Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on people's emotions. It has a significant impact on mental health. anxiety, insomnia, feelings of insecurity, anger, fear of sickness, and risky behaviours are among the most prevalent distress reactions.

Negative emotions are frequent and linked to adjustment which lead to depression, and post-traumatic stress syndrome in the long run.

Infectious pandemics have psychological repercussions that must be handled as part of disaster management. This should be implemented in all aspects of disaster management, including disaster preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery.

The Sphere Handbook and the other Humanitarian Standards Partnership initiatives offer guidance on the minimum response all crisis-affected people have the right to expect. It establishes what needs to be in place for affected populations to survive and recover with dignity.

Human dignity is woven throughout the Handbook. It addresses the early psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, giving suggestions on how to mitigate these effects on the community, including health care providers.

The Handbook states three important overarching factors for COVID-19 response: Firstly, people should be seen as human beings, not just cases. Secondly, community engagement is crucial. And thirdly, focusing on preventing the spread of the Coronavirus should not make us forget affected people's other needs, nor the long-term medical needs of the wider population.
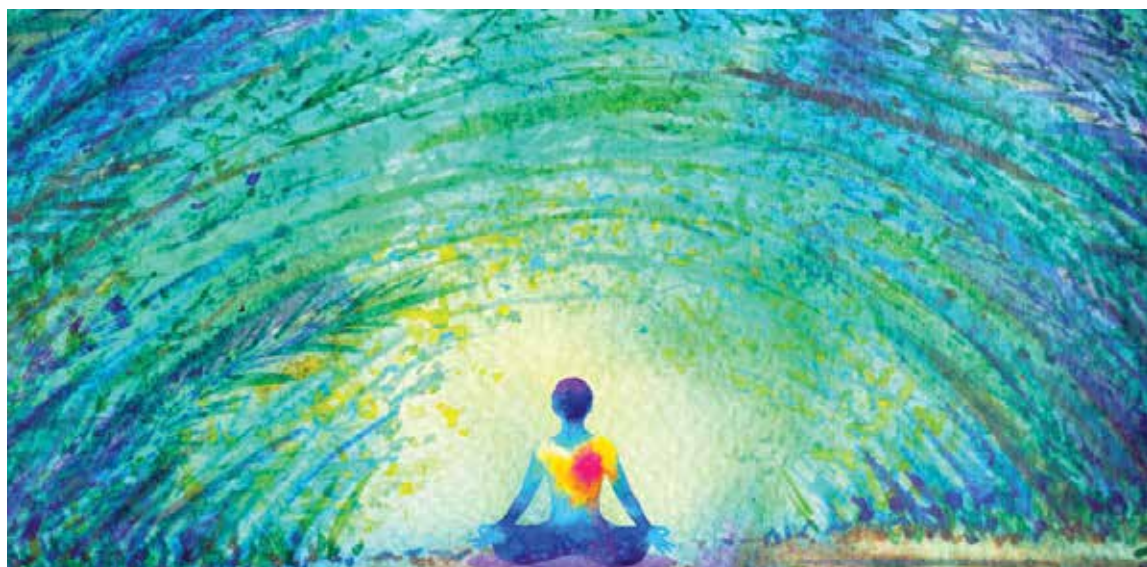
Stay healthy; stay safe!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

IS IT WORLD OR IS IT YOU?

Often times we hear statements such as, "He does not care for me", "She does not respect me", "They are always finding ways to mock at me", "I am looked down upon by all my team mates", and so on. No wonder then, we come to believe that this world is an unkind and cruel place and everyone around us are just trying to get us. But is this really true?

If this is true then some obvious pre conditions are that our life is only dependent on others and we have no control on how it shapes up, behaves, or feels and that everyone is living their life for others - to hurt them, to criticize them, to demean them, etc. Are these two pre conditions true? Do they hold adequate evidence in the world, as we experience it around us? Well if we accept that these conditions are true, we are giving up control of our lives to all those 'others' we meet in life. Therefore, the critical questions begging an answer are – Am I in control of my life? Would I like to take total control of my life? Are humans not focussed on themselves and their own growth and evolution?

Once we take responsibility for our self and decide that we will take control of our life and shape it and drive it as we would like to, then the real beautiful journey of life begins. Having made such a this decision, one tends to think, feel, and act in alignment with the core being and its deepest desires. Even while the environment, people, circumstances, etc. remain the same, one learns to manoeuvre one's way through life, towards one's goals just like a stream of water manoeuvres its way across hills, forests, ridges, etc. and meanders along, over, below hurdles, to finally reach the ocean. Each of us can live life like a stream, in-flow, working our way to our goals. Living thus, one never complains of the constraints but always has an eye on the ways to get through, regardless of the circumstances around.

Our purpose in life, as wise men say, is self-realization. In this pursuit, we require to unlearn and learn many things from all our experiences and constantly evaluate our values and beliefs and strengthen our core. As we are constantly cleansing our self in the fi re of life and its circumstances, we experience fear, inadequateness, remorse, , love, hate, anger (with our self and others), etc. Under the influence of these emotions, our words and actions take on different manifestations. These are then directed at everyone who comes in close range of it. Therefore, in the journey of life, as we criss-cross our paths, we hurl these emotions at each other and create pleasant and unpleasant circumstances around us. These circumstances are merely projections of one's stage in their life journey. These circumstances have not been crafted purely for the other.

Bottom-line is that if each of us works on ourselves and contain the unpleasant projections and manifestations as they continuously morph their way through, then the world will become a happier place. We should, however, project the pleasantness around us, multiplying the positive ions in the environment. In our positive energy journey, some of the things we can do to make our journey more enjoyable, while also contributing to the journey of others, are:

a.   Keep your life moving in a 'fl ow' – cardinal principle, keep moving things forward, even if only a bit

b.   Live in the moment- do not dwell too much in your past or worry about the future

c.   Be in the company of people who contribute positively to your journey – *'satsang'*

d.   Stay away, even if temporarily, from people who make you feel unworthy, inadequate, or helpless

e.   Build a strong core, which includes values and beliefs stemming from your own experience f. Always go back to your core, when in doubt or fear or confusion, pause or hibernate there before moving into action again

f.   Keep your eyes on the goal and also enjoy the journey- both are equally nourishing to the soul

g.   As you journey through life, build and practice rituals that renew all four dimensions of energy (physical energy, mental energy, emotional energy, spiritual energy)

h.   Pursue a hobby that nourishes your deepest self - the soul

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.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

In 2011 "Conversations Today" featured a rapidly growing organization, cofounded by 12 like-minded individuals using the idea of "Power of One" to build life-skills among underserved children and youth in and around Bengaluru. Today it has grown into a massive innovation and life skills-building organization that has already reached over a million children in Delhi, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Telangana and Uttarakhand. Since its inception in 1999, Dream a Dream has provided unique opportunities for children to tap into their fullest potential in all aspects of their lives. Through their After School Life Skill Programme and Career Connect Programme they develop life skills such as problem solving, managing conflict, communication, self-reliance, enterprise and leadership among others, thereby nudging children to dream big, learn to thrive and grow into confident, well rounded individuals. Over 9000 teachers and educators have been trained in innovative learning methodologies that will help them address every child's unique and diverse learning needs.

What are Innovation Labs? These are physical indoor/outdoor spaces in Bengaluru where children have the opportunity to engage in sports and arts. The Life Skills Programme documents the journey of each student and demonstrates the changes that the student undergoes, in order to build larger programmes that can achieve the desired impact at scale. The Career Development Programme provides youth with spoken English classes, career awareness sessions, money management and other workshops. Information about internships, scholarships, vocational training and jobs are also disseminated to keep each young person engaged and prepared to make a healthy transition into adulthood.

Besides these, Dream a Dream also routinely engages other social organizations, government agencies, educators and parents through its 'system demonstrations' and as a way to influence entire ecosystems to be more conducive for a child's wellbeing. The organization develops policies and frameworks through rigorous research of children's ecosystems at both micro and macro levels.

Says Vishal Talreja, Co-founder of Dream a Dream, "At Dream a Dream, we keep the child at the core of all our work. Dignity, Equity and Inclusion are the three pillars that help us achieve a thriving future for these children. We recognize the need to engage with the social identities of our young people." Suchetha Bhat, CEO, Dream a Dream, explains how the lens of cultural intersectionality is applied to build their

activities. She lists out four cultural needs that are recognized and built into Dream a Dream's programmes: a. The need to address adversity; b. The need to address stigma, stereotyping, prejudice, and violence; c. The need to facilitate voice and participation and; d. The need to accommodate difference and change structures of discrimination.

Over the years, Dream a Dream has evolved from direct implementation of programmes to creating systemic change. Says Vishal, "Our direct programmes for children and teachers in Bengaluru act as innovation labs for curricula design and teacher-training modules. This helps us incorporate insight into large-scale programmes delivered via governments and partners. After the launch and implementation of the 'Happiness Curriculum', now we are in various stages of developing life-skills based interventions in five states and are also in the process of partnering with two more states. We are now at a potential to train 200,000 teachers and impact 4 million youth. Today, we are recognised as thought leaders in the life skills space with expertise in addressing adversity and taking on the ecosystem builder role."

The efficacy of Dream a Dream's programmes is visible in the clear and succinct way that their alumni speak on their online platforms. Dream a Dream won the "Football for Good" award by Common Goal, at the World Football Summit 2020. The organization is a certified "Great Place to Work" in 2021. For the third time in a row, this year Dream a Dream is featured in the HundrED's annual Global Collection as one of the leading innovations in K12 education. The organization has earned many other accolades during its years of rising as a force of good.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to newer challenges. Suchetha points out that for the young people that the organization serves, stark and growing inequalities have emerged. Some of the glaring problems are: loss of income and livelihood, migration, high levels of anxiety, children forced to become adults, confusion and misinformation, heightened violence and abuse, gendered impact, loss of learning, loss of dignity, confidence and self-esteem, impact of trauma- all of these factors leading to an inability to thrive.

The organization put together a COVID-19 task force which since April of last year has provided ration support, reintegration modules to encourage kids to get back into learning and has set up a youth-run online mentoring programme. The Life Skills Programme and Skill Development Programme have been made available online. A new movement "#WhatIf" was floated, where young changemakers can

Dignity, Equity and Inclusion are the three pillars that help us achieve a thriving future for these children.

reimagine themselves to become resourceful changemakers within their settings and continue to make useful contributions to their immediate surroundings. Vishal explains that the Dream a Dream community has now identified a whole host of areas where support needs to be built, ranging from medical care to information, to social and emotional support systems. Aside from the pandemic related changes, Suchetha adds that continuous effort is being made towards strengthening monitoring and evaluation of Dream a Dream's projects.

"We realise that this is not enough, and that we can do more. Pervasive systemic barriers-- like an education system anchored on outdated and narrow notions of what success means-does not allow life skills to take centre-stage in education and prevents children

from thriving, says Vishal, adding that, "We want to evolve further, from equipping children with life skills, to promoting 'thriving' as the purpose of education. Sharing what this means for Dream a Dream, Suchetha says that, "Thriving includes life skills and stretches beyond that, enabling children to be resilient, responsible and happy. A move towards thriving allows us to tackle systemic barriers currently holding children back and create a more enabling environment. This is a long journey that will require large-scale change, but one that we are well-positioned to embark on given our track record and one that allows us to take advantage of the movement towards holistic education, well-being and equity within India and around the world."

Archanaa Ramesh

CHANGING HUES: AWAKEN THE QUEEN WITHIN

Superwoman in the whirl of Pandemic

*R*iiiiiing... Amala, wake up! Your alarm...

Hmmm...just two more minutes... (After 30 secs) Oh, my God! I can't be late. I have so much to do...

Amala dear, can you please make coffee for Papa also. He is up early, and give him biscuits too...

Amma, amma, maaa... I am not able to log into this zoom. Come fast and help me. The class will start in 5 minutes. Come soon, come!

Yes, Sir! I have already told the team about this, Sir. I will look into it today and update you by evening...

Will you make my breakfast earlier? I have my conference call at 9 am today. Very important!

Hello, Madam Amala? Calling from ICICI. For the loan that you had applied for, we need some documents. Can you please look into it today?

Madam, I am keeping the ironed clothes here. Please Gpay Rs.680/- now...

Team, Please let us gear up and take the customer requirements properly. There seem to be some issues, and we need to troubleshoot immediately...

Amala, can you order my medicines this evening? Also, we have to fix a telecall with the doctor...

Hello, Naturals Parlour! is it Rajni? Amala, here. Can you please set a home appointment for me on Saturday afternoon? My children need a haircut...

Hi! Amala, planning class friends, zoom call on Sunday – don't give excuses, join, yaar...

Amma, amma, where is that maths book that you were looking into yesterday? I can't find it...

Amala, let's clean at least the Mommy-pappa room. It is very dusty, and they are allergic too...

Ma, ma, ma, look, Akka is hitting me! she is not giving me her chocolate, come here now, ahhhh...

Amala, we need to get vegetables. Only one hour more for the shops to close before lockdown

Yes, you heard it right, LOCKDOWN! Lockdown? Where is the Lockdown for Amala??? The multi-tasker, efficient, effective, energetic, so-called Woman has become a Super Woman!

Not that Amala was not handling the above things before. Not that people at home did not look up to her to address most of the crisis. But, the scenario is different. The Pandemic has suddenly brought everything under one roof and has removed all possible support and help from outside. This strange situation has made Amala go in a whirlwind circle from when she wakes up to the time she drops into bed exhausted. I wonder, what

makes her take this for almost a year and a half and continue? What makes her tick and tolerate all the varied avatars she plays from Goddess Lakshmi, Saraswathi, Shakthi, Durga to Parameshwari in the Indian connotation?

It is strange, you sit with her for a few minutes and ask, 'how are you?' An immense pour out of all the frustrations, tiredness, anger, irritation will come out, especially on what others are not doing to get life to be better at home. Nevertheless, you suggest to Amala, Let things be the way they are. Stop responding immediately as though the entire world is sitting on you. Lo! Pat answer comes, what do you mean, I am dispensable? None of them knows how to manage in the house. Everything will be haywire, and I will have to set it right later. They all know I will do it correctly, and if I don't help them, who will? They are my family and my team. I need to stand by them. I will always want to do my best, and there is so much more to do! Look, I can sacrifice myself,

but no one else in my life!

Amidst the chaos, fear, confusion, helplessness, pain, bonding and togetherness emerge the mother in her, the Strong Woman. Playing multiple roles – mother, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, leader, colleague, friend, mentor and much more, this Superwoman is a ceaseless mixture of emotions and thoughts. Empathy galore, unknown strength that gushes from inside, holding the fort and sanity all around her, the Superwoman truly is indispensable!

Yes, we have to go through Amala's high pitched day after day statements -

Amma, why don't you eat on time and give rest to those TV shows? They are upsetting you

Rohan, can you help me. I wonder how you forget you have a 50% share in everything we do in life, including doing the dishes!

These kids, stop playing and get to finish your homework soon.

Drink up the milk. I need to finish my work and get to bed soon. No one thinks about me!

next time, don't ask me, ask Dad for help... always Ma, Ma, Ma... I am tired of this...

How much can I do? Why don't you understand I am a human?

One day, I will not be there, and then you'll know my worth!

This fantastic, amazing, beautiful, multi-tasking, efficient, Superwoman thrives on love, care, appreciation, respect, hugs and acceptance! Let's Celebrate the Superwoman because of who the world is as it is, even in Pandemic times.

Dr Kalpana Sampath
Illustration by Muralidharan

Reflect:

- How much do I show my care, love, affection for the Super woman in my life?
- Have I thanked and appreciated her for her efforts and support that makes my life easy?

Objectivity

ARPITHA

Some bees built a comb in the hollow trunk of an oak. Some drones came along and claimed that they had built it, and that it belonged to them. The case was brought into court before the judge wasp, who, knowing the habits of both parties, addressed them thus: "The plaintiffs and defendants are so much alike in shape and colour that it is difficult to say who the rightful owners and the case has rightly been brought before me. Now I think that justice will best be served by following the plan, which I propose. Let each party take a hive and build a new comb, so that from the shape of the cells and the taste of the honey it will be quite clear to whom the comb in dispute belongs. The bees readily agreed to the wasp's plan, but the drones would not do so, as they did not know how to th make a comb. Whereupon the wasp gave judgement: "It is now clear who made the comb, and who did not; the court gives judgement in favour of the bees."

Explicit Learning

A. Be like the bees, not the drones.

B. The wasp proved to be a wise judge.

C. Justice calls for objectivity and intelligence.

Introspective Learning

A. What corrupts my objectivity?

B. How do I build objectivity into my decisions?

C. What is the nature of 'Objectivity'?

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Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

D.: Horripilation, sobbing voice, joyful tears, etc., are mentioned in *Atma Vidya Vilasa* and other works. Are these found in *samadhi*, or before, or after?

M.: All these are the symptoms of exceedingly subtle modes of mind (*vrittis*). Without duality they cannot remain. *Samadhi* is Perfect Peace where these cannot find place. After emerging from *samadhi* the remembrance of the state gives rise to these symptoms.

In *bhakti marga* (path of devotion) these are the precursors to *samadhi*.

D.: Are they not so in the path of *jnana*?

M.: May be. There is no definiteness about it. It depends on the nature of the individual. Individuality entirely lost, these cannot find a place. Even the slightest trace of it being present, these symptoms become manifest.

Manickavachagar and other saints have spoken of these symptoms. They say tears rush forth involuntarily and irrepressibly. Though aware of tears they are unable to repress them.

I had the same experience when I was staying Virupaksha cave.

D.: Sleep state is said to be the experience of Bliss,
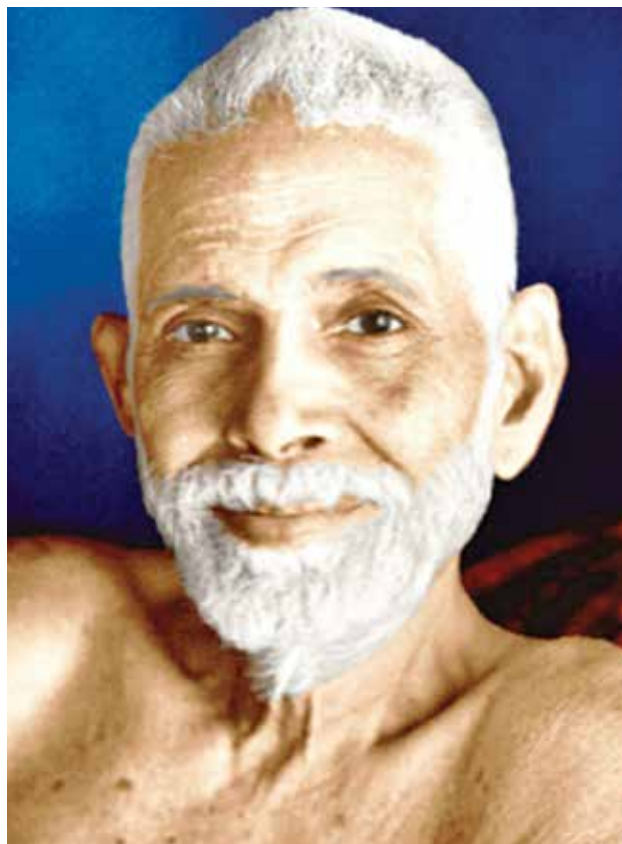
yet, on recollecting it the hairs do not stand on end. Why should they do so, if the *samadhi* state is recollected?

M.: *Samadhi* means sleep in waking state (*jagrat sushupti*). Bliss is overpowering and the experience is very clear, whereas it is different in sleep.

D.: Can we put it that in sleep there is no unhappiness, nor happiness, i.e., the experience is negative not positive.

M.: But the recollection is positive "I slept happily," says the man. So there must be the experience of happiness in sleep.

D.: Does Bliss consist only in the absence of unhappiness, or is it anything positive?

M.: It is positive. Loss of unhappiness and rise of happiness are simultaneous.
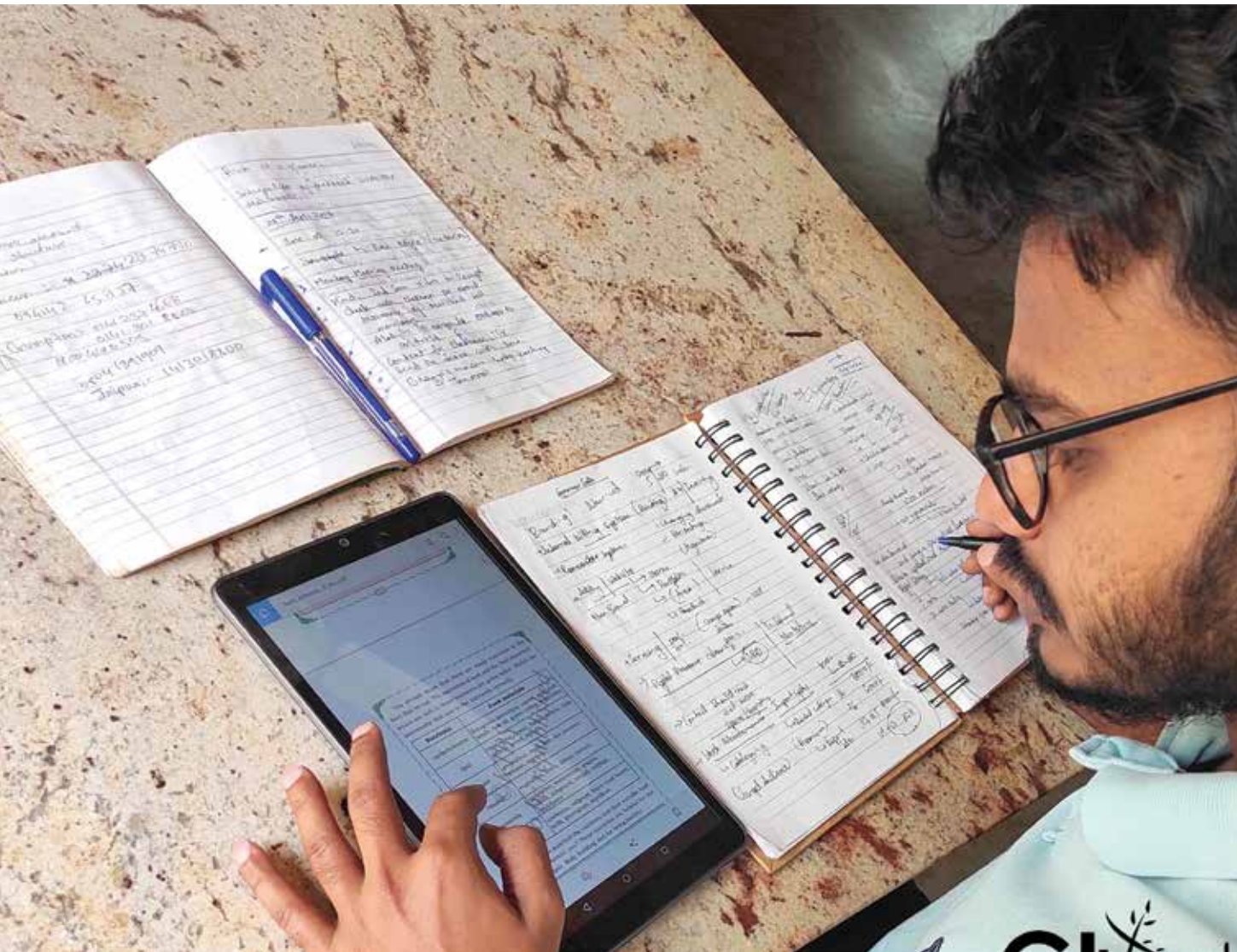
D.: Can it be that the recollection of happiness in sleep is not clear and so there is no horripilation, etc.?

M.: The Bliss of *samadhi* is a perfectly clear experience and its recollection also is similar. But the experience of sleep is otherwise.

Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharishi

TECHNOLOGY AND TEACHING FOR TOMORROW

The access to quality education has been one of the great dividers among Indian society — more so, the access to education technology. While students of privileged private schools have had access to this technology, lesser privileged schools were contending with more basic problems like teacher shortage, which translated to learning opportunities that went amiss.

However, that problem turned around on its head when Bengaluru-based CLT India introduced e-Patshale, conceptualized to transform rural classrooms.

"The strategy was to build a scalable and replicable model where master-teachers would design innovative pedagogy for digital STEM, for local practitioners and technology would be leveraged to deliver them to local areas," the organization's website says. "The entire program architecture was built around what 'access' translated to in the context of underserved communities, which further meant that the resources had to be in many regional languages," it adds.

In a nutshell, CLT e-Patashale is about bringing best teaching practices to every classroom leveraging technology.

Today, the organization has a collection of over 15,000 videos in four languages, 2,000 digital workbooks for teachers, and 80,000 teachers with enhanced skills. The organization has impacted the lives of 2.6 million students across 12,600 classrooms that learn from e-Patshale STEM.

Needless to say, collaborations with State and District governments, corporate entities, NGOs and local communities have made these initiatives sustainable. However, unique problems call for unique strategies and approaches to solving them. And the COVID-19 outbreak has been one such problem.

"COVID threw many challenges and children were impacted the worst around the world. Everyone in this sector realized that we needed multi-pronged approaches to build resilience at a systemic level," says Bhagya Rangachar, Founder & CEO, CLT India, "Digital interventions came to the surface, but the children in under-served communities would end up being left behind for many reasons, like not having connectivity, affordable technology, digital resources and training."

However, with e-learning getting a lot of attention post-COVID for many reasons, one can't help but wonder what caused CLT India to start e-learning a decade-and-a-half earlier. "CLT has been working with government schools for 22 years in different capacities. But one problem or challenge that we have faced day to day was the severe shortage of teachers," says Bhagya.

"Rural schools have the additional challenge of recruiting teachers with subject-matter expertise in Science, Mathematics and English," she adds, "Headmasters were repeatedly asking us to give them additional teachers." And that was how CLT's e-Patashale began implementing the best teaching practices into everyday classroom learning by leveraging technology.

Over a hundred teachers, subject-matter experts and textbook committee members worked together for four years to create innovative content for remote teachers. "They created a framework for pedagogy and built best practices of teaching into every module," says Bhagya, "The technology was designed to keep it simple and light for rural schools."

In recognition of CLT's efforts, the organization was awarded with the second Millennium Alliance Award in 2020, which stands as a testimonial to its

impact at scale. CLT's bigger claim to fame, no doubt, is the fact that the technology was delivered in-house and delivered to remote rural schools, online and offline.

"Technology interventions in India have an additional challenge, other than no connectivity in rural schools, with many States adopting their own regional language to teach," says Bhagya, "CLT has countered this challenge by making available all the teaching and learning resources in regional languages and mobile technology."

CLT's work has gained momentum and recognition as a scalable model that can be easily replicated. The group has received the Social Innovation Award, which recognizes 50 impactful social innovators globally, the Digital India Award conferred by The Times Group and has been featured on CNBC-TV18's flagship show, Changemakers.

"While the internet and computers have changed how information is shared across the globe, only 16% of rural residents in India have access to the internet. The bulk of existing online material available is not translated into regional languages. Many do not even have electricity for several hours per day," says Bhagya, "CLT e-Patashale was conceptualized to address the massive challenges children face in underserved communities to complete school education with good learning outcomes, with no access to quality schools, good teachers and learning resources."

One of the ways CLT has tried solving problems at scale is to create a hub-and-spoke model, where Master Teachers designed in-house innovative STEM pedagogy for Classes 5 to 10 in regional languages. The company also designed low-cost technology delivery models for remote areas with no connectivity.

"CLT's focus has been to address the lack of access to basic needs in the context of education. Our body of work examines 'access' in the context of under-served communities," says Bhagya, "For example, having content or resources on internet does not

necessarily become usable for someone when they cannot afford the technology, training and not available in a regional language. Our strategy has been to build an entire ecosystem to develop relevant resources for the practitioners in their regional languages and develop low-cost mobile technology delivery models with data analytics."

CLT has implemented its e-Patshale program in 4,200 village schools across multiple states including Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan and Bihar. On the last-mile front, the technology is light and user-friendly, while the back-end has a series of complex systems and processes. "While E-learning ecosystems could comprise an android television, it can also be a plug & play android device for TV, which hosts all the content and gives access without the need for internet," says Bhagya, "The device is also sim-enabled that fetches data on usage from every remote area, and reflects on partner dashboard whenever there is connection."

CLT has launched two additional apps on the Google Play Store — Jigi and Jigi Jigi — which enable access to learning outside classrooms. "About 2.5 million learners are direct beneficiaries, which has impacted the way they learn science and mathematics," says Bhagya, "We have learnt that we can influence the local practitioners to be motivated, and adopt effective methodologies while using innovative resources."

CLT India's collaboration with the government, corporate enterprises and foundations are key drivers for scale and reach. The organization aims to build a community of learners that it hopes will eventually grow to 10 million students over the next five years. "We're hoping they can access the best pedagogy in their own regional languages with affordable technology," says Bhagya, "Research shows that the most cost-effective way to scale and gain social return on our investment is through digital learning."

NEED OF THE HOUR:
Promoting all-round development

India with a population of 1.2 billion people has almost 2/3 of the people living below the poverty line. It is the second most populous country in the world after China. Over the years, Indian economy has risen by almost 10%, out of which only a small segment of our society has benefited. A large section of people continue to lead an impoverished life. This is where NGO's play a role by putting in efforts to uplift the society and making them financially sustainable.

The Centre for Tribal and Rural development trust (CTRD Trust) established in 1988, in Nilgiri District, Tamil Nadu has been working for the welfare of the indigenous tribal and rural communities over the last three decades in the field of health, education, livelihood, tribal development, disability and environment.

Mr. R.S. Ranganathen, Founder & CEO of CTRD Trust says "The main aim of our Trust is to improve the socio-economic conditions by helping the community in Gudalur, Ooty and Coonoor blocks to overcome the grip of poverty and ignorance. Our focus was equality and basic human rights for all, regardless of age, gender, and education, and providing livelihood opportunities for sustainable economic development."

Over the years CTRD trust had projects planned and implemented with the guidance of the community as well as experts and has brought about significant changes. The Trust has individually identified several social issues and brought awareness and social change through its programmes.

Woman empowerment and growth:

In 2003, the organisation was registered under the Tamil Nadu Woman Development Corporation. Since then, they have formed 1,180 women self-help groups of which 100 are exclusive tribal woman groups which helps in capacity building and livelihood training programmes for women in Nilgiris.

They have also formed 39 Village level groups which are registered under the Tamil Nadu Societies Act and Tea Board of India. These Village level groups help in providing various tea board subsidy schemes to the tribal farmers working in tea cultivation besides enhancing their skills. This project is spread over 4 municipalities, 11 towns, 35 villages Panchayat of Nilgiris.

Health:

Health being a major concern due to lack of access to healthcare facilities, CTRD initiated the Medical Outreach Programme – where a team of dedicated staff –doctors, nurses, pharmacist–provide healthcare to 150 remote tribal villages. Free health camps are organised in partnership with multi specialty hospitals in the nearby cities.

Education:

To reduce the dropout rate and to encourage literacy, Village Level Preparatory Schools are operated to spark interest in education amongst children belonging to the age group of 4 to 6 years. Nearly 4,200 tribal children have benefited so far. Educational materials like uniforms and stationeries are provided along with tuition fees for university students in 150 tribal villages. Evening coaching centres, painting camps, environmental camps and doctor-kid programmes are organised to improve skills and awareness among children.

Community infrastructure projects:

Tribal communities living in traditional huts have faced infrastructure related issues every now and then. To address this, CTRD came up with "rural housing and livelihood programme for the indigenous communities" wherein solid structure houses were designed by architectural experts and provided. This project was supported by DESWOS, a German-based donor agency. By partnering with Raleigh International, a UK based charity which encourages youth to come together to construct houses, toilets, schools and biogas units for the rural poor communities, 150 houses were constructed, besides a model village project.

Environmental projects:

Nilgiris, otherwise known as 'Blue Mountains' is home to thousands of species of flora and hundreds of animals. To preserve this, CTRD educates communities about climate change. The Trust has also implemented projects to promote renewable energy through biogas plants and safeguarding natural bio-diversity and habitat with the support of Air Bus Corporate Foundation to reduce the Co2.

Projects for differently abled:

Since 2005, CTRD has partnered with Sight savers International, which helps visually challenged people and facilitates people to actively seek better eye care services and lead a better quality of life.

Sanitation program:

CTRD Trust has taken initiative to improve the sanitation culture of the communities by conducting school-level, Panchayat-level and block-level awareness programmes. It also helped to reduce the soil and groundwater pollution and most importantly reduced communicable/viral diseases. So far, CTRD has constructed more than 200 standard sanitation units in Nilgiris.

"We have partnered with several multi-lateral, international, national, government and corporate agencies to support and implement result driven project to benefit them on all fronts. To mention a few, Air Bus Corporate Foundation, Global Environmental Facility, United Nations Development Programme, Centre for environmental Education, AWO international, Care India, NABARD, and many more," says Ranganathen.

Presently CTRD is working with SODI international, Germany to bring organic tea cultivation and started a tea factory to promote tribal tea thereby leading to a sustainable income for the tribal farmers.

Aatika Kouser

Resilience through Community Learning

Perinatal period is the most crucial in the lives of both mothers and children. Maternal Mortality Ratio in India for the period of 2016-2018 was 113 per 100,000 live births. This is a roughly 5% improvement from the previous two-year period. Neo-natal Mortality Rate has declined from 52 per 1000 live births in 1990 to 28 per 1000 live births in 2013. Studies have repeatedly shown that skilled professional care, timely management and treatment usually tips the scales in terms of life and death of both mother and infant.

As we well know, access to the above-mentioned care continues to be a challenge in rural and remote geographical locations in countries like ours. How then are these numbers improving, gradually but steadily each passing year? We have organizations like Ekjut to thank, for that.

Since its inception in 2002, Ekjut has been working with marginalized and tribal communities initially in Jharkhand and Odisha, and then expanding to Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, primarily addressing issues of maternal and child health and nutrition, but eventually expanding to other thematic areas. Managed and run by a diverse group of people with expertise ranging from Medicine and Healthcare, Development and Academics to Management, the organization uses evidence-based approaches to operate and scale up their work. Co-founders Dr. Prasanta Tripathy and Dr. Nirmala Nair, both medical professionals with an impressive combined experience in community health, pediatrics and maternal health, have ceaselessly worked towards effecting policy changes at the national level, through their research work as well as engagement with the National Health Missions (NHM) and other state and central government programmes.

We spoke with Priyanka Yadav, from Ekjut, to learn more about their work. Says Priyanka, "We at Ekjut have been early adopters of the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) approach to address issues of maternal and newborn health and nutrition. Trained facilitators work with groups of women at the village level to collectively explore the effect of their behaviour, become engaged in decision making and proactively participate in problem solving. PLA meetings are facilitated on a monthly basis by a trained village woman or a frontline service provider. Participating communities identify and prioritize problems, plan, initiate and implement agreed-upon strategies and evaluate the same, together." She shared that the approach has not only been effective in reducing maternal and newborn mortality and post-natal depression, but it was also found to be sustainably cost effective. It was endorsed and globally recommended by WHO in 2014. Ekjut earned the 'ImPACT' Trial of the Year Award for its evidence-based work by Society of Clinical Trial and the 'Public Health Champion' award by WHO in 2015.

In 2016, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India recommended the PLA approach to be scaled up in 10 Indian states to improve maternal and newborn health outcomes. Ekjut has since supported the Governments of Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in scaling up their community programmes. They have also broadened their work to combat malnutrition, improve youth engagement and development, adolescent health and wellbeing, address gender-based violence and mental health.

Summing up the philosophy of the organization, Priyanka says, "We believe in peoples' knowledge

systems and abilities, ensuring community accountability and transparency, a belief that women should have more than an equal share/say. We recognise that the state has primary responsibility in ensuring equity and entitlements, strengthening democratic practices. We are working towards a world in which the voice of its people guides the decisions that shape the quality of their lives."

More than a year into this pandemic, Ekjut's work has rapidly evolved to cope with changing times. Priyanka admits, "The initial lockdowns at the start of the pandemic left us feeling a little helpless. We started off distributing cooked food and providing dry rations to various vulnerable groups. However, we soon started working with the state-run Control Rooms initiated by the Department of Labor Training and Employment to support migrant workers stranded at various parts of the country at present we are engaged in encouraging rural communities to get themselves vaccinated."

Working together with NHM Jharkhand, Ekjut supported Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers with digitization of individuals under home quarantine across the region in a spatial-temporal manner during this pandemic. How did they do this? The PLA app template developed for program purposes was adapted to report five consecutive, intensive public health surveys (IPHS) done by ASHAs to trace migrant

returnees and identify vulnerable populations in their catchment areas. This already familiar, digital mode of reporting helped the department in real time tracing the scenario, consequent planning and decision making in discussion with other line departments. A publication of the National Disaster Management Authority & Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure recognized both the use of geo-spatial technologies and app-based IPHS reporting as "Innovation & Outcomes" from Jharkhand. Use of these tools and technologies not only strengthened the health services surveillance framework and managing the work better but also helped in reducing the risk to front line workers by limiting their exposure from multiple visits.

In order to boost adolescent mental wellbeing during the time of lockdowns, Ekjut encouraged youth to distribute over 10,000 saplings in and around their communities to help create kitchen gardens in every home. This initiative also steered the communities towards achieving better food security. Many adolescent facilitators created wall writings of COVID-19 safety measures in the local Ho language, and demonstrated ways to overcome stigma and discrimination associated with the virus. Small groups presently conduct informal coaching, online classes and online quiz competitions for all classes through the Jharkhand Education Department's portal.

In spite of doing so much, challenges continue to haunt Ekjut. Some of the most remote vulnerable tribal groups remain inaccessible at this time. Dissemination of services is difficult due to prolonged travel and funding restrictions. However, Priyanka says optimistically, "Adaptability, resilience and creating an environment of perseverance for our colleagues and communities is our focus moving ahead. We are working on building virtual platforms and digital tools to continue building the capacity and skills of our communities."

Archanaa Ramesh

ARTS AND MUSIC THE PATH TO MENTAL WELL-BEING FOR CHILDREN

When schools shut across India as part of a national lockdown in March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, one NGO jumped at the chance to turn disaster into opportunity.

Based in Chennai, the southern capital of Tamil Nadu state, NalandaWay Foundation envisioned that thousands of school-going children stuck at home for an indefinite and unforeseeable future would start to feel anxious and restless. This would in turn affect their mental health.

NalandaWay's solution was to use its knowledge and expertise in arts-based education to provide children, young people and even parents and teachers with ways to cope during these uncertain times.

DIAL-A-STRESS-RELIEVER

One of the non-profit's interventions targeted 15 and 16-year-old students who were meant to be taking their 10th grade school-leaving examinations, which were postponed or cancelled. NalandaWay partnered with the Tamil Nadu state government and UNICEF to devise a programme that would reduce the stress of students who were stuck in limbo.

Since a majority of the children were from marginalised backgrounds and did not own smartphones, NalandaWay could not rely on delivering this initiative via online platforms. Instead, it worked around this challenge by utilising the country's Voice Response System, which allowed students to ring a toll-free number that would automatically return their call.

Upon answering the phone, students listened to a new recorded story lasting up to six minutes each day over 30 days. The narrative revolved around characters of the same age who experienced similar challenges. Through the art of storytelling, young listeners picked up ideas and strategies on how to cope with mental health issues and completed accompanying exercises after each daily recording.

Founder Sriram V Ayer says more than 30,000 students participated in this programme, called Take It Eazy. One boy, in particular, was so dedicated he would wake up at four in the morning to borrow a neighbour's phone. A child labourer, he listened to the stories every day, and completed the exercises before heading to work at six.

"This is a kid who can't speak English, but was suddenly talking about locus of control or being mindful and journaling. I was really touched," recounts Sriram. "We were able to create something interesting and innovative that a child with no access but [plenty of determination] found a way to use the resource for his own benefit."

PANDEMIC INTERVENTIONS

Another COVID-19 response was to launch a set of guides called Art for Wellbeing - A Parent's Guide, to reach out to children aged three to 15, as well as their caregivers. Sriram explains that the guides were a way to help them express their fears, deal with emotions and build a circle of safety. The guides were so popular they have been translated into 16 languages, including local, and foreign languages, such as Vietnamese, Malay, Bahasa Indonesia, German, Italian and French.

Sriram attributes his connection to the Singapore International Foundation's Arts for Good (A4G) Fellowship programme as crucial to expanding the reach of these guides beyond India. A4G aims to enhance cross-cultural understanding and its network of fellows in Asia rallied around NalandaWay during the pandemic to translate the Art for Wellbeing guides.

"It was remarkable," says Sriram. "We are actively looking at how to serve populations of young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in our respective countries through shared arts-based resources."

ART AS HEALER OF SOCIAL DIVIDES

Our Better World told the story of NalandaWay Foundation in November 2018, garnering nearly

730,000 views with more than 2,320 actions taken. The focus of the video was on the Foundation's Chennai Children's Choir.

Sriram says the video was successful in presenting NalandaWay's impact in a unique way and is used as a tool to engage with donors and communities: "The OBW story looked at NalandaWay from the point of bringing children from various castes and religions to come together [through music]. It was not an angle that we had thought about."

Since the video was published, NalandaWay has expanded and deepened its scope of arts-based learning and intervention programmes. It has also increased its ability to impact more children by working with local and international NGOs in different parts of India.

"In 2019, we realised that we needed to widen our footprint across the country. But that we would not be able to deliver a lot of these programmes ourselves. So strategically, we decided to partner with different organisations in different parts of the country and around the world," says Sriram. "We provided the expertise, experience, resources — lesson plans, curriculum, to these organisations, which allowed us to scale our initiatives in other areas."

PANDEMIC CREATES HURDLE TO EDUCATION

COVID-19 has thrown a pall over NalandaWay's efforts to keep children from low-income families in school. Many have been forced to return to work.

"We see many of our own young people, 14, 15-year-olds, leaving school and getting back to work, which is heartbreaking," bemoans Sriram. "A lot of them are struggling because 90 per cent of their parents have lost their livelihoods. They're in informal sectors and a lot are dependent on unskilled work, and working in shops and commercial establishments that were shut."

With many schools switching to online, video-based learning, children from marginalised communities were unable to continue accessing an education from home. Sriram explains that they either did not own the technology or could not afford to pay for internet data.

"We had to quickly find alternative methods to reach these children directly," he says. "So we put together home learning kits, focusing on three objectives. First and second is to engage them in learning English and foundation arithmetic and numeracy. Third is using art for well-being."

The kits were created for students aged four to 10 years old. To date over 34,000 children in Chennai, Coimbatore, and Delhi NCR have received the kits in a bag containing stationery, art materials, a set of plain notebooks and an Art for Wellbeing workbook. Sriram says that NalandaWay will continue to produce these kits with support from the public, even after March, when schools are expected to reopen. Each kit costs Rs 400 (US$5), and online donations are accepted.

"Sometimes, disasters provide an opportunity for us to rethink how we want to approach our communities and how we want to work, providing clarity. It [the pandemic] has also given us a set of resources, brought new people together, increasing skill sets and competencies. All of which we may not have achieved this soon [if not for the pandemic]."

ABOUT NALANDAWAY FOUNDATION

NalandaWay Foundation is a non-profit from India that provides free arts programmes to children to bridge social divides, while giving children from disadvantaged homes a means to express themselves. It is a key partner of Singapore International Foundation's Arts for Good Fellowship, which fosters a community of practice that harnesses the power of arts and culture to create positive social change.

A story by Our Better World
(the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore International Foundation
www.ourbetterworld.org

Centre for Social Initiative and Management

CSIM
to learn • to heal • to raise

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

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non- profits to facilitate them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives.**www.csim.in**

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

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"Social Change for Nation Building."

Shri Praveen Karn, a Post Graduate in Rural Development from Xavier Institute of Social Services is the Group Head for CSR and Communication at Spark Minda Group. While working for CSR & Communication in the industry for more than 14 years, Praveen was also ranked among 25 CSR professionals in India by the CSR Times, declared among the 50 most influential leaders in CSR by World CSR Congress and was placed among 25 Impactful CSR Leaders by India CSR.

His program for PWDs has won The National CSR Award 2019, conferred by the Ministry of Finance & Corporate Affairs, Government of India and the President of India. He is appointed in the expert panel of IICA, is a member of CSR Committee of ASSOCHAM, a member of CSR for Northern Region of CII and has contributed in more than 50 national and international forums as an accomplished speaker.

In an exclusive interview, Shri Praveen Karn shares with Marie Banu Spark Minda Group's CSR Programmes.

About the founder of Spark Minda group and his philanthropical work?

Spark Minda Group was founded in 1958 by Late Shri Shadi Lal Minda, a leading industrialist and renowned philanthropist who had steered the group to emerge as a leading player in the Indian automotive industry since its inception. His firm belief in "Social Change for Nation Building" provided the impetus for how the group is known today – 'delivering uncompromising quality in automotive parts'.

In 1987, he founded the Moga Devi Minda Charitable Trust that has successfully accomplished several social projects like, a children home in Delhi "Minda Bal Gram", a vocational training center for youngsters across several villages in Adampur Block, Haryana, known as "S. L. Minda Seva Kendra", a value based, not-for-profit, co-education school "Moga Devi Minda Memorial School", and established the "S. L. Minda Memorial Sports Academy" in Bagla, Hisar, Haryana. He believed that any form of service towards destitute society will ultimately serve the nation, besides offering service to God.

What are the focus areas of Spark Minda Group's CSR programmes?

Spark Minda Foundation (SMF) is the CSR wing of Spark Minda Group with a vision of building a sustainable society and improving their quality of life. Since its inception in 2014, SMF has been carrying out various programmes that focus on Education, Livelihood, Women Empowerment, Healthcare and Persons with disabilities. SMF's objective is to protect the planet through affirmative action, thereby leading the integrated and inclusive growth of people and environment.

SMF's aim of enabling sustainable community development drives the foundation to run projects that benefit children, youth and women in rural communities across five states of India, namely, Haryana, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh.

About the 'Saksham' programme?

Saksham Programme was conceptualized in 2014. It was a result of the determination of the board to bring value to the society, especially towards the most marginalized and discriminated sections. This programme takes a holistic approach to empower and uplift Persons with disabilities.

Saksham attempts to provide assisstive and accessible aid, support to gain financial independence by creating inclusive spaces and job opportunities, and also help the PWDs to access governmental support policies through UDID registration.

Started in 2015, camps were organized between 2016-2018 in several domestic locations of Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, and also in Indonesia and Vietnam for the empowerment of PWDs. The foundation also collaborated with the Sadhbhavana Programme of Indian Army's Pir Panjal Brigade and conducted camps in Baramulla district of Uri in J &K.

A Center for Empowerment of PWDs was established in 2018 in Pune, that caters to more than 10 blocks spanning over four districts of Maharashtra, particularly the rural pockets, where healthcare facilities for Divyangs are not easily accessible. Till date, the programme has reached to more than 8,500 Persons with Disability with 7,951 accessible and assistive aids, 282 UDID registration facilitations and 564 employments. By 2025, it aims to reach 19,000 PWDs through fitments, UDID registrations and employment.

A major area of intervention for the Saksham programme is the facilitation of skilling and employment through a Deployment Matrix that was created to identify roles that can match with the type of disability. This exercise is performed at all production locations and helps in deciding on recruitments. SMF has partnered with more than 35 organizations for this project including NGOs, Trade Associations, Government and other Foundations. This programme aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 10 established by the United Nations in 2015 – Reduce inequality within and among countries.

What are the successes and challenges of the Business Integrated Prison Programme?

Under the Business Integrated Prison Programme, Spark Minda Foundation develops manufacturing facilities inside prisons where the inmates can work and earn a payment. The programme focuses on training and rehabilitation of prison inmates with the aim to reduce propensities towards crime in society. The Prison programme will not only help the inmates to develop a skill, but also show them a way for a brighter tomorrow.

Spark Minda Foundation is currently coordinating this programme in four prisons of Maharashtra – Yerwada Central Prison, Pune (for men and women); Harsul Central Prison; Aurangabad Prison (for women) and Nagpur Central Prison (for men). Being the first Automotive Company in India to set up an automotive facility in Tihar Prison in the year 2014, SMF has engaged around 150+ inmates till date through this programme.

The experience of running this project has a brawny takeaway – what initially was felt difficult for the supervisors eventually resulted in a cooperative affiliation with the inmates. In spite of challenges in internal sourcing or operative challenges (due to prison protocols), like complete checking of each packed container of raw materials and the final products etc., the programme has largely witnessed mutual cooperation and willingness to a great extent.

What are the efforts taken by Spark Minda to support those affected by Covid-19 pandemic?

The effects of Covid-19 loomed large across the globe, and fairly took a front seat in SMF's interventions. Persons with disabilities are the most vulnerable group during this pandemic and the team rushed to provide raw food items under the Covid-19 relief and rehabilitation to the PWD shelter homes, in collaboration with CII.

SMF team supported in arranging food and hospitality for the healthcare staff of Safdarjung hospital, New Delhi, in collaboration with ASSOCHAM. In Maharashtra, more than 19,000 cooked food packets were distributed to the under-served community. Medical kits and other utilities like bench partition were provided to Jawaharlal Nehru district hospital in Uttarakhand along with testing kits, personal protective equipment and sanitizers.

The foundation also collaborated with the Indian army under the Sadbhavana project and distributed ration and medical kits to over 300 people in Jammu villages at isolated areas along the border. The Aakarshan Skill Development Center has been converted to online e-certified courses so that it does not stop imparting knowledge and skills. Further, SMF have initiated mask production in all project offices that had produced over 33,000 masks so far.

During the second wave of the Pandemic, the foundation remains committed to provide support to the disadvantaged and marginalized sections of the society. SMF is delivering monthly ration kits to people with leprosy in Manav Seva Kusth Ashram, Uttarakhand, alongside distributing Covid-19 Arogya kit in Vengadu, Tamil Nadu and distributing grocery kits for PWD employees across the country.

In order to further improve access to healthcare internally, Spark Minda Group has also launched a programme to vaccinate all 15,000 employees across the country, free of cost. In addition to this, the group will also provide medical tele-consultation services to all employees for the entire year.