSR projects
- Mandatory registration of every entity intending to implement CSR activity with the Central Government by filing form CSR-1 electronically with the Registrar of Companies, w.e.f. April 1st, 2021
- Engagement of international organizations for designing, monitoring and evaluation of the CSR projects as well as for capacity building of personnel for CSR
- Up gradation in reporting formats of the Board Report of Companies

The amendments also lists a penalty clause for companies who fail to

disclose unspent amount in Annual Report on CSR or transfer the unspent amount relating to other than ongoing project in Fund Specified in Schedule VII within specified Time.

Will Social Audit of CSR programmes make reporting more effective?

CSR activities has become a critical part of the business strategy today and this is particularly important in India, since we are the first country to have legislated the need to undertake CSR spending and make CSR reporting mandatory under the Companies Act 2013.

As of now, the companies are required to constitute a CSR committee of the Board, make a CSR policy and undertake to spend two percent of their profits in pursuance of their policy. The companies are mandated to report in the prescribed manner on how they have spent and disclose reasons for not spending.

The Social Audit of CSR programmes would definitely make reporting more effective as social auditing would help to narrow down the gaps between vision/goal and reality, between efficiency and effectiveness. Social auditing would also be able to provide information for effective response to external claimants that make demands on the organization. The social audit would be able to bring out all the weaknesses and strengths of the organization's endeavors to social initiatives, thus bringing in more transparency and give room for further improvement if required.

