

Conversations Today

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About Bangalore Rural
Education and Development
Society and its programmes



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**"It would be ideal to have a
win-win situation where
both genders are walking
side by side."**

An exclusive interview with
Actor Rohini

From the Editor

Dear Friend,

None of us can predict what the next change—both within us and around us—is going to be. We are unaware of the unexpected opportunity that lies ahead of us that will change the meaning and existence of our lives. Isaac Asimov rightly said, “It is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be.”

Social entrepreneurs are also called change makers. Bringing about change in the society is an inevitable and continuous process for them. The need to bring about change without any violence is also their mantra for success. It is essential to recognize, reward and celebrate accomplishments of change agents as this will trigger more people to emulate them.

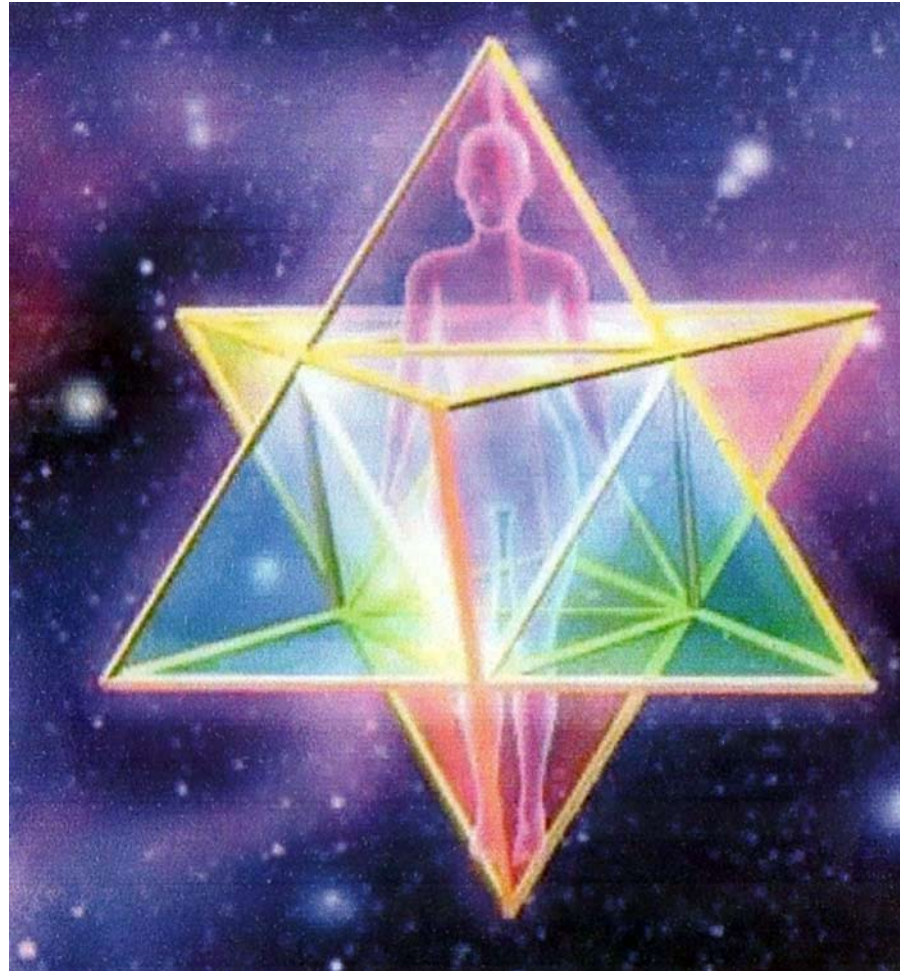
The inspiring stories of the young change agents Sam, Anand, Azhar and Chellakannu who are featured in this edition have just proved the point that changing the inner attitudes of one's minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives.

Happy reading!

Latha Suresh

Being a Leader: Unfolding the Spiritual Energy dimension

“When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy.” — Rumi



Being a Leader not because of a position or title given by others, but being a leader through sincere pursuit of knowing and leading oneself—this is the first step towards unfolding Spiritual Energy.

Spiritual energy means being with oneself, developing a practice of listening to oneself deeply, in a committed manner. Often this energy dimension is misunderstood. Most tend to think of spiritual energy as something esoteric. The common notion is that spiritual energy can only be experienced when one has grown old enough and evolved. However, fact is that all of us experience spiritual energy right through our lives, albeit fleetingly. The drawback is that neither do we recognize such experiences as spiritual nor are we able to make them more consistent and enduring. The journey of personal evolution is learning to become aware of such experiences and

practicing rituals that contribute to making such experiences enduring and consistent, until it becomes a ‘state of being’. Deepening one's awareness of spiritual energy converts it from an acquaintance to a dear friend, to finally becoming ‘the self’.

Finding the Leader within

When one tunes into tapping this dimension of energy, one can create a life program. Most of us live our life with programs given by our parents, our teachers, our peers, and incomplete life experiences. These programs are not meant for us and therefore we experience ‘bugs’ along the way. These bugs are energy blocks that impede our natural growth and flowering. We can remove these energy blocks and move ahead. However, a more sustainable way of living, is to create a program that does not have a bug in the first place. This is when

Spiritual Energy becomes an ally. When the spiritual energy dimension opens up, one can experience a ‘clean slate’ and the capacity to be in wonder, learn, do, experience, and discover living life. In such a state, the spiritual being is in a flow and is guided by the energy of life. Such beings radiate energy in their sheer presence.

When one starts leading oneself, then healing begins. Healing essentially means erasing old patterns, living life in a ‘light way’ so that even new patterns do not become heavy imprints.

How is this Leadership nurtured?

1. **Being with nature:** Nature is the purest form of energy and one can get in touch with their spiritual core when the environment around does not deplete energy. In fact, nature enriches and cleanses the being and provides a sanitized environment for energy to flow freely.
2. **Doing day-to-day activities mindfully:** Being completely present to the moment is an approach that not only helps complete the activity, but also gives the doer a true experience of that activity. When we experience something wholesomely, we generate energy for ourselves.
3. **Developing the ritual of meditation:** Silencing the mind gives an opportunity to go within and locate the seeds of creation. Energy stems from within and flows into our entire existence.
4. **Pursuing a cause beyond the self:** When one strongly believes and pursues a cause that impacts a larger section of the universe, the self melts into the collective energy. This pursuit translates into an existence where one experiences the universal flow of energy.

Leaders, who have thus unfolded the spiritual energy dimension for themselves, serve every individual and the society at large. Through their spirit of compassion and detached attachment, their wholesome presence and deep involvement, and their pursuit of truth, they become the guiding light for humanity at large.

Yours Energetically

Dr. Bhulakshmi V and Ms. Bhuvaneshwari Ravi are trainers and facilitators of the Positive Energy (PE) program. They are spiritual seekers with a vision of transforming their own energy state from surviving to being. In this journey they have gathered deep insights and are 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, the authors are working in the Organization Development and Leadership Development space.

This intervention is offered by GapSkills Learning Solutions Pvt. Ltd is being offered to corporates and schools. You can contact them at info@gapskills.com to design a customized intervention for your organization or join the PE open program - www.gapskills.com.

Social or Not

Entrepreneurship must be backed by appropriate use of technology

The quantum of growth in the development sector and its growing capability to impact many lives has come through multiple phases. Apparently, it is now time for passionate minds to comprehend the significance of policies along with actions initiated on ground. How do we balance both? This is a question even Moses Sam Paul is trying to answer.

Sam is an Information Technology Graduate from Coimbatore. His days at PSG College exposed him to the notion of giving back to the society. “I started looking at things that could have a positive impact on the society,” shares Sam. He learnt about many non-profit organisations and their work when he served as his Department’s Placement Secretary.

Sam was apparently disappointed about the fact that money mobilized through different means was being spent on building infrastructure while the actual need was something else. “We used to conduct shows and raise money to donate to orphanages. They in turn ended up building a room or hall and named it after our Society. I did not like it! It was more blatant that these orphanages needed people, capacity building and mentorship. Human capital was needed more than money,” he laments.

After completing his B. Tech, Sam moved to Hyderabad to work for TCS. Corporate environment enthused him to explore the possibilities of using technology to achieve social goals. It was during this time that Sam came across Rang De—a first of its kind online forum that provided a peer to peer micro lending platform. “Rang De connected people with disposable income with a lot many rural entrepreneurs who yearned for investments to prove themselves. This concept appealed to me. It was not mere charity. The rural entrepreneur’s self-respect and dignity was intact,” says Sam.

Sam learnt about CSIM from a guest talk given by the founders of Rang De—Mr. Ram and Ms. Smitha—at the RTBI, IIT Madras. Eventually, he also came to know that CSIM had its presence in Hyderabad and enrolled himself with the SEOP programme. “Four months at CSIM turned out to be the most interesting part of my life. I met a



lot of people with similar interests here and every student had a story to share. Discussions on what each one of us had started off and what we longed to do drew us closer as a group and opened new in roads for exploration. Furthermore, we had entrepreneurs who came in for guest talks, adding value to our group discussions,” recollects Sam.

Intriguingly, micro finance industry saw a crisis around this time with the fall of SKS group. The government issued a notice saying that no micro finance institutions should operate until they came out with a comprehensive policy. Sam’s notion of social impact was totally affected. He realized that he may have to stumble upon public policy so that good social initiatives can be complemented by policy measures rather than being shelved due to one bad performer. He then moved to Singapore to pursue his Masters in Public Policy from Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

All along, Sam’s idea of entrepreneurship did not change at all. He continued to believe that it was the best way to change the society. Completely convinced about the potential of enterprises, he also started thinking of policies in this realm.

His project in the final year brought him to National Research Foundation of Singapore, where he was engaged in finding out ways and

means to improve the funding landscape to sustain entrepreneurs. “This introduced me to the world of venture capital and helped me realize the value entrepreneurship can add to the economy on a large scale. I got

“Four months at CSIM turned out to be the most interesting part of my life. I met a lot of people with similar interests here and every student had a story to share.”

hooked into the field of investments,” says Sam, who then worked for a bouquet consulting firm in Singapore that helped start-ups to source their investments.

Sam’s passion for entrepreneurship remained. He soon left the firm to cofound Terra Tech—a one stop technology solution for the long tail of transportation providers. He asserts that running a taxi service is not just technology based, it tries to empower the beneficiaries with technical capacity. Terra Tech designed a 7 inch android tablet for one of its clients in Chennai—Makkal Auto Service. This tablet is fixed in the vehicle, auto in this case. The

operator of the auto service is given a booking management software to aid their tracking and booking service for customers. The tablet brought in a bag of advantages. One, it helped the operator track the vehicles. Secondly, the video capability allowed screening of advertisements, the revenue of which will soon be shared with the drivers. Thirdly and most of all, it reduced the dry run of auto drivers by 40 percent.

The tablet was enhanced with a provision called the panic button for ‘She Taxi Services’ in Kerala. This service is completely administered for women and by women. If a passenger is in danger or in any critical situation, he/she can press this panic button. Once clicked, the camera takes a picture and sends it to the operator, who has a database of 10 police stations in the vicinity. The coordinates of the location of ‘panic’ situation are then sent to the nearby police station along with an SMS seeking immediate attention and assistance.

Sam, admitting that the idea is a deterrent in itself, also asserts that the triple bottom line is met in all these cases. “Entrepreneurship that has a positive impact on the society is social entrepreneurship.” Terra Tech is more valued today. In fact, their business model was not viewed as a potential one when they came to the consultancy for assistance in raising funds. But Sam, who was convinced about

the potential of this idea, quit his job at the consultancy and developed a business model for Terra Tech. Today, Terra Tech has grown with an impressive record of business and clients across the globe.

The future, as Sam clearly says, depends on their partners. “The lessons from CSIM have taken me really far. Entrepreneurship is a long journey. The course gave me hope that I was not alone. It was reassuring to see many more willing to go down that lane. The network we got to build in, has evolved to be a fall back mechanism. On the other hand, there is also a sense of responsibility inculcated in us. What do you say when people meet you after two years and ask what you are doing? I must be able to respond. It’s a kind of an alarm, you see,” shrugs Sam.

So where ahead from now? Sam thinks deeply and is contented to plan for the approaching year first. He would like to see the concept of panic button being implemented in every vehicle. “I know panic button is not fool proof, but this provides us with an option though. It will sensitise and organize this unorganized sector,” says Sam who wishes to see the day when there would be no need to use this panic button.

Talking of innovation, Terra Tech is now trying to use GPS to calculate the distance and fare. The team is trying to make this system foolproof even when there is data failure, by using pulse based calculation.

Alongside Terra Tech, Sam is also clear about where his contribution has to be. “Grey eminences in the fields of technology and policy making do not understand each other. I would like to be the bridge.” Sam is currently developing a website called ‘the crowd works’, where only bureaucrats can pose questions and anyone can respond. Bureaucrats have no access to sons of soil and the common people have no access to bureaucrats to record their concerns. This platform will be one step to connect policy makers and those who would be most impacted by these policies. With the website almost ready to roll out, let’s wait along with Sam for its success.

—Shanumga Priya. T



Saga of a Salvation Knight—Arokia Anand

One may wonder how life unfolds for someone who is born to a poor family, but is ambitious in wanting to make a difference. Occasionally, one hears a few success stories of slum dwellers taking up higher academics and demonstrating entrepreneurial talents and leadership. Similarly, there are success stories of how economically deprived people pursued their ambitions to land well-paying, responsible positions in different sectors like manufacturing and services, both private and public. Some of these success stories help you to understand the kind of urge that makes a difference in spite of economic deprivation in achieving the twin motives of moving up the economic ladder and helping as many others as possible to do better.

Here is the interesting case of Arokia Anand, born to a poor family, who overcame all hardship to pursue higher education, and now works for an IT company. Over and above his personal achievements, the unique position he has adopted is to make a difference to the lives of others by extending whatever small support he can provide. He has taken this as his life's mission, and he believes that it would make him happier and more content. Incidentally, his economic well-

being is linked to his work and his performance at his job. It is interesting to note how he blends the challenging demands on his time posed by his involvement in both social service and professional work.

Early days of growth and role of mentor:

Arokia Anand has an interesting family background that cemented his philosophies and his approach towards life. His parents were from two different religions, and encouraged their children to follow both. He belongs to a fishermen's community and lives in a housing board colony. His father hardly earned enough to afford a comfortable living for the family and education for the children. Though his father was respected in their community and acted as the local head in resolving issues, economic conditions meant the family often could not afford two square meals a day.



Arokia Anand was educated by his maternal grandfather. Interestingly, his grandparents who also from two different religions and followed both. His grandfather used to take him along on visits to darghas, churches and temples, and talk to him about religious faiths and the need to be good to fellow humans, irrespective of religion. Arokia Anand noticed regularly that his grandfather was happy sharing his knowledge as well as his earnings for good causes. This observation had a deep impact on him. He learnt from his grandfather that giving is honorable and that when one gives whatever one can to a deserving person in need, it makes both giver and recipient happy. As a child and later an adolescent, this philosophy etched itself into his character.

Arokia Anand was educated by his grandfather, who put him in a school at Santhome in Chennai. His grandfather, who was alive until he passed the ninth grade, paid his fees all through those years. He was a tailor who stitched clothes for people living abroad. He used to get regular business from his customers.

Arokia Anand felt the impact of his grandfather's commitment to work. At 70, his grandfather was hospitalized. His conditions required a private room, which was a luxury for the family. One afternoon, when Arokia Anand brought lunch, he found his grandfather working in the hospital room. He was cutting fabric to stitch once he was hospitalized. This upset Arokia Anand and made him furious. However, he felt humble when his grandfather told him, "Life revolves around the belief that one will always return to normal from adverse circumstances and hence will have to fulfill all commitments to trusted customers. This is more important than pampering oneself!" His grandfather, his biggest mentor, did not live long after that. His final words made Arokia Anand realize that humility, selflessness and a sense of purpose—however small or big it may be—are important in life.

Holding on to purpose:

Though Arokia Anand felt the impact of the loss of his grandfather, he pursued his studies with reasonable success. He was active as a scout; he was also in the NSS and was involved in many social activities. On completion of the twelfth grade, he

found new hope when he joined Patrician College of Arts and Science at Adyar, Chennai. This college was recently established: it was in its second year of operation when Arokia Anand enrolled for B Com there. . On completion of his graduation, he sought admission for a post graduate course at Loyola College, but was unsuccessful because of stiff competition. His morale sagged for a few days. However, he found new hope when he joined Madras Christian College.

Arokia Anand found motivation and worked hard at both academics and extracurricular activities. He was active in popularizing his college with the poor and middle classes. He took an active interest in blood donation camps and sports. He participated in athletics and won the 5,000 meters race. This period of three years taught him that one could make a difference to one's native place by bringing in positive energy, instead of lamenting on lost opportunities.

First engagement:

On graduating, Arokia Anand wanted to pursue a Masters' degree in commerce. He opted to earn while he learnt by working with an NGO, the Centre for Child Rights and Development, Chennai. Though the Chennai job market included a number of BPO jobs, he preferred to work on this assignment. He was doing a social service by educating girls on adolescence and its impact on the grooming of their youth. This assignment required specific training in counseling. In two years, he completed his post-graduation and joined one of the top five IT companies. He worked in the night shift in the procurement department. Night shifts did not deter him from pursuing what he liked—to contribute to society.

Further Involvement:

In the IT company, he connected well with his colleagues by creating a fun team and involving himself in activities that gave him a sense of satisfaction. He established an identity for his team by naming them "Salvation Knights". This team helped needy people in small ways. It contributed money and purchased fruits and vegetables. Every Saturday, he took members of the team to spend time at one of the orphanages, where they made the children happy. He conducted shows,

games and events, and the happiness of the children elated him.

He spent a lot of time on demonstrating cleanliness and good practices to children, so that they could evolve and mature right. At times, he brought in guests of some standing in society, and ensured that they celebrated at least one major festival with the children. These activities fulfilled his desire to bring about happiness in children.

He started working with Sreedhar on arranging the last rites of people who died in homes for the destitute and of unidentified people who died in accidents and lay in the mortuaries of government hospitals. Arokia Anand explained that this experience was unique, as it taught him that life ultimately reduces to nothing. He remembers the words of his first mentor, his grandfather: "The best service to others is the offering you make without expecting anything in return. One day, life's journey terminates, and the soul must depart happy with having gone through the journey. While living, one may not experience this personally, but observing what happens around makes you realize the true sense of life". Arokia Anand sounded rather philosophical for a person of such a young age, but his commitment to making life purposeful for others rests heavily on his shoulders.

One of the strengths of Arokia Anand is his ability to connect with people and then stay tuned in. He is deeply involved in meeting professionals in the social work sector, and draws inspiration from them. When they give him an opportunity to serve, he joins them. Though this may seem to be an unfocused approach to others, he thinks that he is in the formative stage and needs to understand service without expectation of position, money and status. By involving himself with many others, he is able to see what path is right for him, where he could find the best experience of sharing his time and efforts.

He is also involved with Madurai Ilaya Pari, a social activist. He has approached Ilaya Pari as his mentor, as Ilaya Pari works on leveraging government hospital resources for poor diseased patients who often do not understand the benefits of approaching government hospitals, but instead allows themselves to languish. This may look like an odd activity, but it provides critical support for those who are seriously ill. This approach is of special

use for patients who are in the early stage of a disease. Arokia Anand supports Ilaya Pari in and around Chennai. Arokia Anand gets to go after more touch points for potential service. He has learnt to propagate optimal use of healthcare provided by government hospitals among the poor. This characteristic of Arokia Anand, of connecting with and attaching himself to resource persons so he can learn from them and then serve his immediate society is impressive, and needs emulation by other youth.

Arokia Anand also works with other social activists which provide care and support for AIDS-afflicted children. Arokia Anand finds this particular association special, because children get excited when he spends time with them. He works on this project during the weekends on a selective basis, as and when requests come from the two mentors. Arokia Anand derives inspiration from working with those less fortunate kids.

Apart from these activities, he does some incident-based service. Sometimes, incidents occur that he has been familiar with, and he wants to make a difference in small ways. One such example was a fire in a house in North Chennai. He arranged through his contacts at work and associations for the affected children to get notebooks, stationery and dresses so that they could continue schooling without excessive worry. Though government and NGO support is available, he prefers to join in where he can add value. Simply engaging with the affected fellow humans and coordinating with them with all available resources is an invaluable morale booster for them.

Fundamental beliefs:

Arokia Anand recalls the story of a person throwing starfish that had been swept ashore back into the sea while walking along the beach. Observing this, a friend comments that such an activity was a waste of time, because it could not solve the problem of large numbers of beached starfish dying. The benevolent friend picks up the next starfish and replies, "At least I can make a difference to this fish!"

Arokia Anand believes that whatever small difference he can make to someone that is worth the commitment is worth attempting. He is not worried about larger issues that are beyond his scope and

capacity to address. It is a sensible approach, which most social activists pursue. Arokia Anand looks like a "rising star" because of his energy, commitment and willingness to fight, notwithstanding any adverse social and economic odds.

The other belief he has is that whatever one believes will happen, would materializes, whether it is good or bad. Arokia Anand wishes for and does meaningful acts in the social sense, and thus, benefits everyone associated with his acts.

Arokia Anand has a sibling who is doing a Masters in Social Work course. His father encourages him a lot to be of value to his fellow humans. His mother gives him the freedom to choose his religious faiths, and supports the concept of being agnostic about faiths or befriending all religions as a practice. Arokia Anand is married to his paternal cousin, who also encourages him to fulfill his commitments and in return, has the freedom to pursue activities of her choice. Thus, there is an understanding family encouraging him.

Conclusion:

Arokia Anand is a young and energetic person with ambitions of moving up in the social strata. He would like to achieve a better standard of living. However, at the same time, he wants to devote his time and some part of his earnings to making a difference to persons who are deprived in some manner. His belief is that it is important for individuals and teams to gain satisfaction by doing social work in unison. Whether it is working for leprosy eradication, caring for AIDS patients and orphans or arranging funerals for unclaimed dead bodies, there are a number of formal organizations supporting these activities. Individuals involving themselves in these activities give some additional satisfaction to the needy and help make them comfortable. If more youths were to join with vigor in such activities, we would achieve a quantum leap in the average standards of living of the people of this world!

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

Editorial

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INITIATIVE AND MANAGEMENT



Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani. 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. CSIM operates in Chennai, Coimbatore, Hyderabad and Bangalore.

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CSIM also facilitates Social Audit for social enterprises through Social Audit Network, UK and SAN, India.
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Power To The Child

An abbreviation for Child Rights Education and Action and Movement, CREAM is a strategy that aims at social development



The Salesians of Don Bosco have for long, played a key role in taking Don Bosco's guiding philosophy of service for society, across the world. Through the course of the work that the group does, caring for children has been a top priority. But today's times call for a more intense campaign for child rights and the empowerment of children in exercising these rights. And through the Bangalore Rural Education and Development Society (BREADS), a group of Salesians in Karnataka have managed to achieve just that. "In a nutshell, it's all about empowering children," says Fr Joy Nedumparambil, Executive Director of BREADS Bangalore. "Through our visits across Karnataka, we've managed to identify several key issues that impact the lives of underprivileged kids in the State," he says, "Through empowerment initiatives we've tried to tackle these issues head-on." That's when Project CREAM came to be.

An abbreviation for Child Rights Education and Action and Movement, CREAM is a strategy that aims at social development. Its target audience includes young at risk and children afflicted with HIV. Through social development schemes, BREADS aims at developing the skills of children to make them industry-ready, and thereby secure jobs in BPOs and hospitality among other industries. "A key approach to making this work lay in making children understand that they should participate in their own development and thereby work towards self-empowerment," Fr Joy says. In the course of doing so, he explains, such children also become aware of their rights. Another pivotal function that Project CREAM aims to achieve is to assess existing violations of child rights, and work towards rehabilitation in these areas. "This project has the potential to reach out to nearly 75,000 children across the State," says Fr Joy. Among its objectives is eradication of social evils like child marriage and child labour, which BREADS considers a priority in the execution of Project CREAM.

A four-pronged approach is used to achieve these objectives. "The children are first trained in understanding their rights, and knowing right from wrong. We then encourage the formation of clubs, which become watchdogs of child rights, aiming to protect the rights of these children in a collective manner," says Fr Joy explaining the four-pronged approach that Project CREAM adopts. The other two features include 'action' and 'campaign', which are as important as the first two steps and could be potential game-changers in the success of Project CREAM. "Action involves getting the children themselves to act up against cases of violation of child rights. In fact, each school has Child Rights Trust

Regional Network," says Fr Joy, "It's an extension of our initial strategy to empower children in protecting their rights." The last step, of course, lies in extensive campaigning against social evils like child marriage and child labour, which Fr Joy says led to the establishment of the Karnataka State Network of Child Rights, across the State of Karnataka.

For an initiative that isn't even two years old (BREADS began Project CREAM in Karnataka in November 2012), BREADS has come a long way. In managing to trickle down all the way to the smallest of government schools in Karnataka, it has also managed to reach out to thousands of children in the furtherance of its mission of self-empowerment. "Nearly 90 percent of these children that we refer to, study in government schools," says Fr Joy, "And that itself is ample proof that we need to tackle government institutions and take our message to those places, first."

A key approach to making this work lay in making children understand that they should participate in their own development and thereby work towards self-empowerment.

Just a couple of months ago, BREADS Bangalore organised a two-day training workshop for the staff of Project CREAM. The workshop aimed at brainstorming where Project CREAM could be taken to, in its next phase and what were the challenges that lay ahead. In identifying these key areas, the initiative could see itself enhance its working model and perhaps become better equipped in its mission of self-empowerment. The training programme included a talk by Nagasimha Rao, RTE Task Force, on how to be more child-friendly while

continuing to remain assertive. His talk also focussed on diplomacy measures when dealing with community stakeholders. The workshop aimed at enhancing inter-personal communication skills among the staff of Project CREAM so as to allow for better communication with the children. This of course, is keeping in line with Fr Joy's vision for where the project will go from here. "Our mission is to spread the message of empowerment and to create awareness pertaining to child rights," he says, "So, even after the project ends or our work here is done, the message of empowerment should continue. The stakeholders in the welfare of a child ought to take it upon themselves to continue looking into the best interests of a child and thereby spreading the message of empowerment among themselves." In a sense, this enhanced empowerment is what Project CREAM initially started out to achieve, among children. In empowering the future directors of empowerment among children, there's no denying that the investment in empowerment has certainly reaped rich dividends.

A Movement By Them, For Them

"The officials wrote my destiny. I was told that I must do what my ancestors did; only then they will issue my caste certificate."

Movements for the welfare and upliftment of the marginalized castes have had some critical incidents pushing them to take this form of assertion. There is always one name, one leader's charisma that would contribute to the growth and spread of the movement. Puthirai Vannar Ezhuchi Peravai also follows suit, being led by Mr. Chellakannu.

Born and brought up in Vadipatti Taluk of Madurai district in Tamil Nadu, Chellakannu could study only till class VII. As a child he might not have understood the importance of caste certificate in education. But, he did realize this when he had to discontinue studies for not having one for himself. "Not having a caste certificate not only affected my education. It also forced me to stick to my father's vocation of being a barber for dalits and performing their death rituals. The system made sure that I could not move up in the social ladder," recalls Chellakannu, visibly moved.

Officials had demanded witness to issue a caste certificate, but nobody from his village came forward to facilitate this process. "The officials wrote my destiny. I was told that I must do what my ancestors did; only then they will issue my caste certificate. I could not take this discourse against the much touted slogans of socio economic development," he laments. Chellakannu gave up studies and took to his father's vocation in his very salon. He struggled, like everyone else in his community, to make ends meet with the paltry sum he earned every day.

History repeated itself for Chellakannu when he sought a caste certificate for his nephew in 2004. He was deeply disturbed with these questions in his mind—"Will the future generations also be pushed to this fate? Can I not do something about this now? Why should we remain barbers for generations after generations?" This volley of questions led him to start the movement called Puthirai Vannar Ezhuchi Peravai, in 2006.

As his first effort, he brought together 10 people from his community and applied for Caste Certificates at the District Collector's Office. Following enquiry, the applications were declined for the reason that none of the applicants were actually practicing the said vocation. Chellakannu and team did not give up. Drawing inspiration from other movements, he mobilized 50 people and protested outside the District Collector's Office. Yet, no avail.

Chellakannu has been very conscious of what he knew and what he could. He picked up his learnings from other movements as he knew that he could not afford one wrong step. The first good news for the movement came in 2009 when his team succeeded in getting caste certificates for 5 members. "It was 18th April 2009," he remembers emotionally.



As the news spread wide, people of Puthirai Vannar community from Virudunagar and Ramnagara districts sought Chellakannu's help to acquire their caste certificates. So, he started working for them as well.

Chellakannu remained very pragmatic about his commitments. "So far, we have obtained 800 caste certificates for our community members. Every certificate was a challenge and has a story to share," says Chellakannu who proudly shares that all Puthirai Vannar families in Vadipatti, his home town, have their caste certificates. He soon achieved the same feat with Arupukottai Taluk in Virudunagar district.

The Movement's demand for a welfare scheme for Puthirai Vannar community was achieved with the announcement of Puthirai Vannar welfare scheme in 2007-2008. This scheme promised an assistance of 15,000 rupees for the differently abled, old age pension for senior citizens, besides land *pattas* amongst other benefits. "As with many other welfare schemes, a lot of it remained only on paper. We therefore filed an RTI plea to learn the status of implementation of the scheme. The findings came as no surprise for us. More than 1 crore rupees was allocated, but not spent. The Committee that oversaw the

implementation of this scheme was headed by members from Hindu Vannar Community", elaborated Chellakannu.

Caste system in India is so fragmented that there are divisions among people who perform the same vocation. While Puthirai Vannars wash clothes, cut hair, and perform death rituals for dalit people, Hindu Vannars do the same for upper caste people.

Chellakannu's deep engagement in the field brought in many shocking revelations. The first of it being false caste certificates being used to qualify for a government job, practice medicine, etc.

"I also learnt about a family in Madurai where all its adult members were government officials. While true members of Puthirai Vannar community struggled to get caste certificates to prove eligibility for the welfare schemes and faced humiliation in the name of enquiry when applying for the same, we could see others who procured false certificates and used it to the optimum. My people, without awareness, were forced to practice the same vocation for generations," shares Chellakannu.

He also explains about the sexual harassment that the women from his community have been subjected to. The villages are organized with only one Puthirai Vannar family per village, staying in the village's common land. So, when the parents go out for work, the girls are left alone. Not owning a land or place of residence has created many odds to these families. Chellakannu has advocated with the government and sought land *pattas* for 25 families living in Madurai. He is also working towards obtaining ration cards and old age pensions for these families.

Although the movement has made a mark with its achievements so far, Chellakannu remains wary of the future. "I

earn hundred rupees a day. I give fifty rupees to my family and spend the rest for my travel costs across Madurai." While sustaining the movement is one challenge, the other daunting factor is the shattered manner in which these families are situated. "My economic standard stops me from reaching out to many families," he laments.

Chellakannu has been strongly advocating for an Act in the lines of Prevention of Atrocities against SC/ST Act, as the humiliation his community is subjected to has not been adequately addressed by the present Act. Besides, atrocities meted out to SC/ST by other castes are said to be punishable under this Act. Chellakannu feels that atrocities meted out to his community by dalits should also be equally punishable.

Through the movement Chellakannu has also succeeded in mobilizing educated youth from his community to teach the school children at 5 tuition centres. Aware that only education has the potential to change the fate of the next generation in his community, he narrates the case of five members from Puthirai Vannars who have managed to get government jobs. "Not much of a difference though. They used to wash clothes of dalit families. They are now washing clothes in a government hospital. We are just not allowed to move out from this caste identity," says he, who leaves no stone unturned in equipping himself as a leader.

Chellakannu has attended many workshops and trainings, yet finds it difficult to develop a second line of leadership. "I am trying to do it as best as possible. For now, all I want is to create awareness about this movement. Government and Dalit people must know that we are rising!"

—Shanmuga Priya .T

Change Maker

When Mohammed Azaruddin completed his polytechnic course a few years ago, he did not seek out a career that would test his engineering skills. It was, instead, a social calling that had him wanting to make a difference to his surroundings. Back then, he volunteered at the Tamil Nadu Handicapped Federation Charitable Trust. Today, he runs an NGO. Nearly two years ago, Azar decided to do his bit for society by starting the Nal Vidhaigal Trust. Aimed at bettering the lives of underprivileged children and the physically challenged, Azar's trust is at the forefront of championing social change, in a small way.

"Get a job wasn't exactly a priority for me, once I finished my education," says Azar, taking us through how he went about setting up the trust. "Sure, getting a job would definitely mean my family would be in a much better place than they are, right now. But working for the society, especially the physically challenged and children was what really got me going." Today, at 26, Azar is certainly one of the younger social entrepreneurs around. What keeps him going is simple: the drive to sustain something that was put together by students like him. "Our trust was the work of a bunch of us who studied at college. That, to me, is what Nal Vidhaigal is all about. That, to me, is what I feel must continue." And that's why, even today, Nal Vidhaigal continues to be independently funded with Azar standing firm about not wanting to accept sponsorships or funds from outside. "It's quite encouraging to see something that we founded and funded grow on its own. Many a time, when you have people offering to fund our trust and its activities, you become obliged to them in some way or the other," he says, recalling an incident that happened just over a year ago. "A well-known club came forward to fund one of our events. It was a blood donation camp that we painstakingly put together with limited resources. But when a big name like theirs came to be associated with the work that we did, they ended up becoming the focus of the camp that we put up. Even the media began projecting our work as their handiwork. It was then that I decided that Nal Vidhaigal would be independently funded and that what we do, remains to be something that is wholly conceptualised and funded by like-minded individuals who don't have personal interests in a social cause."

Over the last couple of years, Azar's trust has done some ground-breaking work in Madhavoyal. This included sponsoring the education of children who had lost a parent, enhancing their educational capabilities and even providing them with a launch pad to showcase their work. "August this year, will see us host a big science exhibition



for some underprivileged students who we're currently working with. So, that's something to look forward to," says Azar. Other activities that the trust has engaged in, involves environmental drives. "We have been quite enthusiastic about planting trees and thereby caring for our environment," he continues, "But we've also come to realise that caring for the environment doesn't just stop with planting trees. That's why we've got our volunteers to go the extra mile in caring for these saplings, nurturing their growth and literally go the extra mile in shepherding them into big, strong trees." Other activities of Nal



Vidhaigal include awareness drives on Child rights and women's rights (the trust took up another campaign championing the cause of women's rights on International Women's Day, this year). Educational camps have also been a regular feature of Nal Vidhaigal.

Blood donation is an aspect of social service that remains close to Azar's heart. As part of some of its earliest initiatives, Nal Vidhaigal organised several blood donation camps and blood donation campaigns. "The campaigns were a runaway success, and helped spread the

making liaisons with government hospitals, and thus get to know of cases where patients need blood with utmost urgency," he explains, "It is then, that this database comes in handy. Our team has a list of names of one particular blood type, and the necessary mobilization is thus carried out." However, by his own admission, this pet project is also Nal Vidhaigal's most challenging. "Blood donation requires massive awareness campaigns and publicity drives. And public spaces like malls work well for such initiatives," he says, "Sadly, however, most malls ask us what kind of mileage they stand to gain out of our

publicity drives, without realising that this is a noble cause that must be carried out in the greater interest of society as a whole."

Over time, the work of Nal Vidhaigal began spreading to far-flung districts like Thanjavur, and Azar has been working tirelessly to replicate the good work of the trust here, in other districts as well. "That's the objective," he affirms, "As long as our work can make a change to society." In due course, Azar also managed to secure a job at Ma Foi Management Consultants, where he has worked for three years now.

"Like I've always maintained, getting a job wasn't a priority. And if I did manage to get a job, it would have to be one that would give me ample time to focus on the work of the trust," he says, "Luckily, for me, when the Ma Foi opportunity came along, it allowed me to play a bigger role in bringing about social change. The job itself requires large-scale coordination with NGOs across the board, including my trust." As part of his new responsibilities, Azar plays a vital role in planning and coordinating social service activities. Taking Nal Vidhaigal to greater heights, of course, continues to be part of his dream.

word about what we planned to achieving," says Azar, "All these campaigns, which we took up in public spaces like beaches and parks, were aimed at educating the public on how important it was, to donate blood." Azar himself has donated blood nearly 22 times. "One of our blood donation campaigns, we managed to register nearly 22,500 interested donors," he says. These names are part of a data base that Nal Vidhaigal continues to compile, which Azar says, will go into making the process of blood donation quicker, easier and a lot more efficient. "We go about

Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

An educated man asked: Is there an Absolute Being? What is its relation to the relative existence?

M.: Are they different from each other? All the questions arise only in the mind. The mind arises with waking and subsides in deep sleep. As long as there is a mind, so long will there be such questions and doubts.

D.: There must be stage after stage of progress for gaining the Absolute. Are there grades of Reality?

M.: There are no grades of Reality. There are grades of experience for the *jiva* and not of Reality. If anything can be gained anew, it could also be lost, whereas the Absolute is central - here and now.

D.: If so, how do I remain ignorant of it (*avarana*)?

M.: For whom is this ignorance (veiling)? Does the Absolute tell you that it is veiled? It is the *jiva* who says that something veils the Absolute. Find out for

whom this ignorance is.

D.: Why is there imperfection in Perfection? That is, how did the Absolute become relative?

M.: For whom is this relativity? For whom is this imperfection? The Absolute is not imperfect and cannot ask. The insentient cannot ask the question. Between the two something has risen up which raises these questions and which feels this doubt. Who is it? Is it the one who has now arisen? Or is it the one who is eternal?

Being perfect, why do you feel yourself imperfect? Such is the teaching of all the religions. Whatever may be the experiences, the experiencer is one and the same. 'I' is *purna* - perfection. There is no diversity in sleep. That indicates perfection.

D.: Being perfect, why do I not feel it?

M.: Nor is imperfection felt in deep sleep. The 'I' in sleep being perfect, why does

the waking 'I' feel imperfect? Because the one who feels imperfect is a spurious offshoot, a differentiation from the Infinite - a segregation from God.

D.: I am the same in all the three states. Did this ego submerge me or did I entangle myself into it?

M.: Did anything come up without you?

D.: I am always the same.

M.: Because you see it, this appears to have come up. Did you feel this difficulty in deep sleep? What is new now?

D.: The senses and the mind.

M.: Who says this? Is it the sleeper? If so he should have raised the question in deep sleep also. The sleeper has been lost hold of, some spurious offshoot has differentiated himself and speaks now.

Can anything new appear without that which is eternal and perfect? This kind of dispute is itself eternal. Do not engage in it. Turn inward and put an end to all this. There will be no finality in disputations.

D.: Show me that Grace which puts an end to all this trouble. I have not come here to argue. I want only to learn.

M.: Learn first what you are. This requires no sastras, no scholarship. This is simple experience. The state of being is now and here all along. You have lost hold of yourself and are asking others for guidance. The purpose of philosophy is to turn you inward. "If you know your Self, no evil can come to you. Since you asked me I have taught you."

The ego comes up only holding you (the Self). Hold yourself and the ego will vanish. Until then the sage will be saying, "There is." - The ignorant will be asking "Where?"

D.: The crux of the problem lies in "Know Thyself."

M.: Yes. Quite so.

—Excerpted from talks with
Shri Ramana Maharishi

Belongingness Dimensions – Accounts of accountability

One of the major issues in HR especially in a free flow social organization is all about accountability – internal as well as external. The question is usually, who is the final peg in every task that is taken up in the organization. Many a time, it is escalated till it reaches the dead-end of top. But those organizations cannot be called agile organizations. Being agile not only requires responsibility but also high level of accountability. But, the common place discussion is all about responsibility and not so much on accountability. The difference between responsibility and accountability is huge.

Responsibility is the 'response' ability – ability to respond to situations, people, task and issues. Accountability is the 'account' ability – ability to account for everything that happens to the situation, people, task and issues. When it is accountability there are no grey areas. It is in absolute – a two pronged answer of either yes or no. Responsibility is more about responding which can have varied level and intensities. It has shades of grey that are debatable.

The shades of grey makes responsibility issues more complicated. There are two kinds of responses with fine distinction – reaction and response. These two words are interchangeably used many a time. Reaction is often seen in a cause and effect relationship; an instantaneous reply to the stimuli. While, Response seems to be a thought out reply with balance of intelligence and heart to the stimuli. Life coach Bob Proctor said, "When you REACT, you are giving away your power. When you RESPOND, you are staying in control of yourself." A reaction could also be instinctive and immediate reply; while response is planned and timed reply. It is interesting that both reaction and response do not anywhere explicitly talk about



being accountable. People can choose to react or respond but may not take accountability for the consequences that may follow the reply. Nevertheless, response is considered as higher order reply compared to reaction.

While there are ways in which responsibility can be taken, there are many ways in which people do escape responsibility. To aid the escape there are some very close friends. Dr. J.M. Sampath, managing director of Arpitha Associates speaks of these five friends as

- Excuses
- Reasons
- Because
- Rationalization and
- Yes...but

These friends, he says, are so close that when you own them up, you automatically disown the problem and pass the issue to someone else who is available. In an organizational context it becomes an automatic 'passing the buck' game. Everyone seems to be action oriented but no one is accountable for the consequences of the action. The buck does not seem to stop with anyone until it is escalated and cannot go any higher. Even at that space it

can easily move on horizontally from field to field. Social organizations are working on a continuous basis though and people are very engaged in continuous dialogues but who is actually accountable is yet to be determined.

These five friends are extremely loyal and they have an important role to play and that is to ensure your ego is protected. In a social organization where layers are more flat, multi – role and multi – task is required, the grey shades of responsibility only grow higher. People who perform also tend to develop the 'holier than thou' attitude. The orientation is that of "I'm doing everything possible but it's the others who are wrong. Until they change and stand corrected I will not be able to show any impact." It would be like -

This is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody. There was an important job to be done, and everybody was sure somebody would do it. Somebody got angry about that, because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought anybody could do it, but nobody realized that everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that everybody blamed somebody when nobody did what anybody could have done (Sampath. J.M. story 92 Discovery – 3rd edition, Insight Publishers, Bangalore, India, 1998)

Accountability on the other hand is all about specifics and traceability to the last point. It is an orientation that calls for –

- Owning up of the consequences of every action from self
- Taking action from end to end including all follow ups to complete the action
- Being proactive to pre-empt the blocks and take corrective action as a response
- Ability to move comfortably in the organizational hierarchy to achieve the goal and ensure its in line with

the organizational vision

- To find alternatives and options and make informed choices that will lead to decisions that are value adding.
- There is high level of clarity in each action irrespective of it resulting in success or not. Therefore every action can be substantiated very well.
- Ability to face hurdles and blocks standing strong with perseverance till the goal is achieved.

Whether within the organization or with outside stake holders, social entrepreneurs need to be accountable. In the issue of CSR, the corporate organizations would demand accountability from the social organizations. The impact studies would be of quality when they reflect the accountability in the efforts. The sustenance of a thought, idea, institution lies in the extent of accountability that each of us can take as social entrepreneurs for what we offer to the society. Many of us wish to be responsible citizens but how many of us are willing to be social entrepreneurs with accountability? The HR of the social organization needs to drive accountability within the organization and not mere responsibility.

Reflections:

1. What does accountability mean to me to be a social entrepreneur?
2. To what extent do I use the five friends in my everyday life?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, to what extent do I take accountability for myself and the society around me?
4. What are the actions in my everyday life that show I am accountable for my vision and goals?

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath, PhD.

Learning to let go

Raju Venkatraman's experience as a serial entrepreneur has broadened his personal and professional horizon while positively impacting society

“I believe a venture must have a purpose besides making money. Money is a significant by-product, but what drives me is the larger purpose,” says Raju Venkatraman, founder and director, Medall Healthcare (Medall), a Chennai-based healthcare company. This is his third venture, after Vetri Systems in 1991 and RevIT in 2002.

Medall, which acquired Precision Diagnostic in 2009 with a focus on diagnostics mainly for the Tier II and Tier III regions in southern India, has expanded its vision to provide healthcare and cure by enabling prevention at affordable costs. Competitively priced, the diagnostic centres thrive on volumes. Sharing his vision, Venkatraman says, “Through partnerships with the government and private hospitals, we are taking high quality healthcare services to the underserved areas of the country.” At present, the company is fairly large in radiology services and provides focused solutions for the poor and women.

Venkatraman views this as just the beginning. He estimates the overall healthcare market in India to be US \$3 billion to US \$4 billion, but believes that the industry is segmented with most players operating in the sub US \$100 million range. And this gives everybody a chance to expand while impacting society in a positive way.

In 2010, the company started with eight centres and its tally reached 35 by 2011. Its target for the current year is to hit the 100 mark thereby employing 1,700 people – both medical and non-medical staff. In addition to expanding in the four states it currently operates in, the company is looking to foray into other regions to create a pan India presence. It is also in the process of expanding its areas of services – from diet consultations to mental health to providing non-intrusive surgical solutions in government hospitals. As part of its growth strategy, Medall is encouraging hospitals such as Sundaram Medical Foundation in Chennai to outsource diagnostic services to it. This is a win-win for both organisations as Medall can grow by means of volume while the other hospital can focus on its core functions.

As for how the diagnostic centres are run, Venkatraman believes in mixing micro and macro management, as he believes that an entrepreneur should create ventures that can run with or without the founder's presence. “Our centres are managed by people with a background in management, while medical and paramedical staffs manage the diagnostic side,” he explains. Medall's aim is to go beyond making each centre profitable and recognise those from the organisation who have the potential to become entrepreneurs.

Where it started

Throughout his career as a serial entrepreneur, Venkatraman has practised a



mix of micro and macro management. This has also been one of the reasons he has successfully exited his previous ventures, at the right time.

An alumnus of IIT-Madras 1981 batch, Venkatraman worked abroad in companies such as Cadbury's and Electronic Data Systems (EDS), while being responsible for the divisions he worked in. At EDS, Venkatraman realised the potential to use India as a hub for outsourcing work. He even wrote about this to Ross Perot, the founder, in 1987 and was promised something would happen soon. Meanwhile, Venkatraman continued to work on cutting edge technology of that time – scanners, compressing data, digital imaging and the likes.

Raju Venkatraman believes in mixing micro and macro management, as he believes that an entrepreneur should create ventures that can run with or without the founder's presence.

When by 1991 the promise had not come through, he decided to venture out on his own and founded Vetri Inc. in the U.S. He initially started with product development, but when he realised the magnitude of funds required to distribute products, he turned the company into a BPO. Since satellite technology was becoming feasible at that time, he moved jobs to India, thus fulfilling his dream to create jobs here. The company was into digitising case laws and also into health insurance claims processing, and started Vetri Software in 1993 for developing solutions for publishing databases, workflow management, archiving and retrieving data. With an aim to create a global footprint, it acquired companies in countries such as Granada, Barbados, China and Philippines.

In 1999, US-based Lason acquired Vetri and Venkatraman continued to execute the strategies he had worked on. Though his unit continued to be profitable, other issues forced Lason to declare bankruptcy and Venkatraman resigned in 2002.

Second stop

Retirement was out of the question for Venkatraman. “I had developed no hobbies and was like a fish out of water,” Venkatraman confesses. He had returned to

India with the idea of either doing social service or starting another venture. The lack of good service providers in the healthcare processing space tipped the scales in favour of starting his second venture – RevIT. Here, not only did the companies process claims but also made the payments. This meant that the training of the employees was that much more rigorous.

In 2005, when he was ready to scale up, he found good synergy with ICICI Bank's BPO subsidiary – ICICI Firstsource. “The company was good at raising money and I had a strong business to run,” he points out. The two companies merged and Venkatraman became the joint MD. In the three years that followed, he grew the company to 23,000 people and expanded to other countries, all while establishing centres in the smaller towns in India including Siliguri, Indore and Trichy.

In 2009, though offered the post of MD, he opted out. This time, he wanted to do something India centric in the healthcare space. After much research, he decided to focus on diagnostics as he found this to be highly unorganised and fragmented. He acquired Precision Diagnostics and rechristened it as Medall.

Passion for progress

Medall has been rated as the number one emerging diagnostics services provider in 2011 by Frost and Sullivan – a recognition that Venkatraman is proud about. As is often the case, one of the primary reasons for the company's success has been its people. The team is selected carefully with attributes such as passion, competence and commitment being as important as the necessary qualifications. The dearth of skilled and committed talent in the market has also compelled the company to start its own training academy.

Even as the company courts growth aggressively, it has to work past the existing challenges. Consumer awareness in the areas it operates in is low and Medall organises seminars and other means of communication to improve this. Infrastructure issues can also be an impediment and Medall has overcome this by centralising administration, through remote monitoring and by deploying IT solutions. It has also partnered with GE and Philips for tweaking its solutions keeping in mind the power limitations in rural areas. Remote consultations and strategic pricing have further helped the company's cause.

In an experimental move, Medall has recently introduced a behavioural centre to help urban professionals and students cope with the ever increasing stress of modern life. It is slowly expanding its capability here to provide confidential support to individuals. This is just one of the focus areas for the future as there are several other plans in the making. However, Venkatraman has enough experience and, more importantly, patience to know when to take the leap. His past ventures have given

him the ability to study the pulse of the market and expand quickly when required. “What is needed is an understanding of the larger picture, the openness to infuse fresh blood into the company as needed and a constant eye for growth opportunities,” he concludes.

Learning on the job

Vetri Inc.: Set up in the U.S., this venture gave Raju Venkatraman insight into establishing an international business, financing it and managing its growth. Managing people and building teams were also critical lessons he learnt from this venture. Later, with the Lason acquisition, Venkatraman gained experience in devising a strategy and executing it quickly in a constrained environment.

RevIT: Venkatraman was able to create an innovative business proposition and scaled up to 1,500 people in two years. The ICICI Firstsource experience also gained him experience of taking a company public, dealing with analysts, making it a US \$400 million company, managing and growing with it.

Medall Healthcare: This was a new segment for Venkatraman – so learning quickly and expanding simultaneously reinforced the core learning from his earlier ventures. But the challenge came in dealing with rural India, where the issues are very different from an international setting, or even urban India. People management, customer management, quality control – these entities presented a different challenge in this context.

When the time is right

Knowing when to let go of your own creation is an art that Raju Venkatraman, founder and director of Medall Diagnostic, has mastered. To him, the purpose must define the point of exit. “If money making is the purpose, stick to it. If it is to touch lives and you need capital, then you need partners. You need to respect your partners and their business needs.” There are several other important factors that contribute to the success of a venture including learning to separate personal freedom from governance. Good governance and constant communication with ones partners are critical. Building a team that can grow and be independent is also essential. A venture should be successful with or without the founder, points out Venkatraman.

Importantly, knowing when to raise funds, debt or equity, when to invest and when to step back is necessary. In his personal capacity, Venkatraman also mentors entrepreneurs, has made angel investments and admits that the journey of an entrepreneur is very lonely. So, he stresses on the need to network with like-minded people.

—S. Meera

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“It would be ideal to have a win-win situation where both genders are walking side by side.”

Rohini shares with **Marie Banu** her thoughts about women—yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Rohini is an Indian actress, lyricist, screenwriter, voice actor and director. She has mainly acted in south Indian, notably Malayalam and Tamil films. Having started her acting career at five, she has about 130 south Indian films to her credit. She received National Award of Special mention and Andhra Pradesh State Award for Best Female Actor in the year 1996 for the film *Sthree*.

Being an activist for AIDS awareness, Rohini has also directed short films for M.G.R. Medical University and Tamil Nadu Aids Control Society. In 2008, Rohini had directed a 50-minute documentary *Silent Hues* about film industry's child artists, she being one herself. Her acting skills were recognized and she was given the Kalaimamani award recently.

In an exclusive interview Actor Rohini shares with Marie Banu her thoughts about women—yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

What are your thoughts about women— yesterday, today, and tomorrow?

Yesterday it was really bad. Today, it is slightly better. I cannot say this with total conviction, because today I read about a woman who was raped by constables in the police station premises. I do not know what 'better' actually means now. We have two girls who were raped and hanged as they were dalits. If you look at the way in which women have progressed financially— yes, they have become financially independent, and are able to support their family. They are also able to stand up for

themselves. But, this is not the ideal situation though. It would be ideal to have a win-win situation where both genders are walking side by side. 'I don't follow you; you don't follow me. If I am following you, I am protecting you; if I am followed, I am leading you.'

Having done a documentary on the life of child artists, what are your views about children who participate in television reality shows?

It is totally different when compared to children taking part in reality shows. Because, child actors are involved in this profession solely for financial reasons and totally miss out on their

education. They are put into a unnatural situation where they have to laugh, cry, and endure a strenuous schedule like any adult actor. The child does not understand what he/she goes through. Undue attention from peers make them feel different. They are deprived of the natural way of growing up.

A child participating in the reality show attends a regular school. He/she is happy to participate in the competitions, but is pressurized by the parents very much. The kind of emotional upheaval the child goes through is not at all recommended. I don't think the child should be put through such stress.

Your started your career as a Child Artist. What was your inspiration to join the film industry?

I didn't enter on my own. It was my father who was interested. In the beginning, I liked to bunk school. But, when I met my school friends after shoot hours, I realized that I did not know anything and felt backward. There was a gap of three years in my career, when I was between 11 and 13 years of age. I was too old to play a child character and too young to play an adult character. That's when I actually went to school. I was admitted straight away in 5th standard and did not know how to even write the alphabets in one line.

But, when I started learning, I was encouraged by my teachers. I was a fast learner

and was very happy to go to school. I did not want to discontinue, but had to.

You have done a short film on AIDS awareness. Can you tell us more about this?

I started a company and wanted to do advertisements and corporate films. It was then I got the opportunity to work closely with TANSACS and CAPACS. I gave them some story boards, and they wanted me to direct the film. One particular short film titled 'Amma' got wide recognition, as it was very emotional and touched the audience.

'I don't follow you; you don't follow me. If I am following you, I am protecting you; if I am followed, I am leading you.'

Which of the social issues are you passionate about?

Anything to do with environment really moves me a lot and troubles me. I think that is my calling and I would like to do something for that. We are inspired by people who have taken the initiative to rejuvenate the water bodies (like lakes, tanks and ponds) in Salem, Madurai, and Coimbatore to provide adequate supply of drinking water.

We have already started doing some ground work. We plan to replicate this effort in and around Chennai. First of all, we would like to appeal to the government to take up this issue seriously and act fast. We also want to partner with the government wherein my part would be in creating awareness and mobilizing support from citizens who reside around the water bodies.

We want like-minded people to collaborate with us. I welcome students and NGOs to collaborate with my team.

