

# Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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**EDITOR: MARIE BANU.J**

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## FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

As India gears up to gradually lift the lockdown, people are getting used to better health and hygiene practices. Wearing a mask seems like an extension of one's clothing and physical distancing is consciously done even at home. Contactless shopping is the new trend and thanks to Digital India, we are able to manage most of our purchases online. Well, all this happens for the literate or rather middle and high income segment of our population. What about those at the bottom of the pyramid, especially the migrants? The international scope of this pandemic has ensured that no section of people is left unaffected. The scale of the issue may vary from state to state or city to city, but none is left unscathed.

For decades, hundreds of thousands of workers have moved from state to state and some to shores abroad, looking for opportunities and livelihoods. A World Bank report states that the lockdown has impacted nearly 40 million internal migrants. It is time to finally acknowledge the challenges the migrants face during the Covid 19 lockdown period. Media clips of people trudging across hundreds of kilometres carrying heavy bundles on their head and shoulders is a distressing sight. It saddens more to learn that many lost their lives in this attempt.

For many companies, layoff have become the order of the day and some are resorting to massive pay cuts. Workers without formal employment contracts, casual labourers, those who work in small companies, and the self-employed, are the most vulnerable.

While the Indian government is organising trains to transport home hundreds of thousands of workers stranded in cities, several NGOs are assisting them with food and ration supplies. But, does this suffice? What would be their livelihood Post-Covid? Will they return to their previous occupation or choose an alternate one in their own land? Well, questions are many.

The Covid-19 storm will pass and mankind will survive. We need to gear up and get prepared to manage the future.

Stay strong!

Marie Banu

## EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh  
Marie Banu

## THE PARADOX OF PLENTY



**L**ot of the plenty that we possess on the tangible dimension of life does not yield much beyond physical security. How many of us have experienced abundance or the lack of it in “softer” dimensions of life – like deep relationships, abundance of time, abundance of attention? And, when we do, what is the experience of it? During the lockdown, we have got the opportunity to experience this kind of abundance and plenty and perhaps for many equally the lack of it.

We have always had this side of plenty too, however, most of our attention was towards the tangible plenty-perhaps money, physical comforts and so on. On the other hand, we have

had the absence of it and we had numbed ourselves with the tangible plenty. Now this is the paradox of plenty.

Our mental boundaries and perhaps societal structures keep us active in accumulating tangible resources. This is the time to call out this fallacy and step into authentic connection with life.

While we need physical security, making it the basis of life has misplaced all our desires and thereby actions. This is the time to embrace the softer dimensions, to nourish deeper relationships, deeper attention and abundance of energy.

### 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](mailto:bhuvaneshwari@teamthink.co.in) for arranging Positive Energy training and Coaching sessions.*

# THE PROMISE OF DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Education is the face of every civilisation. It lays the foundation for aspirations and future, and in the process also influences pedagogy in such a way that learning becomes more engaging for both teachers and students. Use of various methods and tools have their share of influence on the evolution of pedagogy but an incredibly significant influence comes from the use of technology. “Rightly so because every teacher is different and so is every student. Having been students, we all have felt gaps in the system. We all, at some point, wished for some changes that could have made learning much easier and more interesting. Technology can help bring alive small and significant changes,” assures Ms Mallika Valluru, Co-Founder of Radius Edutech, an edtech startup based in Hyderabad.

Coming from a software background, Mallika has always been interested in education and intrigued by the logistics of introducing small and significant changes in the system. When she did her specialisation in Social Impact Strategy from University of Pennsylvania, her focus fell on the introduction of scientific concepts in a graded manner. “Concepts can be explained differently for different age groups, gradually widening the scope of association. I would have loved that as a student,” she smiles, adding that she first thought of establishing a science lab that would allow students to learn science concepts practically.

She quickly dropped the idea because labs she felt, weren’t classrooms and were visited only periodically. Her exploration of alternatives led her to think of a tool or medium that children could lay hands on and use. “What if children get to have a tool that allowed them to imagine concepts in different scenarios?” says an excited Mallika.

Interactive Simulations answered all her questions and Mallika strongly believed that enabling virtual learning through interactive simulations was not only aspirational but also need of the hour. “We must allow children to imagine. Animated experiments will help them try same experiment on a concept, say frequency for example, in different scenarios, all at the comfort of their classroom. In so doing, we are in no way, not in the least possible way, trying to reduce the role of teachers. Interactive simulations help teachers visualise lesson plans and also evaluate the level of students’ absorption. And therefore, they can adapt their methodology to suit the level of students’ needs,” says Mallika.

Radius Edutech was established in 2018, incubated by the WE HUB, the only state-run platform for women



entrepreneurs by the Government of Telangana. The company offers a range of products that include interactive touch boards, televisions, projectors, along with a comprehensive Learning Management System (LMS). Having designed the curriculum herself, Mallika feels that the STEM based class, which is a weekly lab class by teachers is very promising. Radius Edutech manufactures its products domestically in Hyderabad, providing its share of local employment opportunities.

Radius Edutech’s video conferencing platform – Octa, has been a huge success recently. Thanks to the lockdown due to

Corona, there has been an increased emphasis on the use of video conferencing. Working on low bandwidth, Octa is an encrypted, secure alternative to all other platforms currently available. With a dedicated team to enable teachers use this platform, the company has seen a surge in its users. “We use Octa for faculty development as well. Our usage demonstrates how privacy concerns are addressed and the efficacy of giving worksheets and online assessments. For us, this lockdown has been a blessing in a disguise,” smiles Mallika. To ensure privacy and content security, the team plans to introduce local

hosting post the lockdown, unlike the common cloud hosting used by other platforms.

Having reached 14 schools in Hyderabad, Radius Edutech is all set to go pan India and more than 10 countries across the globe. “This is a huge feat for us but challenges are always there. Adaptation is still a problem, especially with language teachers who were never exposed to use of technology in their classes. Continuous training and hand-holding has made the difference and we reassure that teachers are the enablers. Digital infrastructure is an additional aid in their hands, adding to their efficiency,” she asserts. With penetration of technology in education becoming a reality, Mallika hopes to customise her products for women skill training in the future.

A software engineer turned entrepreneur, Mallika feels that CSIM gave her the energy to do what she loved to do. “Peer influence and the ensuing positive energy is a very strong motivating force. At CSIM, I saw people who did what they loved and also succeeded in their pursuits. They were able to see the change they once visualised. Being amidst them gave me the confidence. I was inspired to study Social Impact Strategy,” she says, still in awe of the energy she felt at CSIM. “Passion has no age barriers and there is no better place to realise this than CSIM,” she adds.

*Shanmuga Priya.T*



# SHATTERING THE BARRIERS THAT SILENCE US

*Living with tinnitus can deafen the world around you, but for Grace, it has heightened her sensitivity to disability.*

The buzzing in your ear that doesn't go away, drowning out all other sounds. A song that seems to get louder and louder, as if the singer is singing right into your ear.

The world recedes, and a heavy veil of noise descends, silencing everything else.

This is Grace Lee-Khoo's world. Growing up she was often labelled a "daydreamer" or a "space cadet". "All my life I assumed I didn't hear very well, because I wasn't paying attention. But here I am, trying to listen to my friend. Her mouth is moving, but I can't hear the words," says Grace.

Eventually, Grace saw a doctor and was told she has tinnitus — the perception of noise or ringing in the ears that can range from a low roar to a high squeal, affecting a person's ability to hear. "It was like, 'Mystery solved!' Life goes on!" says Grace.

By then, she was also already a theatre practitioner who had founded Access Path Productions to discover and nurture disability-led work.

A former teacher, Grace had returned to her first love, theatre, and went to pursue her Masters in Applied Theatre in the United Kingdom in 2015.

There, she immersed herself in the art form's potential to open doors for marginalised persons, who are still often regarded as objects of pity in mainstream society.

"Some people might see disability theatre and take it as an opportunity for inspiration. 'You poor thing, you're so brave, you're superhuman, you're so inspiring.' That's charity," says Grace.

"And I saw this other model that was, 'We are here to reflect. We are here to examine ourselves'.

That's the kind of work I realised I had always wanted to make. "It is about changing people's attitudes towards disability. It highlights the fact that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference. It helps us recognise barriers that make life harder for disabled people."

Returning to Singapore, Grace founded Access Path Productions in 2018. The same year, Access Path co-produced *And Suddenly I Disappear: the Singapore-UK 'd' monologues* by Kaite O'Reilly, a disability-led theatre project created between UK and Singapore artists.

For Grace, advocating alongside the marginalised is about "parity, not charity".

"I, alongside many others, would still very much like to live in a warm environment where people would not see



my impairment as a flaw, a burden or something to fuss over but just something to collectively accommodate," she says.

She adds: "We always seem to want to hide our flaws or ignore them. But isn't that what makes us different? What makes us so wonderfully unique?"

So while "inclusion" may be a buzzword, Grace hopes that Access Path's performances and activities can engage people of all abilities in a deeper way.

"It's about participation. Inclusion is like getting an invite to the party, but participation is when you are invited to dance. And we should all be dancing."

## ABOUT ACCESS PATH PRODUCTIONS

Founded in 2018, Access Path Productions stages high-quality theatrical and cultural events to put narratives about the marginalised in the spotlight, and provide community-based care through the arts.

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



*"Some people might see disability theatre and take it as an opportunity for inspiration porn. 'You poor thing, you're so brave, you're superhuman, you're so inspiring.' That's charity, not parity."*

**Grace Lee-Khoo**  
Founder, Access Path Productions



# Disaster Response versus Reaction

The right approach to responding to a humanitarian crisis in the wake of a disaster is not about getting into relief right way. Instead, it should involve proper planning in order to make a measured response based on experience and mature decisions to improve effectiveness, reduce redundancies and remove impediments.

The development sector comprises of different kinds of organizations and their overall aim is to benefit the society and improve human conditions. These organizations work with allied stakeholders to address gaps as well as ensure proper delivery of Government initiatives. While most development sector organizations have a long term strategy and work in line with their vision, mission and goal; often their scope is defined by their skill sets, their spread and the availability of funds. For example, some organizations work in livelihoods others focus on climate change or are involved with healthcare, while a few work with a gender lens whereas others focus on children. Their work is supported by their experience gained from their field of operation and the linkages that they build with their stakeholders over the years. Among them, a large number of organizations also have disaster management and relief operations as their area of interest or activity.

## Reacting to Disaster and Humanitarian Crisis

The period following a disaster is chaotic and usually filled with uncertainty. This is combined with risky work conditions apart from Government agencies being stretched. Given this background, when organizations - especially those without any prior experience in disaster management or relief operations - rush to respond, they are often less prepared for the eventualities and therefore their responses during crisis might be less effective. Some



might actually harm the local populations by overwhelming local people and responders. For example in Zaire in the mid-1990s, many more people died when cholera hit poorly operated refugee camps.

The tsunami crisis in India in 2004 is another case in point. In the early days of the aftermath of the disaster, more than 400 NGOs converged in the area, especially in Nagapattinam. NGOs experienced in handling disaster immediately prioritized the needs based on urgency but there were many others who were responding in a manner that was obviously not sustainable. As a result, there was an abundance of supplies in some pockets while others did not get anything. To be brief, it resulted in chaotic scenes due to lack leadership, lack of 'need assessments' or a clear strategy and a clear lack of accountability till the government took over.

Many of these aid workers were well

meaning volunteers, but eager and unprepared volunteers make it nearly impossible for humanitarian responders to run efficient relief operations.

## Disaster Response and the subsequent road to normalcy

A lot of resources are usually poured in for disaster relief and this necessarily does not translate to better outcomes for those affected. It is imperative that donors and funding agencies work in tandem with experienced disaster relief groups and the local authorities, who are in a better position to understand grass-root realities, provide immediate aid, support the population and help in transition from disaster hit to re-building communities.

Given that disaster response is about both short-term and long-term support, it is important that organizations involved with long-term projects to continue to focus on long term strategies instead of altering their focus in haste. These programs or long-term support opportunities will be needed after emergency needs have been met and the community is ready for rehabilitation and restoration. The long term programs might need to be strengthened in new ways before it is delivered and their effectiveness measured. There might be other changes which will need to be considered while the programs are implemented. Because in the long term, the problems that beleaguered that community to begin with will not go away without the active intervention of these NGOs. For example, NGOs that work in water supply and sanitation or waste management will still need to be active after the disaster but with alterations in line with changed scenario to ensure efficacy. Similarly, those working in livelihoods or skilling will still need to be able to assist affected people to earn a living.

Here again, donors, funding agencies

and CSRs with a long term vision should continue program support for those NGOs engaged in transforming lives and helping them in making their programs more effective in the aftermath of a disaster. This needs to be a collaborative process and cannot be impulsive approach on the part of the NGO or the donor. Once the phase of disaster relief is over and mitigation measures are in place, the NGOs that worked in other important issues will need to continue to work for the affected society to make any real progress. Responding to a disaster for such organizations should be after some introspection.

## Long term programs need to be re-aligned to changing needs

We are once again hit by a major global disaster and given the spread and the urgency to rehabilitate communities, every country will have to work on disaster relief with the available resources. India too like many other countries will have to enlist NGOs to support communities. Therefore it is all the more important to strategize and ensure that aid workers are aligned to the changing needs. For example this time, apart from supporting with health and livelihood solutions, there will be an enormous need to focus on behavior change as well as leverage digital technology as a major tool to navigate through these testing times.

**Aboli Abkari**  
Head – Partnerships  
Dr Reddy's Foundation

*Aboli Abkari is the lead for Partnerships at Dr Reddy's Foundation and her skill includes forging new partnerships in addition to resource mobilization. A keen propagator of philanthropy for a cause, her experience includes digital fundraising, corporate & institutional partnerships.*



## Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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

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

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

For more information, visit [www.csim.in](http://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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# MOVING WITH THE TIMES



*The launch of the Skill India Mission in 2015 further underlined the need to provide skills to young people and address unemployment*

Dr Reddy’s Foundation (DRF) was established in 1996 with the aim of enabling young and disadvantaged youth, access “quality education” and “employability skills” to realise their potential. Over the last couple of decades, DRF’s skilling programmes have impacted over 3.8 lakh youth. It began with the design of one of the earliest short-term placement-linked skilling models – known as Livelihoods Advancement Business School (LABS), which in turn expanded to other parts of the country with support from the Ministry of Rural Development, state governments and development agencies. Later, the programme was replicated in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Vietnam.

“The value-add of these skilling projects was recognised, and in 2010 the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) and later, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) initiated similar skilling programmes across the country,” says Pranav Kumar Choudhary, Director Operations, GROW “The launch of the Skill India Mission in 2015 further underlined the need to provide skills to young people and address unemployment. This also launched a plethora of free skilling programmes, which emphasised more on

quantity or enrolment numbers, rather than the quality of training.”

The Foundation, however, continued to intensify quality of programmes. After a year of research which included primary and secondary data, and after engaging with hundreds of students, alumni, community members, employers and peer skilling agencies from seventy cities, it distilled inputs to shift from traditional domain-based skilling to core employability and technical skills.

“Now with unemployment becoming one of the biggest issues, DRF’s skilling is more relevant than ever,” he says, “With trainings that focus on Foundational skills for entry-level jobs and technical skills that are aligned to market needs, DRF is optimistic that it will be able to support young people to find their feet in a changing market or opt for self-employment.”

But times are changing, and what was important in ’96 may not be relevant in 2020. While DRF focuses on education & livelihoods, new approaches have been added to its portfolio. This has been done in the hope to keep pace with social and development issues. “Apart from ensuring the earlier programmes have new components and value-adds to keep pace with present needs — a good example is the shift

from LABS to GROW in the livelihood skilling sector,” says Pranav, “Several new programmes like Aritra, which in partnership with IIM Bangalore, addresses the leadership gap in the development sector; MITRA works with farmers to build a lead farmer community to help farmers access agri-scientists and establish last-mile connectivity.”

In the last 20 years, DRF has focused on skilling and education. Internal evaluations based on research and market trends, however, highlighted the need for change and soon GROW was born. “Now in the COVID-19 scenario, DRF recognises the need to leverage digital platforms and so shifted gears to include digital classes in addition to the classroom model,” he says, “Similarly, DRF’s skilling modules for persons with disability (GROW PwD) is not just the largest skilling model for persons with disability in the country, but also among the very few, to offer digital courses for persons with disability by a not-for-profit.”

The Foundation’s MITRA programme is not limited to building a platform for farmers to resolve last minute connectivity issues but also, to link them with agri-scientists so that transfer of knowledge and hand-holding during crisis is available to address farmers’ needs.



“Our Sakshat programme supports girls from underprivileged backgrounds, is the only scholarship in the country, which offers mentorship to students by directly connecting them with some of the lead scientists in the country so that the girls are motivated to become scientists and researchers,” says Pranav. Another big contribution by DRF is Aritra. Designed in collaboration with IIM Bangalore, the programme has trained a hundred development sector workers to become visionaries, spearhead policies and address development needs.

“Our programmes have stood the test of time and a testimony to this is number of lives DRF has impacted,” Pranav says, “We have impacted 7.68 lakh young people, while another 2.4 million have benefitted indirectly.” DRF’s numbers are a testimony to its work. The Foundation recognises that addressing complex social problems has to be a collaborative effort.

To achieve this, DRF has worked with stakeholders

to find solutions. Each of its programmes are “pressure tested” and piloted before donors are invited to support the project. Unlike the routine practice of rolling out projects based on donor preferences, DRF has been open-minded, neutral and transparent, and is guided by the collective problem inquiry model, which in turn ensures programmes are need-based and sustainable in outcomes and financial viability. These programmes are scalable and ensure that communities benefit from it.

“We work across the country and have centres in 19 States,” says Pranav, “Expansion plans are need-based and while health and environment are two domains that have a high priority, the immediate focus is on expanding digital skilling for young people (including those with disabilities) diversifying healthcare skilling and agri-programmes to additional states with the help of partnership.”

It goes without saying that DRF’s priority now is to urgently address issues surrounding COVID-19,

and keep pace with evolving needs. In line with the Foundations drive to be agile, learn, design and execute, DRF has shifted gears to factor in the “new normal”. In keeping with this, the Foundation has developed a COVID-19 Response Strategy, disseminated to ensure staff and stakeholders are on the same page. “Apart from emphasising on safety and well-being, all programmes have factored in new needs by ensuring online delivery models, which was possible because digitalization of programmes was in the pipeline and the team only had to advance the datelines to make it operational,” says Pranav

Recently the Foundation launched Project Samhita, to train community members on combating COVID-19. It hopes to impact 5,000 people in remote communities. In addition, DRF’s High Quality Healthcare Skilling Programme plans to include a component on infectious disease management as a value-add to present-day training.



# RESILIENCE AND HOPE



*Gliding through the hallway,  
serving ailing people day and night,  
she is and will always be the optimist.*

*Believer of far-fetched hopes,  
an idealist of improbable dreams,  
she walks into a new mission every day,  
with the intention of success.*

*A divine art,  
shielding like a peaceful warrior,  
she dodges shortcomings in her path,  
emerging as a salient saviour of the world.*

*Committed to solve,  
she perseveres,  
finding sunshine amidst the clouds  
to save the day.*

*Resilience and hope  
are the key to her mantra,  
she turns the impossible to possible,  
making her way through life  
with a radiant sparkle of optimism.*

*Kaushiki Ravi*

## Winning



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

### Explicit Learning

- In all that you do to help others, you are helping yourself.
- Competition is one winning with the other losing, while co-operation is both winning.
- Sharing of the best corn seeds led to everybody enjoying quality corn.

### Introspective Learning

- What does 'winning' mean to me?
- Why do I fail to see the possibility of win-win?
- How do I learn to be truly selfish?



# MAKING RURAL HEALTHCARE A REALITY

Living with a terminal illness is one of the most dreaded predicaments one might find themselves in. It comes as no surprise then that survivors of degenerative and/or terminal illnesses are some of the most generous donors and advocates for research and medical assistance to people going through something similar.

Arun Nevatia's fight with cancer started when he was only 10, but he wouldn't let it come in the way of becoming a successful businessman, well into his forties. His family's plentiful financial resources ensured that Arun got very the best of care. What's better, his family was acutely aware of their position of privilege. That financial constraints among the underprivileged communities make it almost impossible to seek medical help, was a realization that led Arun, his brother Anant and their family to start Rural Health Care Foundation (RHCF) in the year 2009 in their home state of West Bengal.

Nearly 69% of Indian population resides in rural areas, with access to only 3% of all medical professionals. These are dangerously low odds to live by. Due to the lack of sound medical systems, there is a high prevalence of fake medicines or quacks, as they are commonly known. Dependence on the advice of quacks can mislead innocents into medical complications.

In response to all of this, after a successful pilot in Mayapur, in Nadia District of West Bengal, they (Arun, his wife Falguni and Anant) set up RHCF with the aim of establishing affordable health clinics in remote areas. The 12 rural centres are located in areas lacking proper medical facilities within a 50 km radius. Each centre is equipped with General Medicine, Optometry, Dentistry and Homeopathy departments. Each one also has a pharmacy with about 200 kinds of generic medicines. Patients are provided with medical consultation for Rs. 90 and free one-week supply of medications. Low cost spectacles are available and free Cataract and Pterygium surgeries are also undertaken, in collaboration with Rotary Eye Hospitals. Patients incur only their own travelling expenses. RHCF also has five urban centres to serve low-income communities residing in cities.

Asif, a 61-year old man was brought to RHCF with a severe case of arthritis. Bedridden, he was initially brought to the centre in a van. With a monthly income of just about Rs. 6000, it was difficult for him to seek medical attention at city hospitals. His treatment and low-cost medication at RHCF led him to become more and more mobile over a period of time. Today, he rides a bicycle to his nearest centre, just 4 kms away from his home, for his regular check ups and medications.

To date, RHCF has treated over 24 lakh



patients and is consistently recognized for its healthcare excellence, leadership and social innovation through several prestigious awards at the national and international level. Arun's success story was published in the UN Volunteers Book in 2012. A case study on RHCF was published by Harvard Business School in 2013. More recently, in 2019, Falguni was given the "Times Women Hero" award for her outstanding service, among other accolades.

RHCF provides learning opportunities for students in Ivy league universities. As part of the Global Social Entrepreneurship/India Programme 2017-2018 organized by Yale University, a team of four Yale students partnered up with RHCF to work on an enterprise development project. RHCF also has special consultative status with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

What is the secret to their excellence? RHCF's Communications Manager Krishna says, "Quality of care is as important to us as affordability. We have developed an innovative, scalable and replicable service-delivery model. We follow a Standard Operating Procedure (S.O.P.) for every aspect of our work. We are "asset-light", in that our centres operate in rented properties. This enables us to relocate from a low-footfall area to an area of greater need, with ease and without high financial loss. All our operations are computerized and on

cloud. We are also consistently improving performance evaluation and monitoring mechanisms to ensure quality treatment for patients and smooth functioning of the centres. To maximize the impact of donation on our communities we limit administrative cost to 10% of project cost. Charging a nominal consultation-fee of Rs. 90 helps reduce our dependency on donors. It also helps us attain sustainability."

That said, there are other systemic challenges in providing low-cost healthcare. Doctors are often unwilling to practice in remote rural areas. Currently there is a shortage of doctors in the entire state of West Bengal. The rising cost of medicine is another challenge. RHCF rises up to these challenges in a few different ways. Says Krishna, "We have a policy in place for scouting and recruiting experienced and qualified doctors and staff who are both subject matter experts as also willing and passionate about

working with our communities. Since travelling to remote rural areas can be difficult, food and accommodation arrangements are made for our staff in the same building as our centres. We also hire support staff (over 30 at present) from within the communities we serve. We mostly procure generic medicines and use our stock judiciously."

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, RHCF centres have had to be suspended temporarily. Krishna says, "In order to keep our patients as well as our staff safe, we have to abide by the lockdown. Even before the lockdown was announced however, our teams had carried awareness messages to our communities on how to keep safe and stop the spread. Over 13,000 Soaps and 6,300 masks have been distributed so far, with more being supplied currently. We are monitoring the situation very closely." RHCF in partnership with Kolkata Gives Foundation has been arranging masks and reliable month-long food supplies to 10,000 people.

Currently serving over 500 villages, RHCF is looking to expand into several more communities in need of medical care, with the goal of reaching 100 centres in the near future.

Seven years since he passed, Arun Nevatia's vision for accessible health care in remote rural areas, lives on.

Archanaa Ramesh



# CHANGING HUES: AWAKEN THE QUEEN WITHIN

1965, early morning, birds chirping, the sun rising slowly in the horizon, heralding a new beginning! Kausalya Suprabha Rama poorva sandhya pravarthathe ... the early morning prayers heard faintly from the Mani Mama coffee shop with the slowly rising sound of life in the city. Seetha, eldest of 6 siblings, opened her eyes slowly, feeling a bit sore at the back. She was in her parents' house, waiting for the delivery. 9 months full term, and the baby was waiting to come.

This morning she felt too big and full. She knew possibly the time had come to keep the load down. Suddenly, Seetha felt the pang of anxiety inside her. Something changed inside, and there was an uneasy pain in the abdomen. She called out to her mother, who was already in the kitchen cooking for the large 8-member household.

Amma, amma, come here. I think we need to go to the hospital. Come fast.

Amma stopped short in her breath, handed over the kitchen to her second daughter who was drinking coffee, saying just to see to it that there is some breakfast and lunch. And the rest of the family rushed to the government maternity hospital, which was only half a mile away from the house.

After two hours, even before much sound was heard from the labour room, the nurse called to Seetha's mother, Maami, it's a girl! You have become a grandma now. Call the father of the child. I'll bring the child out.

All rushed to the door of the labour room.

"Oh! It's a girl again. Well, Lakshmi is born," sighed a disappointed Seetha's mom, a mother of 6 girls.

"Why, Lakshmi? Say Saraswathi is born; we have been waiting for a granddaughter for the last 10 years!" Quipped Seetha's mother-in-law.

"Lakshmi or Saraswathi, as long as she is a powerful Shakti, she can manage life," added the duty doctor smilingly.

"Go, get some tasty sweets, and distribute. It's a celebration at our home today," said Seetha's husband to his brother as he took out money from his purse.

Thus began the life of Padma Natarajan Iyer.

Seetha lovingly touching the infant who was lying wrapped up in the cradle. "So what if you are a Girl? I am glad you are healthy and beautiful. You are mine, and you will be safe and get the best in life," she said making a solemn promise to herself.

55 years went by.

Dr. Padma Natarajan Iyer, Ph.D. was sipping her evening coffee while sitting on her terrace that was filled with flowers and medicinal plants. The doorbell rang, and the housekeeper announced that Reena, the young 21-year-old next-door neighbour girl, had come.

"Come, Reena, How are you," said Padma.

"Hello Auntie!! So lovely to see you relaxed. I need a favour. Tomorrow is Women's Day, and I have to do the

welcome address for a small event in our college. I wanted to begin with the changing women role, position, presence in society. With your kind of experience as an entrepreneur, writer, teacher, and artist, I thought you can give me some points. I want to focus on women entrepreneurship," said Reena.

With a broad smile, Padma quipped, "Haha! That will cost a fee. It would be giving me a good hug and watching a movie with me this weekend. Is that fine?"

"Of course, Auntie! How can I refuse my ever-young friend?" Reena replied.

Women, being her favourite topic, Dr. Padma, with her usual clarity and conviction, began to roll her thoughts.



Illustration credit: Prathiksha

As I have read and seen in my life, a lot can be spoken about the women down the ages, the way society has changed, and have treated the women in several ways. The Vedic period had women who were scholars and educated with a high level of spiritual and intellectual capability. They also have held positions of importance in the temple activities, State governance and have been active in many fields. But, with the invasion came a lot of changes. In the name of protecting the women, we branded them as the weaker sex, and gender bias was ushered in, making our society largely patriarchal. Patriarchy functioned within families, homes, villages, cities, and society at large, reducing women to the realms of kitchen, household, and caregiver roles. She got symbolized by sex and entertainment, disqualifying her educational and financial needs.

So if you take women empowerment, it has to traverse through social, emotional, economic, legal, occupational, political, and many areas. There are, of course, many reforms brought out by the Indian government since the day of independence to empower women and give them equal opportunities. What you are experiencing now, Reena, is not what I have seen or heard from my grandmother's time. It is not easy to

uproot the deep-rooted ideologies and ways ingrained into the culture and DNA. Uma Keni Prabhu writes in her article on women empowerment, "Society looks upon her as a service provider. We believe that she essentially is a caregiver and has also conditioned her to believe that is her primary role. The rest all is secondary. A woman is a caregiver, for sure. But she is much more than a caregiver. Beyond all, she is a person, a human being, who has a mind of her own. She was never the weaker sex. You cannot brand someone weak basis, just one parameter, which is the physical strength. She was conditioned to believe that she was weak and hence inferior, and that process of indoctrination still continues." How many working women that I know of are hurled blame for not managing the house and family well enough, but the men who are equal professionals are excused.

JSB Charitable Trust has identified areas to work for empowering women

- Having the power to make decisions for self
- Having access to resources and information for proper decision making
- Having numerous options to choose from (instead of yes/no, either/or)
- Ability to show assertiveness while making decisions collectively
- Ability to think positively to bring about a change
- The ability to develop new skills for group power and self-improvement
- The ability to use democratic means to change the perceptions of others
- Adopting changes and a growth process that are self-initiated and never-ending
- Overcoming stigma and staying focused on increasing positive self-image



Illustration credit: Prathiksha

When we talk of women entrepreneurship, it is not merely about entrepreneurship. It is qualified by the word women, which has all the above underlying issues. A woman entrepreneur is considered to be a

confident, creative, and innovative woman desiring economic independence individually and simultaneously creating employment opportunities for others. I want you to actually focus on what I think are two points:

- Women have been through several challenges, but I have always been amazed at their perseverance, resilience, and courage that shows up in most needed time. While the generic symbol is that of weaker sex, women have shown grit and tenacity to manage tough situations, emotionally, socially, ethically and sometimes physically too. They have been masters of their circumstances.
- Women are their own enemies. I mean women to other women, and to oneself. With a scenario like that, it becomes more challenging for entrepreneurship to blossom. The work has to happen within than outside in the society. At times, even if the environment changes, her own belief systems fail her.

*Auntie, thank you, and this will make a good opening for me. You must be knowing so many stories then of such women who were master of circumstances. I am sure listening to them, I will be motivated to see life from a different perspective. Can you share with me those instances and stories? I am sure you have seen over three to four generations, and the timelines must have affected experiences differently. Padma, through her smile and twinkle in the eye, catches the opportunity offered by Reena. Yes, Reena. There are many everyday unsung heroines we can learn from. Keep a weekend free this month, and we will chat up on all those memories. But, you have to make the documentation for me so our effort can be shared with others. Certainly, Auntie. Now I got to go and find an outfit for tomorrow. Okay, here's your hug and I will catch ya at the movie time on Saturday evening. Bye. Love you.*



Dr. Kalpana Sampath, PhD



# RUNNING FOR A CAUSE



People around the world are not active enough and Indians more so. Insufficient physical activity is a risk factor for non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cancer, stroke, cardiovascular diseases and obesity. With nearly 60% of the world population between age group 18 and 60, the inadequate physical activity puts the health of the majority at great risk.

Runner's High is a Bangalore based organisation started over a decade ago by Santhosh Padmanabhan with the goal of bringing running and fitness sport to everyone in the community irrespective of their background, and to help them reach their true potential through sports.

Education for children is perceived in a narrow fashion as academics and specialised technical training that's not hands-on. Hence to break the trend and open everyone's mind to a different perspective, Runner's High began with the aim to open up a different world of learning for the child by the alternate method of running and sports, which breaks the notion of restricted area, physically or mentally where the child should learn.

Santhosh was always enthusiastic about athletics, and practiced long distance running during his school days. He completed engineering at National Institute of Technology, Warangal and went to the US for masters. He volunteered for Asha for Education in the US and during his breaks used to visit the NGO partners in India. As he got more involved and understood the ground realities, their fund raising efforts in the US needed more impetus. The team decided to raise funds by running marathons and that's when he got involved in long distance running again and this time for a cause.

In 2008, Santhosh returned back to India for good. Thulir (Post School Learning



Centre) was an initiative in a tribal village in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu that he had fundraised for many years. Thulir helped the local children who were struggling with the normal curriculum, failed in exams and dropped out of schools. During his many visits to Thulir, he realized the children had immense talent and enthusiasm. He felt physical activity could be a potent way of educating and building their self-esteem, but he felt most Indian schools hardly have any space for sports. So he decided to leverage his expertise in running and passion for education of the disadvantaged. He started training children from various disadvantaged backgrounds and initiatives. He realized that in order to sustain his initiatives financial income was necessary and the idea of coaching people aspiring to run long distances for a fee came about. This is how Runner's High came into being. Runner's High functions as a social enterprise with volunteers from the community coming forward to support all initiatives. The community adopts running as part of their life. They initially join for personal benefits of health and fitness, and soon realise there is a larger meaning to their running and community. The runners contribute time, efforts and money towards the charitable initiatives. They have runners as young as 4 yrs and

up to the age of 80, and 10000+ runners since its inception. In 2013, they started a training program for children and staff at Shristi Special Academy, Bangalore. The participants included children with autism, Downs syndrome, mental retardation, Physiotherapists, Special Educators and parents trained under the guidance of Runner's High. The group started training with small distances and getting used to the new physical activity. After the training, the Special Educators and Physiotherapists saw significant changes in the confidence levels, social interaction and self-expression. The program was then expanded to many more special schools in Bengaluru.

Santhosh says, "My experience in working with these different schools enabled me to crystallize better my ideas about teaching and learning, as I was getting more involved with the curriculum of these schools". He also started coaching children in Snehadan, a NGO that provides shelter, education and medical care to children and people with HIV, and at Ananya - an initiative that works with urban poor and disadvantaged, he became a teacher, handling many roles.

The volunteers at Runner's High also got involved in various activities in these schools, some volunteered as teachers, helped in running of schools, Doctors

conducted free health check-ups, and some developed life skill programs to prepare the children for the professional world. While some gave entrepreneurship lessons to the youth so that they could later start their own business.

Most members contribute money to help these schools. Some have spent time with the children and contributed through skills and passions, finding it to be a fulfilling experience for both runners and the children.

Over the years, Runner's High has come a long way with children trained by them representing Karnataka, and later India in the Special Olympics. The children trained by Runners High are now confident adults, continuing their running and have taken up careers as physical fitness coaches, life skill instructors, gym trainers, dancers and karate instructors, etc.

Santhosh added, "We need to accept that we are currently in an environmental and socio-cultural crisis. Wherever possible we should strive to do less harm to the environment, constantly re-evaluating and improving our processes and systems. Our actions should strive to improve the well-being of every individual in the community and assist in their quest for realizing their true potential - be it in terms of health, education or any experience in life. As part of this effort we all have to start with our own well-being and fitness. Starting from the food we eat, learning where it comes from, supporting our farmers, being physically active, ensuring proper health care systems with a focus on prevention, ensuring proper disposal of our waste and its effects on us - All of these are aspects that we can bring a change in. We need to change and also create awareness and convince more of our community. We should never shy away from that responsibility."

*Aatika Kouser*



# “There is no value in leaving one relationship to build another.”

*Dr. Sumathi Naryanan shares with Marie Banu her thoughts on the progression in the family system.*

**D**r. Sumathi Narayanan, President of Creative Communication and Management Center, Chennai- a Center for Personal and Professional Excellence has been in the field of training and development for over four decades and counselling services for two decades.

An ardent learner, she is a powerful speaker, trainer and leader. She enjoys conducting her workshops and her strength lies in innovating and customizing programs to suit organization's culture and needs. Her mission in life is to share Life Skills to the lesser privileged students or institutes serving them. She strongly believes in helping people develop and realize their potential. It is with this goal she is a counselor for the past one and a half decade as this has become her life's calling.

*In an exclusive interview, Dr. Sumathi Naryanan shares with Marie Banu her thoughts on the progression in the family system.*

## About your education and exposure to training?

I come from a very humble background. My father worked with USIS and my mother was a homemaker. When my father took a voluntary retirement, we moved to Chennai in May 1972. I got exposed to training as a learner in spoken English to public speaking skills. These skills are not taught in schools or colleges. During my childhood, my father used to conduct the Public Speaking programmes and we used to assist him in preparing the workshop materials as we used stencils then. I used to wonder what these Public Speaking programmes were as I could see the participants very confident/different after the 10-week programme.

I did my UG in Home Science at SIET Women's college. My family wanted me to get married when I was 18, but I was determined to pursue my higher education. Every woman has the right to choose what she wants. So, I convinced my parents and in-laws to allow me to continue my education. It was this decision that changed my destiny. I continued my graduation in Home Science and completed my Master's degree in 1978. My husband and my mother in law were very supportive and encouraged me through.

I believe that if you want your family to support you, you need to do your bit first. Pay attention to your relationships, else you're going to mess it up. Having people to love and care for you is what matters. All our goals need to be aligned



with our total life, otherwise it becomes an isolation, in silos.

## Your thoughts on the present generation youth mindsets and their priorities today?

Today's youth are insecure and immature in their relationships. Many relationships are breaking-up as the girl does not want to live with her in-laws in the same house. I have come across several such cases. I ask the girl: "You want the boy without his parents, but you don't mind benefiting from the education his parents gave?"

They do not see the value of having a relationship. You want to have your space, ask for it. Do not demand to severe relationships. If your spouse can do that, he can do it to you too! There is no value in leaving one relationship to build another.

Everybody agrees that one loses freedom after marriage. They don't see the love and the commitment that comes with it. It's all about Facebook posts and the number of likes and comments.

## About the progression in family system over the years?

I have seen the family system progression over the last 40 years. The joint family has its own advantages and disadvantages. The advantage - there was protection; the disadvantage - there was no individual right.

Today, Indian youngsters (all over the world) want their parents to support them and take care of their children. Now, when you want to build relationships, you should realise their worth as well.

When we are getting older, we need to yield for certain things that our children want and also put our foot down at times.

Similarly, we need to allow them to do what they want and express what is not acceptable to us. It is their life!

India has to learn a lot. We do not allow an individual to decide or differ from a group. I see a lot of young girls confused about: 'where do I draw a line?'

## From being a Trainer to becoming a Counselor.

I have been a trainer for the past 40 years. I equip myself by updating my knowledge and did my PhD in the middle of my life. I didn't want to be a counselor for a long time as that was not the space I intended to be in. As I progressed in life, many people approached me with their problems and I used to refer them to other counselors. I then realised the need for counsellors and started equipping myself with the necessary knowledge and skills. Now, I have both the trainer as well as the counselor role in me.

Recently, I completed the Australian Counseling Association certification which qualified me to become a professional Supervisor as well as assist young counselors in their career. All these helped me to interact with people at different levels.

As a trainer in hundreds of organizations and thousands of people with whom I have interacted, I talk about the individual taking responsibility for their own progress and overcoming mental blocks.

## Any challenges you faced as a Counselor?

Every client who approach me for counseling have their own challenges. Perhaps, I can say that when I address a new type of a problem, my ability is

extended and I equip myself even more. My challenge is in updating, upgrading, and making sure that I am doing my best to every one of my clients in every session. So, that is a big challenge.

Many parents don't understand their children. This is the reason we have counselors in many progressive schools. I am a student of human development and remember reading a quote: "Home is a place where we come and lick our wounds so that we can feel healed and go back to the world again." But, for many children, who do not have freedom of expression in their home, it is a place where they get wounded. I have found this to happen in cases when either of their parents or both were not loving, affectionate, and expressive.

So, in the family structure, there is a dysfunctionality that needs to be addressed. It would be ideal to call all the family members and counsel them, but not all have the luxury of visiting a family therapist.

## Your view of Work Life Balance?

I would rather call it 'in LIFE, you balance with work - LBW'. Work brings an imbalance because of physical absence and time duration. It affects every other aspect, for instance, you don't have family time and health regimen.

In India, the workplace has no respect for one's personal life and personal time. So, they think it is okay to ask somebody to stay back after 6 PM and make them work for more. the logic is that they will have to work from 9 to 6 because you are off on Saturday. But, how many companies are willing to provide 5-day week for their employees?

Even companies who have overseas offices and have branches in India or vice-versa have different timings for their staff in each country. As Indian staff are insecure, they will yield to whatever the company demands from them and even work extra hours.

## Can you tell us about Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP)?

NLP is not just a technique. It is a way of life; an approach to life and understanding. You always have a better choice. NLP teaches that life is about choices. Take the Covid situation for instance. You can feel bad for being arrested at home or take full advantage of the situation and utilize it for personal development, indulging in a hobby, taking online courses or talking with family members. NLP proposes that you can always choose to be happy without a reason. All our past experiences, which disturbs us, can be re-programmed. We can make sure that we are in the present and we can programme ourselves to succeed in future. In a nutshell, NLP is the understanding of how we have structured experience in our mind and how it is impacting us. It is about modeling excellence and a very powerful tool to make people more competent and realising their full potential.