

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Many of us would have been involved in fundraising activities like walkathon, food fests, and buying goods at an extra cost, as we knew that the money would go to support a worthy cause. Such activities might have made us socially conscious to a certain extent, but does this suffice? Will these fundraisers bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots?

Social entrepreneurs around the world have been unparalleled catalysts for social change. They use market-driven strategies to tackle critical social issues in brand new ways. Through non-profit, for-profit and hybrid enterprises, social entrepreneurs have promoted a broad range of solutions focused on sustainable development, decades before they were called ‘Sustainable Development Goals’. They are courageously creating change through innovative and sustainable social ventures by attracting growing amounts of talent, money, and attention.

Social enterprises typically offer an altruistic form of entrepreneurship that address a societal need while providing a service or selling a product.

MSDS has been supporting social entrepreneurs across India and offering a fellowship grant of 10,000 rupees to three Fellows every year, for a period of three years. This month, we have featured three such Fellows/Social Entrepreneurs.

Happy reading!

– Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh

Marie Banu

Design: Blink Foundation

Transformation- breaking free from your mold

“It ain’t easy to break out of a mold, but if you do your work, people will ultimately see what you’re capable of. Too often, people find it easier to make assumptions and stick with what they believe. They put you in a place and it makes their job easier. The good people constantly search for something different.” – Christopher Meloni



When we create a mold, it is for efficiency and to create scale. With humans, getting into a mold means following the norms set by the society, by our parents, operating from a pre-defined set of beliefs and fears. Would this bring the best in us?

Inside each of us is a dream, a longing to do something more than the norm. It does not always have to be big or grand, but it is not something that can happen if we are limited by our undistinguished beliefs and fears.

Transformation is breaking free from such a mold. It is using our energies not to fight the mold but to invest it to build the new. We would still create a mold, however, this new mold is the one we have created, not just blindly taken on what others have to give us.

When one willingly walks the path of

transformation, then it marks the beginning of knowing oneself as a possibility. It marks the end of the limited. Possibility is catalytic.

So how does one get access to the possibility catalyst—by transforming thoughts, emotions and the physical dimension of comfort. Thoughts transform by creating periods of performance and rest. Rest is an important element. Emotions transform by creating acceptance consciously. Physical transformation can happen by respecting the body and its needs.

Being fully ourselves always wants to happen in us and requires our active participation. It’s not something out in front of us that we’re working on, or measuring ourselves against, it’s not predictive, not a “get-to” thing—it’s declarative, a “come-from” thing, a place to stand, a matter of saying.-
Landmark Insights

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.

Carrying the Beloved's Legacy with Pride

“We can serve the society in many areas and in myriad ways. What is required is the intention to serve, a little sacrifice, a little time to reorganize personal priorities to achieve the satisfaction of serving society.”

N.V. Lakshmi did the same while she bid farewell to this world at the age of 52 due to brain haemorrhage. She spread life even in her death through organ donation which sparked a new life to six other people. During her life, she along with her husband Mohan Nishtala was involved in various philanthropic activities.

Lakshmi believed that education is the light of life and supported poor children with fees, books, and school uniforms. Her deep passion to educate the underprivileged children is therea that NV Lakshmi Foundation focuses upon. Mohan visits various schools and colleges and identifies girl children who need education support. Some children are also recommended by their teachers. Today, these girls are pursuing professional courses across the country.

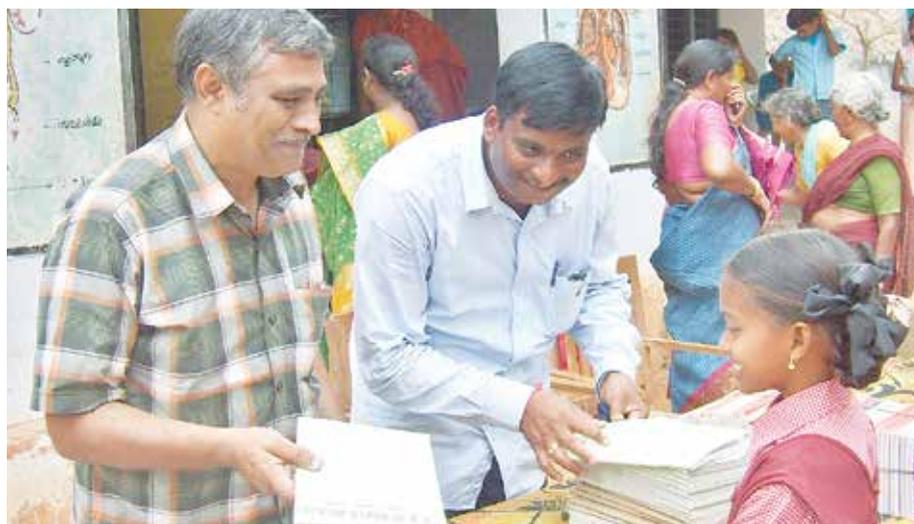
Mohan started the NV Lakshmi Foundation in 2011 in memory of his dear wife Lakshmi to continue what she had begun and left behind. Organ donation awareness is also an area that the foundation focuses on as Lakshmi herself has led by example and believed that Giving is in fact Living.

Mr. Mohan recollects how they both met a young electrician some 15 years ago who couldn't afford to study further. They offered him support to pursue his education and that young man today has reached great heights. Quite a lot of people would want to testify how a phenomenal woman and her deeds have led them to have a better life, a better future. Recognizing the social initiatives of Lakshmi, the Rotary Club of Secunderabad- Cantonment invited her and Mohan to be Rotarians which opened gateways to a host of NGO's who were doing phenomenal work.

There is a synergy between the Rotary Club and NV Lakshmi foundation which has led to a number of joint projects. “It was one of the Rotarians who had undertaken the Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme at CSIM that recommended me to take up this course in 2013. My time at CSIM was an enriching learning experience. I learnt about the Government regulations and how one can become a social entrepreneur. Professor KL Srivastava, Director, CSIM Hyderabad has been a pillar of support,” says Mohan.

My association with CSIM is strong and has opened great networking opportunities. But the learnings and knowledge I gained here is incomparable,” he adds.

Mohan promotes organ donation and hosts a Memorial Lecture on Lakshmi's birthday (13th of December) each year in Hyderabad. “Our Trust's primary goals are to support girl children



“While organ donation is prevalent in the country, there is social stigma attached to it. By spreading the right awareness, one will be able to save more than one life.”

education and promote organ donation. Lakshmi also had concern towards differently abled children and was associated with Sri Vidya School for Special Children and Deaf Enabled Foundation. For her, the urge and passion to do something for the underprivileged was imbibed since childhood, says Mohan.

Lakshmi and Mohan have been engaging in various social causes together since the time they got married. But neither of them had plans to start a foundation. It was only after Lakshmi's demise did Mohan decide to keep her thoughts and actions going.

N.V. Lakshmi Foundation was nurtured initially by Lakshmi's and Mohan's family and their close friends who continue to support the cause they are working for.

“While organ donation is prevalent in the country, there is social stigma attached to it. By spreading the right awareness, one will be able to save more than one life. My wife Lakshmi had set an example,” says Mohan. Giving back to Society is crucial and that is what Mohan has been doing and striving to do through the foundation.

“We can serve the society in many areas and in myriad ways. What is required is the intention to serve, a little sacrifice, a little time to reorganize personal priorities to achieve the satisfaction of serving society.”—N.V. Lakshmi at a Rotary Club Meeting.

Lakshmi's journey was a melody, an incomplete music score that's getting composed by her husband, family and close friends for over a decade now. Sometimes, counting one's blessings will make us want to be good and do good. Lakshmi's impact has created a ripple effect on everyone she had touched during her lifetime and keeps transforming many lives. It has touched the writer in me, and it hopefully will touch the reader in you.

—Angela Anish

Leader & Leadership Matters...

13. Empowerment : the Developmental Leadership story



Meaning of Empower in Leadership: The Leader has the ability to empower people while at work. (LOI, www.discoverself.com). To empower means the official authority or power given to someone to do something. It is also the process of giving group of people more freedom or rights. The synonyms are enable, authorize, legitimize, entitle and so on. The antonyms deny, disallow, refuse, reject & so on

In our discussion on Leader and Leadership matters, the ability to empower their team members stands as one of most critical attribute in Leadership Orientation. At an individual level, empowerment is the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights. But at a Leadership perspective it is the amount of space, freedom and entitlement given by the Leader to the team members. While it can be argued that the extent of freedom depends on the team members' competence and capacity to handle situations, it is equally important the extent to which the Leader feels secured and can place trust in another individual or group to empower them. When Leaders have high capacity to Influence but a lower capacity to empower, they become more autocratic and controlling. The team members are reduced to mere cogs in the wheel and cannot grow just like saplings under a banyan tree. Empowerment not only ensures stronger organizational culture but also growth and development of the team members.

To discuss the attribute of empowerment I picked up the Kumarans Institution (www.kumarans.org) which has been in existence over half a century and has passed 3 generations in Leadership and is believed to have upheld its vision and culture over the years. The tenure of many senior teachers have been nearly over a decade and half. The school also clocks a very low attrition rate. The Institution has CBSE, ICSE and State syllabus schools run in 4 campuses. The vision for the school is to be an excellent academy of global choice, emphasize upon Indian values, culture and provide opportunities for the holistic development of every child to face the challenges of a changing world.

The best person to talk about Empowerment in Leadership is Smt. Deepa Sridhar, the Head and Principal of CBSE, Kumarans Institutions. Deepa Sridhar with an experience of nearly 3 decades as teacher, principal and head of Kumarans Institutions is a masters of education (M.Ed) from University of Sydney and Masters in Psychology from Annamalai University. She also has the Education Leadership course degree from Harvard to her credit. She has held significant positions in the School forums and CBSE council.

Deepa, according to you what is empowerment?

"Empowerment for me is providing the broad parameters for the full functioning of the school and allowing teachers to thrive within those broad parameters. You are not going to get much by all the time breathing down their backs. Yes we give them deadlines

to do or we give them tasks to be completed. As adults we need to understand that they also know their responsibilities to a large extent. Empowerment is also for the teachers to feel free to give their ideas."

How do you manage the Top – down communication and which are the challenge areas for empowering teachers?

"Not all management is top down. Even in empowering teachers there are certain structure and set processes. In academics, there are certain definite 'no's and definite 'yes', things like how we want to collaborate within the class, the methodology, curriculum transaction for example are usually non-negotiables. Each school has their own culture – for example, in our school, we don't believe in dictating notes. That is something non-negotiable. We would not want to move to giving notes. If a new teacher is doing that, we will tell her that it is not acceptable and we will ask her to instruct her students to make their own notes in the class."



"There are many spaces where we empower teachers too. I know I cannot be the eye for the whole school. I can only do so much as an individual. So we have layers within the school and empower those teachers or coordinators to take independent decisions in several spaces. Even if I am not there I am sure they will take independent decisions and they will stand up to it and most of the time the decisions they have taken is right."

Speaking about the extent of belongingness and ownership of teachers in various activities of the school, what is the magic as a Leader that you bring to the team? What do you do to make them feel empowered?

Deepa, smiles thinking of Smt. Malathi Badami who has the longest tenure with the school and who is 72 year old having worked with all 3 generations of Principals. Deepa says the Malathi madam has learnt different things with different generations. During the 1st generation the concept of discipline

connecting to punctuality, timing and structure were the focus. During the second generation, probably how to improvise on academics and methodology was the thrust and the third generation brought in the holistic perspective, with academics and all other co-curricular and character building as important. "Malathi madam living in the school has built these perspectives into her personality too. Her knowledge of our school history goes a long way in building the culture."

Deepa delineates her core principles as –

- "First thing we do is to respect the teachers. Teachers are here to enlighten the student community. We respect them for that.
- Second, our family has also been a family of teachers. Starting from founding Mother to Mother and to me now, we all have been teachers first and then we learnt to manage administration. Definitely therefore, there is higher level of empathy. When teachers come to dialogue, we put on the teacher's cap and think from their perspective first. Then, we also wear the admin cap and see if the idea is doable and within the constraints how to incorporate the idea.
- We being educators and educationists understand their language better. For example, all these years we had cycle tests. Now with the change in boards, the coordinators and teachers asked if we can bring back unit tests every month. We incorporated and that made a difference. As management I should be open to ideas from them, and without giving a try, saying that it won't work is not acceptable.



- When teachers come with an alternative idea or a short-cut is suggested, as an administrator we usually think that they are trying to make their job simpler or to get away from responsibility or work. This is not good. When you have trusted them with the students and

made them a part of the teaching fraternity, I think we need to give them that space. I think, THAT EMPOWERS!!! You are giving them the right to think on their own and their right to come up with ideas and implement those ideas and see the effect.

- Constantly when they know you first respect them, then trust them, they want to give their best. Therefore, consistency is important.
- One important thing is that, if the idea collapses there is no point in nit picking them and saying I told you this or in punishing them. Even an idea coming from the management or top down can collapse. But accepting the failure and seeing, how to make it work or what can be done different, builds their confidence. If you want to empower, as Leaders, we should encourage them to learn from mistakes. Leaders are all not infallible. When teachers realize this they get involved a lot more and that increases belongingness in them.
- I do the Induction program for all new teachers myself. The Joining letter, which is the first letter from the Institution goes from me and I sign it personally. I personally sign every certificate given to teachers or students. I think personalization brings in deeper connections.
- For staff who work in housekeeping, I personally show equality and respect in the traditional way during Dushera festival giving them their uniforms or sweet boxes with haldi and kumkum.
- Even when I come to know someone had a personal problem or a death in family, when they come back I check on their welfare. These little things go a long way in making them feel I respect them.

Deepa, you are also the Head of the Institution as well as a Principal. What kind of reporting structure do you have that you think works well for empowerment?

I have two roles to play – I am the Principal of CBSE as well as the Head of the entire Institution. So the ICSE and STATE school principals are also colleagues as well as report to me. There are coordinators between the principal and the teachers. There is no distinction between the senior school and junior school teachers or between newly appointed and senior teacher in school. We try to give them the message that they are valued as the people who have been here always in terms of their contribution and work. I ensure I am available, approachable and open to their requirements. Whenever anyone by passes the system and comes to me directly for complaint or favors I listen to them but always take all others concerned into confidence and handle the situation. I don't act based on one report or one-sided story.

Due to long association, teachers feel comfortable to share with me their

Am I am an empowering Leader? Well, I never looked at it that way, other than following the footsteps of my Grandmom (Smt.R Anasuya Devi) and my mom (Smt. Meenakshi) who ran this institution before me.

personal life challenges too and I sometimes help them out with references of medical help or otherwise. I sometimes give my opinions and suggestions without getting too personal with them. As a strict rule, I don't gossip or share unnecessary information with anyone which makes the teachers and other staff feel safe to talk to me. There is a grapevine information flow in any institution. But I am very careful not to use or divulge the information at any point of time.

Deepa, how do you manage to empower and also not allow them to misuse freedom? What feedback mechanism and development strategies for teachers do you have?

Deepa explains the steps when teachers have been caught defaulting a principle or value of the school. First, a dialogue at the coordinator level; if there is no change, a dialogue with her to find out what is making them behave the way they do. She goes into identifying their life circumstances and find out the cause for unacceptable behaviour or decision. Opportunity is provided for correction after counselling them.

"We have a continuous feedback mechanism. There is subject feedback from the academic coordinators and general feedback from the principals of the schools. It is not that the person is brought to meet me at the first instance itself. So they also know that when something comes to my notice it is serious and has to be addressed. Similarly, every good work is acknowledged personally and in meetings."

"About 30 – 40 % of the time goes into planning, developing, empowering the teachers. Professional competence training is given to the teachers regularly. The soft skills for the teachers is also focused which includes leadership and behaviour part to manage themselves and



the students. As a school we respect their choice for progress. If a teacher wants to do a course or higher education we give them time off, even sabbatical to complete the course. Even teachers have taken a one year break just to rejuvenate or take care of their family members. But they always come back once they are fine."

Deepa, can you share the beliefs that you hold within you that makes you an empowering Leader?

There's a twinkle in Deepa's eyes when she asks me, "Am I am an empowering Leader? Well, I never looked at it that way, other than following the footsteps of my Grandmom (Smt.R Anasuya Devi) and my mom (Smt.Meenakshi) who ran this institution before me.

Most of my beliefs have been mirroring from what I saw of them. I was there observing and learning how they dealt with the incidents that have happened in the school. They have been my role model for the longest time. One important role model that I definitely learnt a lot is my mentor and the Principal of teacher's college, Dr. T K Jayalakshmi. We were a group of students and she would give us situations on how we would deal with

them and we got a lot of practical knowledge. That apart, my own sense of belief in myself came when my mom gave me the CBSE school 24 years ago and all freedom to deal with the teachers and curriculum. I stumbled and made some mistakes. But she did not nitpick me or scold me but said its fine you made mistakes, let us see what can be done.

There are instances when values are threatened and ethical principles have to be kept intact. For example if there are references for admissions but there is also a meritorious student to whom the admission should be given. These are places where I believe my upbringing and culture of the school can be upheld.

When there is a challenge between student, parents and teachers, I will always support my teachers. In the sense, I won't say the parents and student is wrong, but I will always say I will look into the issue and get back. I will never say upfront my teacher is wrong and pass the issue onto her.

Also, I never shout or discuss issues in class in front of students with the teacher or shout at anyone in open meetings. If there is anything I need to talk, they are called to my room and I will have a conversation. Giving them respect is utmost important to build empowerment and grace in the Institution culture.

Another aspect is I believe my closeness with anyone as a person should not have favoritism built into it. An issue is given importance and not the person. Closeness should not make them feel they get a leeway. That is something I learnt from Mother when she was the Director and Principal. It is the same rule for everybody. But the way we talk to them will be dependent on what they can take and how they will understand. She understood their nature and accordingly spoke to them. "

Deepa, what is the final say for empowerment?

"As a Leader, I am a human too. I have no image to keep. I choose to be frank and honest in all interactions and don't micro-manage. Respect and Trust are the key with clear vision and principles to guide empowerment should be a natural process."



While Influence and Empowerment are critical to Leadership, the true power comes from Credibility, walking the talk which we will explore in the coming month of Conversations

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath

No Child Left Behind

3R App - an independent learning resource that aims at empowering children as well as their parents with a host of information related to the screening, understanding and addressal of specific teaching-learning challenges.

Learning disorders, prominently Dyslexia, are a common, but routinely misunderstood condition. Dyslexia is a difficulty in reading and writing where letters and words appear disoriented to the individual. While this has been proven over and over to be unrelated to intelligence or eyesight, yet people, both the general public as well as those in highly prominent positions in society often make light of the issue. Children are regularly bullied at school and stigmatized for finding reading or writing, a difficult skill to acquire. "Study hard! Don't be lazy!", "Put in more effort," "If you can tell it, why can't you write it?" - these are some of the oft repeated snide remarks that children with learning difficulties face at school and sometimes even at home. At college level, the lack of empathy is even higher. As a result, children suffer most from a loss of self-esteem rather than anything else. "When self-esteem is absent, teaching anything becomes irrelevant" observes Arun Fernandez, founder of 3R Lab.

"Intelligence is a state (of mind), not a trait," remarks Dr. Jayashree Ashok, Academic Director at 3R Lab, as she explains how mainstream education more or less ignores the different learning modalities of children, while loosely classifying them as "intelligent" and "dumb" based

on scores alone. "Children thrive in an education system that focusses on what a child CAN do, instead of focusing on what every child MUST do," she says. This is at the heart of BRS's (Blink Research and Services Private Limited) 3R Lab. The Lab (named for the widespread 3R- Reading, wRiting & aRithmetic concept) is a one-to-one and group intervention program for students with learning difficulties including, but not limited to dyslexia. It focusses on equipping students with learning aids and virtual study modules, anchored by trained remedial tutors. Their objective is to create a platform that nurtures children's 'individual potential.

In India, an estimated 10-15% of school going children have a learning disorder. That adds up to roughly 38 million children. Remedial education is available in just a handful of places within the country. "How can we possibly attain the desired 1:5 teacher-student ratio for 38 million children?" wondered Arun, who identifies himself as dyslexic and is an alumnus of a prominent remedial school. He says this number-check is what led him and his team to develop the 3R App, an independent learning resource that aims at empowering children as well as their parents with a host of information related to the screening, understanding and

addressal of specific teaching-learning challenges, while providing a forum for expert advice and regular updates on recent developments in this field. "With this app, we hope to reach out to the millions of children, making them self-reliant when it comes to learning," says Arun.

Timely screening and access to remedial education helps with addressing learning disorders. Remedial education comprises of a series of tested, proven and scalable teaching-learning techniques and tools that with trained tutors help children find the learning modalities that best suit them. Multi-sensory learning, the Orton Gillingham method, the VAKT (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic and Tactile) model, the Thinking Skills Program are just some of the aspects of remedial education.

Arun and his team members, many of whom have suffered the brunt of a society that refuses to understand learning disorders, are accomplished professionals in diverse fields, ranging from sports, arts, logistics, technology, to social work. When asked how they managed to cope with the stress of being the outliers in their homes/schools/friend-groups, they offer interesting answers. "I channeled my frustrations into sports and dance, and I excelled at it," says Bharath Raj, Director of Operations at 3R Lab. A former college level



athlete and a stellar dancer, Bharath says that you need an anchor to fill in for any 'deficiencies' from within. For him, that anchor was sports, dance and youth service groups that gave him a sense of community. Exploring these other facets of his personality gave him the confidence to say, "Even if I fail, I will be okay."

Ajay Subash, Operations Director of CHILD, a sister program of BRS and the 3R Lab, says that it is his interpersonal skills that drove him to fight the odds and handle rejections. He says, "At school, even though I wanted to make friends, I would invariably be filtered out. I learned that I only had a space at every school until the month of July each year. From July, the first of the examinations begin and thus I would be cast out for my 'poor performance'". He eventually found his personal space inside a lecture hall, thanks to his gift of the gab and his ability to connect with people.



"For high performers, failure is critical. For people like us, failure is usual. I have grown so used to failing that I don't get intimidated by it anymore," says Arun with a laugh. He believes in what he calls 'falling forward'. "I believe if I attempt something that I have never done before, then failing is nothing but progress."

Dr. Jayashree Ashok, who also founded CHILD, says, "Teachers teach in isolation." A former

Principal at Alpha to Omega Learning Centre, an internationally acclaimed remedial school, she believes that teachers need to be supported with creative freedom and access to continuous learning in order to cater to diverse learners.

3R Lab currently reaches out to over 240 students across schools in Chennai. An extensive team of academic, technological and creative consultants work on the development of content and services. The Lab operates during school hours so that students are free to pursue their other interests during the rest of the day.

The 3R App is currently being incubated at IIM Bangalore. 3R Lab is looking for technology partners and for successful individuals with learning disorders who can contribute to the cause. More importantly they are looking to build a more inclusive community for diverse learners so that they might, in fulfilment of their mission, ensure that no child is left behind.

—Archanaa Ramesh



Sorting



Nasruddin became the Prime Minister. Once when he was wandering through the palace gardens he saw a 'Royal Falcon'. Nasruddin had never seen such a bird before, and thought it was an ill-kept pigeon. So he ordered his men to catch it. When they brought it to him, Nasruddin took a pair of scissors and trimmed the claws, wings and beak of the falcon.

"Now you look like a decent pigeon," he said. "Your keeper has evidently been neglecting you."



Explicit Learning

- A. No amount of trimming will make us look alike as we are basically different individuals.
- B. We tend to sort people into pigeon holes.
- C. We should learn to see people as they are, and not as we want them to be.



Introspective Learning

- A. Why do I tend to sort people into pigeon holes?
- B. What is the basis on which I sort people?
- C. How do I learn to see people as they are?

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Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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

CSIM offers **training and consultancy to social enterprises** – for-profits and non-profits – to facilitate them to apply successful business practices and yet retain

their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives.

For more information, please visit our website www.csim.in

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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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Afforestation in the Himalayas

With human development becoming the benchmark for progress, the comprehension and realization of social inclusion has taken many forms. “This understanding must go further towards environmental inclusion, without which poverty alleviation will be superficial,” warns Ms Sheeba Sen, Founder of Alaap, an eco social enterprise based in Nainital, Uttarakhand. Hailing from Lucknow, Sheeba grew up in a middle class family. She studied International Relations and Law from the London School of Economics and Oxford University respectively. She worked with an international law firm for more than three years and all along felt an ‘inner urge’ to come back to India.

“I personally felt I belonged here. I wanted to come back and do something more meaningful to others’ lives,” says Sheeba. Soon after marriage, her life in Mumbai introduced her to the coffee farmers. “I got to meet someone who worked hard to clear the supply chain for coffee farmers from the control of middle men,” she adds. Her experience with the coffee farmers gave her a fresh insight about poverty. Having seen the supply chain in operation and the levels of interferences that reduced the revenue to farmers, Sheeba felt that lifting farmers out of poverty was nobody’s priority. It was not a concern that drove all operations, but she was more disturbed by the fact that the poor were themselves not inclined towards investing in themselves. “Poverty disarms people from thinking logically and investing in their development. That is why we have inter-generational poverty. Poor lose the will and strength to move ahead in social ladder,” she laments.

A summer vacation in the Kumaon district of Uttarakhand in 2012 not only served to be an exhilarating experience, but also helped Sheeba get in touch with local organisations. Inspired by the work of Aarohi, an organization working since 1992 to empower the mountain communities, Sheeba visited many villages and understood life in the mountains, especially the routine interaction people had with forests, and the dependency. Soon, she started working for Aarohi in their community and youth initiatives. Extensive field visits exposed her to the challenges faced by grass root organisations. After about four years with Aarohi, Sheeba felt the need for a new approach that will focus on the critical relationship between rural life and ecology. “It was time this linkage was analysed deeply. Human development problems are messy and complex. In order to have a holistic look, ecology must be factored in. Rural life, culture, livelihood and ecology are all connected; poverty stands right at the intersection of this web,” explains Sheeba.

Sheeba founded Alaap in 2017 with the mission to re-forest the Himalayas through community action. Alaap aims to address the triple threats of



environmental degradation, large-scale migration and lack of reliable livelihood for the mountain communities through creation of native forests. Native forests, not only enhance biodiversity in the region, but also arrest animal-human conflict and desertification. The farming culture in the mountains, affected by drying rivers and erosion due to monocultures, is also revived, giving way for people and nature to live in harmony. “This is a big dream. Harmony between human and nature has been compromised but it is high time we all worked towards it,” she asserts.

Currently, Sheeba and team are working in the villages of Champawat district to turn it into a carbon negative region in the next ten years. A community action group, comprising of farmers, Village Development Officers, and officials from the District Government Departments were brought

together and trained to carry out the process. They were not only capacitated to identify different species, but were also trained on the chemistry between different plants, trees, soil, and other fauna. On completing the PNV (potential natural vegetation) mapping, species dominant in the region and those that grew along, were identified. Backed with a complete understanding of how the species interact, saplings were planted in the region chosen by the community.

Alaap follows the Miyawaki method of afforestation where a number of different types of trees are planted together in a small pit. By doing so, it reinforces the richness of the land and allows plants to interact naturally. Seven thousand saplings have been planted in Champawat so far.

With an inherent participatory approach, Sheeba believes Alaap will demonstrate the impact of investing in people. Otherwise, she believes,

creation of native forests is a long term, one-sided exercise. Therefore, building Eco Leadership is the focus of Alaap in order to inculcate the values of a self-sufficient eco system.

Workshops with youth from the community have been designed to encourage a sustainable lifestyle that can meet the needs of people and forests together. This promotes a culture that allows for preservation of native forests. “A long-term initiative, recognition of Eco Champions is a crucial step forward for Alaap to show the strength of this model. Small nurseries are set up as a means of employment for the local people. All requirements for creating the forests are sourced locally, from within the communities. By doing so, the communities are well aware of the effort and also come forward to contribute in other ways possible. That is why we call it creation of both tangible and intangible values with the community,” she says.

Alaap dreams of seeing people from the mountain communities participate in making policies that govern the management of forests and their lives amidst them. Their newsletter, Van Jagriti, is a step in that direction, spreading awareness on legal issues and advocacy for Van Panchayats. Collaborations with colleges and other like-minded organisations are also underway to keep the process of co-creation open to participation from all stake holders. “Together, only when together, we can preserve and build new forests,” says Sheeba.

—Shanmuga Priya.T

To Love and Live without Fear

Section 377... an archaic law that has been violating the fundamental rights of a large group of individuals was veiled quite a few months back bringing great pride and relief to a community that has been struggling to rise against oppression. An unjust law has been violating morality and rejecting the very existence to live a life that each human think they deserve. LGBT has been one of India's major concerns for many years. Though many activists in the social space have been struggling to bring about transformation for decades, the law itself stood as a hurdle as it criminalized a community for 'being themselves'.

R. Jeeva, Founder of Transgender Rights Association has been threading the journey to freedom from the moment she realized she was not like the rest she knew. As a child of 8, there isn't much you can understand about how you feel. But, as soon as puberty hit, Jeeva started growing uneasy to the way she felt about herself. She knew she was what she thought she was; but, to her family this was an unacceptable scenario. Being a transgender was not acceptable to the kind of family Jeeva grew up in. Like most Indian families, she too had a very conservative family that tried to change her mind and told her what she thought was not right.

The road was not easy for Jeeva. With the help of the only transgender she knew, Jeeva decided to run away to Mumbai. Although she knew that she was able and employable, she had to beg for a living as nobody wanted to employ a transgender.

After a few months, she chose to leave Mumbai and get back to her homeland Chennai. Here, she worked for about two years in a tile company and had to leave as the company closed. Although she did not complete her schooling when she left her home, she ensured that she completed her under graduation and succeeded at that in 2007. During this period, Jeeva was also involved in social service activities. Seeing her passion and determination, YRG Care, a Centre for AIDS Research and Education, decided to make her their Community Advisor. This brought forth new experiences and started making a difference in Jeeva's life.

Dr. Sabina Francis, a CSIM Alumnae and a transgender, encouraged me to enrol in CSIM's Post-graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management. My learnings at CSIM was immense and this led me to form the Transgenders Rights Association," says Jeeva.

From then on, it has been an exciting journey for Jeeva. She was offered a fellowship by ActionAid. The words of Dr. Esther Maria Selvam has been so motivating. She encouraged me to leverage the fellowship opportunity and scale out my organization. Today, we have 360 transgenders from Chennai who are part of TRA," says Jeeva.

Jeeva dreams and works to ensure that transgenders across Chennai get



opportunities which she never had. Jeeva is now a State Level trainer who advocates for transgender rights. She believes that the youth of today can be the greatest strength if they are properly understood and if our society accepts transgenders as they are.

While Jeeva addresses college students on this issue, she sure knows that it's going to create a ripple effect and the word will soon reach their parents as well. "Enlightening parents and influencing a change in their perception as they listen from their own children is the best way to sensitise them. A lot of problems could be avoided

if only parents of transgenders are able to accept them and let them choose the life they want" says Jeeva.

Speaking across various platforms has helped Jeeva gain confidence and have faith in her own self and in what she and many others like her believe in. "People always sympathise transgenders for who and what they are. This is wrong. I want each of them to be recognized for their skills, educational qualifications, and ability to undertake the tasks they have been assigned in their workplace," says Jeeva.

Jeeva is currently working on a government project. She is striving hard

A lot of problems could be avoided if only parents of transgenders are able to accept them and let them choose the life they want

to ensure that everyone receives the rights they deserve. Although her family did not accept for what she was earlier, her mother did realise her worth and lived with her for more than ten years. "It is unfortunate that I lost my mother last month. I feel that she is still with me in spirit and guiding me in all that I do," she says.

Jeeva has crossed the path and is now paving the way for many like her. "This is just a beginning to a long journey to break free and live and love without limits," she signs off.

— Angela Anish
Translated by Jisha Abraham

MSDS National Fellowship Awards

Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani Trust has been supporting young and prospective rural social entrepreneurs by awarding them the Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship since 2012. The monthly fellowship amount of Rs.10,000/- is offered to select fellows for a period of three years. So far, this fellowship has been awarded to 19 social entrepreneurs.

This award is not just a celebration of the work of these social entrepreneurs, but an ambition to build on the excellent cross-sectoral work and strengthen and support the social entrepreneurship community.

The Sadguru Gnanananda National Fellowship Awards 2019 ceremony was held on 27th February at Narada Gana Sabha, Alwarpet, Chennai. The Chief Guest for the event was Mr. Abhaya Srisrimal Jain, Chairman-LifeCell International Pvt Ltd. Mr. James Raj Kulanthai Samy of Rhythm Foundation, Malaysia, was the Guest of Honor and Mr. Alan Kay, Co-founder of Social Audit Network, UK was invited as a Special Guest. Mr. P N Subramaniam, Managing Trustee of MSDS, and Mrs. Latha Suresh, Trustee of MSDS, were also present.

Three aspiring Social Entrepreneurs – Ms. R.Jeeva of Transgender Rights Association, Mr. Manish Rai of Dohara, and Ms. Sheeba Sen of Alaap, received their first fellowship amount from the Chief Guest.

Speaking on the occasion, Mr. Abhaya said, “I have been associated with CSIM for a very long time. It is hard to forget the great man—Shri PN Devarajan, the Founder of MSDS Trust. It was because of him only, I achieved this position in my life and I am always thankful to him. MSDS Trust has been doing

remarkable work for the betterment of the society. I feel proud to participate in this event and wish the young social entrepreneurs all success. May many more such people come forward to serve the society.”

Rhythm Foundation has been supporting MSDS Fellowship programme for the last two years. “The MSDS Trust has influenced a lot of change in our Indian society. I wish to continue my work with them and promote social entrepreneurship and social responsibilities among youngsters in India as well as in Malaysia,” said Mr. James

Mr. Alan Kay stated, “Leadership, and indeed social entrepreneurship, comes in many different forms and for me it is more about encouraging, getting consensus and ensuring that others – and particularly the most disadvantaged – fulfill their potential in society. In order for that to happen social entrepreneurs, of course, have to be resourceful, take opportunities, see new initiatives, and solve social and community problems in different and innovative ways.”

Book Release

Unsung Beacons - Volume 9, a compilation of articles featured in Conversations Today 2018; and **Social Audit Eco-system**, a compilation of articles authored by Mr. Alan Kay featured in Conversations Today 2017 and 2018 - were released by Mr. Abhaya Srisrimal Jain.

The e-copies of these publications can be read at www.csim.in.

—Marie Banu



CSIM Alumni - Awards and recognitions



Mr. Ezhilarasan was awarded “Vivega 2019” by Youth Red Cross & National Service Scheme organized in Anna University on January 2019. A social worker, he works for the cause of people affected by albinos and vitiligo leucoderma.

He launched Dreams Trust in 2010 after he completed the PGDSIM course in CSIM.

Ms. Logammal was awarded “I am Strongest 2019” by Sharon ply in February 2019. A social entrepreneur who works to alleviate social problems through democratic participation of Children of the area, she completed the PGDSIM course at CSIM in 2003.

She has formed children parliaments in over 20 districts of Tamil Nadu. She is a positive change maker and an inspiring personality. She enables children to take charge of their destiny and realize their dreams.

“Meditation is washing the thoughts.”

Swami Nityananda Giri tells Latha Suresh and Marie Banu about the power of introspection

Swami Nityananda Giri is the Chief Patron of the MSDS Trust. Swamiji, a chemical engineer in his poorvashram days, severed his worldly connections in 1963 and took up intense spiritual sadhana. He came to Sadguru Gnanananda in 1971 and was accepted by Him as a Brahmachari disciple. He received direct guidance from Him and studied Vedanta under Swami Vidyananda Giri. Well versed in Vedanta, Swamiji continues the tradition of teaching the scriptures. He is very much interested in mysticism from all traditions. He was often invited to participate in inter-religious and inter-monastic dialogues around the world. He has travelled widely lecturing on Vedanta and Yoga.

Swamiji had the privilege to compile the teachings of Sadguru Gnanananda under his personal direction titled Gnana Inba Veli. Another book “Sri Gnanananda Darsanam” authored by him gives a very good account of the life and teachings of Sadguru Gnanananda.

In an exclusive interview Swami Nityanandagiri talks to Latha Suresh and Marie Banu about the power of introspection.

What is meditation?

A Lebanese man asked what is meditation. I said, “Meditation is washing the thoughts. When one washes the thoughts, the thoughts are changing and along with it the thinker is also changing. Good thoughts make you happy and the bad thoughts make you angry. Mano Maya - our mental state keeps changing and we should watch over it.” He again asked me how can one can be conscious and be watching.

Watching means being a witness to it. For example, if a person is a witness to a murder, he has nothing to do with the murder but can identify with it. Behind our mortal, we have something immortal inside

us, which we can be contacted and controlled. We have to train our mind and for this we need japa (meditation). When we train our mind, it is capable of separating the true self from our pseudo self. The pseudo self is the same in everyone – you, me and in Osama as well.

Your thoughts on the power of introspection?

A story in Gnanananda goes like this. Once a stationmaster a disciple of Gnanananda brought one of his friends, a rich landlord, along with him to his ashram.

He did not believe in God and once asked Swamiji with reverence, “There is a saying that - without God’s will nothing can be done. So, if I am doing anything wrong, then it is God that is doing it and not me!”

Swamiji replied: “Why worry about it. But, are we doing anything wrong?”

Landlord: “I argue with a lot of priests and have also injured a priest.”

Swamiji: “You have done the right thing”

Landlord: “But, the puranas say that it is wrong.”

Swamiji: “The puranas are rubbish.”

Landlord: “No, my conscious says that it is wrong.”

Swamiji: “What is conscious? Where is God? He is within us and tells us what is to right and what is wrong. But do we listen to Him? It is the consciousness within us which is God.”

This transformed him.

Unless one introspects nothing can influence change. Swamiji Chinmayananda asks us to write a spiritual diary. It is not a diary of events. It is about writing a diary after introspection - when we got angry and when we were happy. We should cultivate the boldness of going and apologizing to the one whom we have hurt. In each religion, there is transcendence. Swami



Gnanananda taught people to go beyond religion - to a contemplative and spiritual level.

Your advise for present generation?

When we really talk to our youngsters today, they will change. Parents must give more time to our children. Educate them in proper schools. Tell the children the rituals and its meaning, instead of blindly following it.

The purpose of religion is to bring about an order and practices. For example, Marriage - it talks about a husband and wife should live

together and bring up their children. In the case of divorce, the children are the sufferers.

Adultery is one of the Ten Commandments. But, our Supreme Court has passed an order legitimizing this by taking western examples. This is not a good thing to say!

A book titled ‘Our culture’ by Sri Raja Gopalachari says culture means restraint. A cultured person knows where to stop.

Religion is at one level, but we should go beyond religion. It prepares you for a higher spiritual life. This has been neglected.