

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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About Arunodhaya Centre for Street and Working Children



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**"People do not realize the value of
what we give them. Anything given
for free is not realized and not
accepted the way it should be."**

An exclusive interview with
Shri. Ravi Sam

From the Editor

Dear Friend,

Children's Day is India's indigenous festival and is commemorated on 14th of November, the birthday of India's first Prime Minister and freedom fighter, Jawaharlal Nehru.

India is home to the largest number of children in the world, significantly larger than the number in China. Our country has 20 per cent of the 0- 4 years' child population of the world.

India has made some significant commitments towards ensuring the basic rights of children. There has been progress in overall indicators: infant mortality rates are down, child survival is up, literacy rates have improved and school dropout rates have fallen. But, access to education, child labour, child abuse, child trafficking, and malnutrition continue to be serious concerns.

Children are assets of our country. They are the future of our nation! It is time we take collective as well as individual responsibility to overcome these challenges and pave way for a healthy and safe environment for our next generation.

The changemakers featured in this issue have worked towards the welfare of the under privileged children. Let us recognize charity for what it is at heart and encourage these inspiring personalities for their noble work.

Happy reading!

Marie Banu

Grow in Gratitude

"If you've forgotten the language of gratitude, you'll never be on speaking terms with happiness."

Experiencing gratitude everyday is the means to happiness.

Gratitude is many things to many people. It could be appreciation, saying thank you, experiencing abundance, looking at the brighter side even during a setback, it is thanking the divine for giving the awareness of how simple things in life lead to joy.

Most of us live life in the gap - looking at things that we do not have and that others have. This state of existence is very oppressive indeed! And yet we continue to live in the gap.

Growing with Gratitude draws our attention to things that we have. And doing this regularly allows us to celebrate the abundance we already possess.

As we compare ourselves, our surroundings, our work, with others, we have an opportunity to take lessons about areas for our improvement. However, we cannot magically transform or improve. We require a stable position from where we can make the leap towards improvement. This stable position is bestowed by living in Gratitude.

Gratitude is an attitude towards grace – it makes us more receptive to grace. Grace is an intense energy that brings harmony and abundance to both, the inner and outer dimensions of our life. We seek grace, but in the absence of gratitude we cannot experience it. On the other hand, when we are in gratitude, grace fills us.

Gratitude is like a wellness spring; once gratitude begins to flow, it attracts more and more wellness into our lives. We experience abundance in every facet of our existence. And when we live our day to day with an experience of abundance, our thoughts, words, and actions are also driven from a deep sense of security, openness, and trust. This in turn attracts more abundance. Gratitude creates a virtuous cycle of fulfillment in our lives.

Begin your Gratitude journey today and allow yourself to cherish your existence and increase your self-love.

Steps to grow Gratitude in your life:

1. Keep a daily gratitude journal of three things you are thankful for. Let it also include the daily things in life that we tend to take for granted, such as, seeing a bird fly; an old person smiling; hearing a child's laughter, having a comfortable bed, etc.
2. Make it a practice to appreciate people about something in them, every day
3. Look in the mirror and appreciate yourself everyday - think about something you have done well recently or something you like about yourself
4. Write a gratitude letter to people who have impacted your life profoundly – such as a parent, teacher, sibling, friend, mentor, neighbor, colleague, etc.
5. As you meditate, with each in breath, recognize and appreciate a part of your body for performing its functions efficiently and with each out breath, say thank you to your body for keeping you fit and healthy

Gratitude Meditation

Thank you for this breath Thank you for this inhale Thank you for this exhale Thank you for this Life	Thank you Heart Thank you for this pounding Thank you for this pulsing Thank you for this Love
Thank you feet Thank you for this walk Thank you for this run Thank you for the Dancing	Thank you Eyes Thank you for the Sunrise Thank you for the Sunset Thank you for all the Colors
Thank you Ears Thank you for The Music Thank you for the Rhythm And Thank you for the Stillness	Thank you Hands Thank you for the Caressing Thank you for the Clapping And Thank you for the Holding
Thank you Nose Thank you for the Flowers Thank you for the Pines Thank you for the Sniffles	Thank you Nose Thank you for the Flowers Thank you for the Pines Thank you for the Sniffles
Thank you Mouth Thank you for the nourishment Thank you for the Wine Thank you for the Kisses	Thank you Nose Thank you for the Flowers Thank you for the Pines Thank you for the Sniffles
Thank you Arms and Shoulders Thank you for the Carrying Thank you for the Burdening And Thank you for the Hugging	Thank you Voice Thank you for the Expression Thank you for the Word Thank you for the Gift of Creation
Thank you for this Day Thank you for the Light Thank you for the Stars Thank you for the Night	Thank you Self Thank you for the Laughter Thank you for the Play Thank you for You
Thank you for the Emotions Thank you for the Joys Thank you for the Tears and Sorrows Thank you for the Richness	Thank you for the Abundance that is. Thank you for the Abundance that is given. Thank you for the so many experiences and so many things Thank you for this Dance.
Thank you Life!!	

Yours Energetically

Dr. Bhulakshmi V and Ms. Bhuvaneshwari Ravi are trainers and facilitators of the Positive Energy (PE) program. They are spiritual seekers with a vision of transforming their own energy state from surviving to being. In this journey they have gathered deep insights and are continuously working towards creating a pathway for more seekers. With years of exposure to spiritual practices like yoga, reiki, and personal development interventions like coaching, the authors are working in the Organization Development and Leadership Development space.

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Organically Yours

"I dream of the day where every baby is held for the first time in the purest of cotton — an organic cotton towel — free of chemicals; as pure as the baby itself."

Clichéd as it might sound, Rashmi Vittal's social initiative is one with a difference. Most social initiatives aim to make a difference to the lives of people belonging to a certain social strata. Rashmi's on the other hand, aims to change the lives of cotton farmers and with it, make a genuine difference to the health of infants. Barely a year old, Rashmi's start-up Little Green Kid, has already begun making quite an impact. It has a Facebook page with nearly a thousand likes and a website that's just about ready to change the way mothers dress their babies. "When a child is born, the first material that it comes in contact with is cotton," says Rashmi, recounting what inspired her to Little Green Kid, "The baby is wrapped in a cotton towel even before its mother holds it for the first time. I dream of the day where every baby is held for the first time in the purest of cotton — an organic cotton towel — free of chemicals; as pure as the baby itself."

In a nutshell, that's what Little Green Kid is all about; an embodiment of Rashmi's efforts to 'clean up' our cotton. "During my work on organic cotton, I learnt that cotton — a single crop — uses 25% of the world's pesticide," she says, "Now, India let's remember, has been great at textile production, for centuries. We export finished garments, and leave the pesticide and toxic dyes in our soil and water." Rashmi says that nearly 60% of a farmer's cost is spent towards pesticide. And the only way to get around this environmental bottleneck, she feels, is to grow organic cotton. "It's good for the soil, water; it's good for the farmer and also great for the customer's skin — especially babies."

By her own admission, Rashmi did not consider the social edge to the exercise when she sowed the seeds of her idea back in 2006. It was, then, merely a business idea that was soon to take form and shape, the focus of the idea being eco-friendly products for happy customers. "It wasn't until 2010 that I came across organic cotton and found it

promising, since it has great social impact and an environmental impact too," she says. "It helps farmers live better lives, and is great for the customer and the environment."

Today, Rashmi's initiative, Little Green Kid, sets out to achieve just that and more. With a complete collection of products already out on display to great success, she now looks forward to another showcase in January next year, which she hopes will take the social brand to the next level. "Switching to an eco-friendly lifestyle is not easy," she says, "There aren't many eco-friendly products that can replace the stuff that we currently use." So, that's when Rashmi and her team brainstormed over launching products that were eco-friendly and functional, thus assuring patronage.

"After some market research, we discovered that newborn babies are the ones who need organic cotton the most," she says, "The skin of an infant is sensitive, and a number of children develop skin allergies thanks to chemicals used in cotton-making and dyeing."

However, the MBA graduate from INSEAD (France) knew that effective marketing of a product like this would require massive campaigning. "The lack of organic cotton could be put down to lack of awareness. So, we decided to work in this space and build a brand that spreads awareness about organic cotton, and thereby build steady demand for the product." Along this journey to sustainable, eco-friendly and child-friendly cotton, Rashmi's team received help from other social entrepreneurs, who advised her on the nitty-gritty's of entrepreneurship itself. "When you set out with a good motive, it's amazing how helpful people are," she says with a smile. In an extension of her zeal to protect the environment, Little Green Kid's page on Facebook also has a section

of short stories for children, on conserving the environment.

An alumnus of CSIM, Rashmi has also successfully applied what she learned at the institute, out on the field. "I always had this impression that social enterprises were not-for-profit enterprises," she admits, "This is interesting because I personally am clear about the need to build companies that are for profit-with-a-purpose." But that's when Dr Sudhakar Varanasi's definition of social entrepreneurship inspired her to go out and make a difference. "He said, 'an entrepreneur has passion while a social entrepreneur has compassion'. I completely agree with that definition because a passionate entrepreneur may be successful, but a compassionate entrepreneur will not try to be successful at the cost of other people or in this case, the environment. And that, to me, is very important." Delving into social entrepreneurship has also re-emphasized the importance that Rashmi has always lent towards volunteering. A veteran volunteer herself — often in engaging in tree-planting and clothes collection drives — Rashmi has made it mandatory for her staff to volunteer in an NGO of their choice.

Today, the passionate traveller, painter and now, social entrepreneur, hopes that Little Green Kid will go places. Rashmi plans on talking to investors in late 2015, even as her soon-to-be-launched website, www.littlegreenkid.com takes form and shape. Interested buyers can leave their queries on thelittlegreenkid@gmail.com until the website is up. "We hope to offer the next generation a clothing option that is eco-friendly and the best. That way, we hope to grow with our little customers," she signs off.



Restoring dignity among destitute: Narayanan Krishnan

Well may you wonder what else a man could do after completing his education and starting a career as a chef in a five star hotel! You would expect him to pursue the advancement of his career. You would expect him to be madly excited about an opportunity to work in Switzerland with a leading international chain of hotels, especially if he was born to an affluent family and was groomed with lots of ambition. Then, when you get to know the reality, you may call it the hand of god or a twist of fortune or fate, when such a person gets recognition as a real life hero by CNN Heroes—Everyday People Changing the World. The person we are about to discuss was among 10 heroes chosen by CNN in 2010. He is Narayanan Krishnan from Madurai—a highly energetic man with a deep sense of commitment and empathy for destitute! He works on the salvation of the poor from a state of despair by providing relief and peace.

Early days: Krishnan is from an affluent family. He had a happy childhood. His father K. Narayanan is a retired insurance agent and his mother, Lakshmi, is an administrative officer with a government-owned insurance company. His parents instilled a strong sense of responsibility and discipline in him, right from his early childhood. By observing his mother, Krishnan understood, even in his childhood, the importance of staying engaged with meaningful work. He learned never to think of a job as just a mere source of income. He learned to do everything with a deep sense of love and pride. His approach to his studies also with the same attitude, and thus, he thoroughly enjoyed them.

Somewhere along the line in his early growth stage, he realized that he had great interest in becoming a hotel management professional, especially in the area of food and beverages. He was excited about becoming a chef. Actually, this was not a common choice for someone with his family background and even more so, for someone coming from his kind of conservative society.

However, his parents encouraged him to pursue whatever interests excited him. He is charming and pleasant personality. He is energetic and has resolved to progress with passion with his choices. Even in his childhood, his parents thought, rightfully, that he was capable of realizing his dreams. Krishnan is a loving family-oriented person and has a sister, Shweta Narayanan, who married after completing her MSc in biotechnology. From his earliest days, Krishnan was deeply caring about his family and kept all of them bound together with cheer, humor and love.

Krishnan says about himself:

“I received a very good education from a

reputed school in Madurai, and did my bachelors’ course in hotel management from Madurai Kamaraj University. After that, I had the opportunity of working with a group of five-star hotels in Bangalore from where I was also supposed to go to Europe to work as a chef”.

All of a sudden, an impulse triggered him to move to working in the social sector. We now discuss what sent him down the social service path.



Defining moment for change: Almost invariably, you will find that every person involved with the social sector was triggered to do so by some factor or the other. This gave them a strong urge to dedicate themselves to something unique, or something demanding deep conviction and dedication to carry out. Krishnan also experienced such a defining moment; it made him dedicate himself to changing the world around him to a better place for people to whom it mattered.

Krishnan narrates this incident:

“I did not have any idea about this path or any plans to choose this journey by setting up an organization. It all happened because of an incident that touched my heart, and after that, my inner voice insisted that I enter the gateway of giving.

In June 2002, while travelling on a busy road in Madurai, I saw an old man eating his own human waste out of hunger. I was completely shaken and oblivious to my surroundings. I jumped out of my vehicle and, went to the old man. I realized he was driven by acute hunger and was not in a proper shape of mind. Immediately I bought a few idlis (steam-cooked pudding) and gave them to him. As the old man gobbled the food given to him at a speed I had not

experienced before, he held my hands, giving me very real sensation that he was transmitting love and energy, something I had never felt before. That inner happiness and fulfillment changed my life forever. This deeply etched unique experience is vivid even now”.

As anyone would look at it, this was an experience that would have agonized any fellow human. A typical Good Samaritan response in similar circumstances is to give

some money or buy some food just for that one time, maybe accompanied by a few words of love. That was what Krishnan did, but with him, it did not stop there. This event triggered a decision to forgo his career opportunity abroad. He chose to remain, to listen to his heart and nourish neglected humans out in the streets. The difference in Krishnan was that where passion should have helped him to earn wealth, he turned to using his wealth to feed destitutes! This was an astonishing, truly heroic transformation in the life of a man who was then in his twenties!

Determined moves: For the first few months, Krishnan dug into his savings and bought food to distribute to the helpless poor. He traveled in his car along the roads of Madurai district, distributing food. He narrates this experience as follows:

“I started off as a one-man army in the year 2002 with the money I had saved. Initially, I bought food from roadside shops and distributed it. From January 2003, for reasons of economy and hygiene, I started cooking the food by myself at the back of my house and distributed it in the morning, at noon and in the evening.

At the beginning, I was feeding less than

20 people a day. I did everything by myself, from purchasing, cutting vegetables, cooking, packing and even delivering.

Once the number of people I was serving increased to 50, a young boy named Mani joined me to help me cope with all of them without compromising on the quality of the food. As the numbers increased, I employed more people.”

One must consider the transformational challenges Krishnan underwent. From acting on an emotional reaction to looking at a painful event to making it a habit to feed the destitute and homeless of Madurai, and then to quitting his career to act on this passion, he was required to cross a number of hurdles.

Let us understand how his friends, relatives and parents felt as he launched his social work as a full time effort. He fed more than fifty people going around in a car on certain routes to cater to the poorest of the poor, people who were languishing on the pavements of village roads or living in abandoned large pipes or just anywhere they happened to be. These people did not have access to facilities for a proper wash and other basic hygiene. They see god on being served food and live for the moment.

Krishnan did not stop at giving food. He started sponsoring haircuts and shaves. He got his beneficiaries to wash, and made them feel fresh. These are not easy things to do, and they cannot be done every day. Even when one does these things selectively, it is difficult to imagine sustaining the drive required to continue with such a service. How many of us allow ourselves to even get close to such humans, let alone render them such a service? It requires tremendous drive, fearlessness and ability to serve selflessly. One needs to be fearless because one should not worry about what others think, or about likely infections that may occur when handling homeless humans! Imagine what Krishnan must have been thinking when doing it for the first time. From just buying food for destitutes to offering them food and hygiene—it is nothing like shop floor add-on service. You read about such services more in fantasies and works of fiction! Krishnan not only made it a reality, but also made it a routine, a habit! Krishnan’s challenge was in committing himself full time and systematizing his work

Surmounting the Challenges: Over the first few months, there was no support for Krishnan. In fact, there was strong opposition from close friends and relatives. To quote Krishnan,

“My act was considered abnormal and out of alignment. My family was opposed to my decision. Coming from the upper echelon of society, this was not a typical career path and my parents, too, like any other parents, had big dreams for me. Their

hopes and dreams were crushed by my decision. I decided to take my mother on my service rounds one day and when she saw the pain, the hunger, and when a few of those I served fell at her feet and thanked her for my help, she realized that what I was involved in was something amazing. She promised to feed me while I took care of the helpless.”

Krishnan had to listen to his heart and stay with his mission! He had to balance his commitment towards his family, their values and dreams with his passion to pursue his philanthropy. Krishnan thought, rightly, that his mother, who had always inspired him with her commitment to value, was the right person to start with. He had decided that to win support, it was important to make doubters realize the truth of the experience in person. Krishnan was convinced that he could transmit the energy and drive he felt to his mother. He believed that he would receive her blessings and endorsement after she had firsthand experience. This belief turned out to be true. After taking his mother, he then took his father through the same experience. He says, “To this day, my parents stand by me in all my decisions. My father often runs errands for Akshaya”. Krishnan’s grooming and self-confidence helped him to negotiate the first set off barricades.

Slowly, Krishnan’s friends also started to understand his mission and encouraged him. After a while, Krishna never had time for any of his stakeholders. Once he started cooking and delivering food himself, he became very busy. His typical day would start at 4.00 am, when he went out to buy vegetables. He then started preparing for cooking by cutting vegetables and organizing everything necessary for preparation of the meals. He would do everything himself, as he had passion for cooking. Then Krishnan packed the food in small single servings to hand out as he drove to his various delivery points. He used to drive 60–70 kms every day to finish handing over the food packets to his beneficiaries. It was not an easy job, when he had to do it without consideration of monetary benefits.

As he started serving more people, the size of his kitchen in the backyard of his home became inadequate. He had to rent a suitable place and hire people to help him. Such a level required management skills in organizing resources like material, men and money. He invested whatever he could, and

received generous support from his parents. Slowly, his friends also started chipping in. He never asked money from anyone.

To quote Krishnan on resource constraints, “Initially when I was alone, I did not have any blueprints or plans. I just pushed myself to give joy and happiness to the people who needed care.

According to me, no research is required to do good to the society. It is just a matter of answering your inner voice to help the needy to the best possible extent of an individual – sometimes research will not serve the purpose and will become a never-ending subject. No good cause will ever stop of want of any resources. If a good cause stops for want of any resources, the cause is not good enough, and has to be improved”.

This statement of Krishnan shows his deep conviction about his role in making life meaningful for others! One need not think that benevolence involves just soft corners. It requires hard, practical attitudes to be different in thinking, acting and visualizing the end result. This is so different from living just for the self and a small group around!

Scaling up: During this process, Krishnan formed an organization, the Akshaya Trust. Krishnan and Akshaya have prepared and delivered three meals a day every day of the year for ten years. As of 2013, they have delivered over 1,900,000 meals whether rain was pouring down or the sun was blazing.

Akshaya is now feeding approximately 450 people a day. Over time, Krishnan has redesigned his approach to enable better use of resources that are under his command. Instead of cooking and delivering food in vans like in the case of milk and water distribution, he envisaged the possibility that he could bring all beneficiaries under one roof and thus, serve them better. It also gave them an opportunity to socialize and feel like they were part of a community.

Working on this thought, Krishnan conceived of the idea of building the Akshaya Home for destitutes. The Akshaya Home will be a shelter for the homeless, a haven for the sick and a place to provide additional continuous care for those in need. The site preparation started in 2009 and building construction started in 2010. As of 2013, it houses about 450 people. It required a lot of governance, fund raising capability, discipline in project management and an ability to convert

vision and mission into strategy. Krishnan provides such strategic leadership.

Cooking meals for 450 people would be a major task for a well-staffed restaurant with the best of equipment. For Krishnan and the volunteers at Akshaya Trust, it is a routine done three times a day with minimal staff, very basic equipment and in less than an hour for each meal (<http://www.akshayatrust.org/feeding.php>). If one happens to visit this home, which about 20 kms away in the outskirts of Madurai, one would be surprised to see the cleanliness and hygiene, and the involvement of destitute folks along with staff in preparation of the food.

In fact, all occupants ensure that they keep the place neat and clean. Their mindset is calm and their spirits are motivated and high. They practice yoga, walk around, play, talk and pray as a community. It looks simple, but is very challenging for the staff. When a new person is picked up to join the home from the streets, he or she is often not in the right mental frame, and may be suffering from fragile health. Not all residents share a common language. They are housed in a dormitory. There is a health center with medical facilities, and some of them are admitted there at various times. There is a lab inside for routine investigations and records are maintained scrupulously to comply with statutory requirements.

During most of the day, Krishnan is on the spot, walking around and living along with the residents, cheering them up and ensuring that the mission stays successful. His challenge now is staffing the activity. He has about 40 employees in the trust, and it is a challenge to keep staff size appropriate for increasing resident size. He mentors these people and helps them understand how to be compassionate with the people in the home. Such leadership is demanding, and he balances his time and resources to ensure optimum achievement of the overall objectives of his mission. He has committed trustees and staff who support his endeavors.

Akshaya Trust employees go on a round in an ambulance three times a week and rescue people who are on the streets. Usually, they come across a few such people on every trip. Out of the more than 700 people who have been picked up, more than a 100 have been reunited with their families, after receiving care and nourishment from Akshaya. About 50 of

them left this world, and final respects were paid at the home. The government has given Akshaya Home permission to pick people up off the streets, providing everything is reported. There are statutory formalities in place must be complied with. On arrival, every person gets lots of love and affection, and an essential part of the reception is to get him or her clean and hygienic. Food and shelter follow! Krishnan personally gets involved in most cases. This author observed all of this during an unannounced visit to the place—evidence of the abundance of love and peace with which new entrants are received.

Family support: As mentioned earlier, Krishnan’s parents and sister give immense support. It took a while to win their support, but once they were convinced, they were firmly committed. Krishnan was married in January 2011 to Harini, and has since been blessed with a girl baby, Sara. His wife supports him by encouraging him to pursue his dream, even though he hardly gets time for home. He is not in a regular 40–hour-per-week job. He is engaged 24 X 7 with the Akshaya Home and the people there. His celebrations and joys are first at the Akshaya Home. His family members are accustomed to this situation, and enjoy whatever time they get with him. For a social entrepreneur, family time becomes the most important aspect of balancing personal life with mission.

Conclusion: Krishnan’s deeds are heroic. He has charm, energy, leadership traits and the ability to fight against the isolation of people neglected by the society in a small part of India. His mission is commendable, and worthy of replication elsewhere. Additionally, Krishnan has the daunting challenge of sustaining his success in ensuring that there are no homeless people in Madurai district. We all know that the government machinery works for such people. However, the governmental set up has its own limitations, considering bureaucratic demands and other pressures. I hope this mission of Krishnan will continue to succeed and grow. The world needs more Krishnans to achieve social justice and universal humanity.

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

Editorial

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INITIATIVE AND MANAGEMENT

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani. It is a learning centre that promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship. **CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non-profits – to facilitate**

them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives. CSIM operates in Chennai, Coimbatore, Hyderabad and Bangalore.

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

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No To Labour, Yes To Education

“We noticed that young children were made to engage in hard, rigorous labour at these factories. We resolved from then on to tackle child labour, raise awareness, and eradicate it from our society.”

It all began back in 1992 at a metal factory at Korukkupet. When Virgil D’Sami’s team at Arunodhaya heard that the factory had begun employing children for cheap labour, they decided to step in and step things right. In a sense, that was the beginning of what would later go on to become two decades of unrelenting service to society, in the eradication of a social evil that plagued India in the 1990s and the early part of the last decade: child labour. “We noticed that young children were made to engage in hard, rigorous labour at these factories,” says Virgil, executive director of Arunodhaya Centre for Street and Working Children. “We resolved from then on,” she continues, “to tackle child labour, raise awareness, and eradicate it from our society.”

What followed was a sustained campaign at a grass-root level, to tackle the issue from the bottom-up. No sooner did the NGO focus on the steel factory at Korukkupet, it also trained its attention to weeding out instances of child labour in another industrial locality, Tiruvottiyur. In a short span of time, the focus quickly broadened to raise awareness on the number of children employed as domestic help in several households across the city. “That’s how we zeroed in on Kodambakkam,” Virgil recounts, “We visited the slums in the locality, met families of children who were hired as domestic help, and spoke to them about the importance of children’s education as a means to a better future.” Through these efforts, the motto: ‘Say no child labour, say yes to children’s education’ echoed through Arunodhaya’s campaign against child labour.

Through these instances of intervention, the NGO has successfully managed to create child-labour-free zones in the localities that bear its footprint. Primarily, the initiative itself has helped move children from the industry to the schools. But Arunodhaya has also gone the extra mile, to facilitate the transition. “We began setting up child labour centres across the city, to help children prepare for schooling,” says Virgil, “There’s obviously a bit of catching up to do. Some of these children we rescued had studied only up till Class 1, while some others just till Class 8. So, we ideated the introduction of bridge courses in these centres, to help re-introduce these children to a normal, academic, school life.” These efforts apart, Virgil believes that schools today, need to go the extra mile in caring for such children. “When we first began our efforts in Korukkupet, the school there was far from what schools ought to look like. Cattle roamed there in the evenings, and the classrooms were unkept. The teachers who joined that school were all up for a transfer, so they didn’t seem to care enough.”

Sensitizing society about the importance of

rehabilitation of these children was paramount. But Virgil believes the process can and must begin at home. “So, we decided to empower the women of the household,” she says, “Helping them secure employment, training them to engage in income-generating activity was definitely part of our plan towards empowerment and employment of women.” As a result of this aim, self-help groups were established, in the hope that employment this way would eliminate the need for the child to seek employment. However, the challenges were many.

“When we began raising awareness about child labour, the first big hurdle we encountered was the family of the child,” says Virgil, “We were usually questioned over whether education would guarantee a government job, and asked how the family would survive without a working hand. We tried our best to put those doubts to rest. The other challenge was the employer. There would always be a direct or indirect attempt to re-employ the child as labour in these factories. The employer would either forcefully take the child back into the factory, or would brainwash their parents into believing that we were out to prevent their children from being employed and providing for the family.” The campaign against child labour, evidently, had a long way to go. This called for collective action. There began a formative process of setting up Women’s Sangams and Children Sangams — bodies that would act against child labour within their respective communities. “Today, the work we’ve done speaks for itself through such Sangams,” says Virgil, elaborating how these bodies have gone about achieving a great deal in enforcing child-labour-free zones.

Arunodhaya’s work is far from over. Today, two big challenges continue to exist. One of these is the vast presence of children as in-house, resident domestic help. The other is the sustenance of children’s education post-rescue. “Not many cases of children as resident domestic help comes to our notice,” says Virgil, “These cases are almost always invisible until we heard of a case of domestic violence against such kids.” The other issue, pertaining to sustenance of education, Virgil believes can only be tackled when the parents are serious about continuance of an education. “What usually happens is, in the case of eviction from a certain locality, these children and their families move localities. Hence, continuing in the same school becomes a bit of a problem. That’s usually when a child runs the risk of reverting to becoming child labour.” But she believes that all that’s left is an attitude change. “Once attitudes change, I can definitely see a future where child labour in India, is non-existent.”



We were usually questioned over whether education would guarantee a government job, and asked how the family would survive without a working hand.



After literacy, Kerala now tackles student entrepreneurship

Madhumita Prabhakar from The Smart CEO magazine chatted with Sijo Kuruvilla George, CEO, Startup Village, one of India's most promising incubators, that has taken upon itself the grand mission of creating a US \$ 1 billion student startup out of India

Earlier this month Kerala-based Startup Village was in the news for SEBI, the market regulator, approving its US \$10 million angel fund. According to an announcement from the incubator, the fund could go up to US \$20 million with the 'Green Issue' (over-allotment) option. With this, Startup Village will become one of the first few incubators with its own fund, to invest in early-stage businesses in India.

This piece of news garnered a lot of attention, thanks to Startup Village's goal of disrupting the student startup ecosystem in the country. Sijo Kuruvilla George, CEO, Startup Village, and his team at the incubator are thinking really big – they want to create 1000 product startups out of college campuses by 2020, build 100,000 square feet facility to host companies and possibly, catalyse the creation of a billion dollar student-founded company in India. We caught up with George to discuss the Startup Village journey till date and future plans.

Please take us through the early days. What was the thought behind establishing Startup Village? Why Kerala?

Startup Village was established with a vision to provide student startups with assistance to develop themselves into profitable companies, creating jobs and generating income by leveraging the resources of the public sector and the connectivity and funds of the private sector. Kerala, with its highest literacy rate and teledensity offered the best environment to setup a telecom/internet business incubator. While academic institutions around the country have their own public private partnership (PPP) incubators, the most successful PPP technology business incubator in India is the Technopark TBI, Trivandrum, that has incubated several companies, generating a total of 3000 jobs. One of their success stories is MobMe Wireless, which is poised to be the first student startup from Kerala to go public. Having the experience associated with a successful business incubator made Kerala more attractive for the setting up of Startup Village through a three-way PPP model between Department of Science and Technology, Technopark TBI and MobMe Wireless. We began with a grant from the Department of Science and Technology from the NSTEDB. The initial grant was half of the total sum of five crores that was to be given over a period of three years.

The sheer volume of applications and potential investor interest in the products of our startups has shown that the PPP model



is very relevant to the present entrepreneurial climate of Kerala. The model has shown itself to be very advantageous till date.

How did you approach the members of the advisory council?

The members of the advisory council of Startup Village are industry stalwarts who have been instrumental in providing mentoring and advice to our host institute MobMe and its founders. The experience of the advisory council and their visionary thought leadership has been instrumental in our exponential momentum of growth and visibility.

What is the current employee strength and what are the different functional areas within the Startup Village?

At present, Startup Village employees 12 full-time employees and one to three interns over each quarter of the year. Interns are given the opportunity to grow and experience first hand, the various functional areas of Startup Village. The core functional areas at Startup Village include academic relations aimed at evangelising Startup Village's vision on entrepreneurship, knowledge repository aimed at creating a common resource pool of key technological skills, either through in house personnel or through seminars and workshops, incubation to provide regular and virtual incubation facilities to startups, strategy and operations to oversee the growth of Startup Village and develop a roadmap for the same and new initiatives aimed to explore new directions that Startup Village can contribute to and provide first level in house mentoring to startups.

How many startups have been incubated since its inception? How many colleges have been reached out to?

At present, we have received 612 applications for incubations; out of which a total of 225 are incubated with us. We have 45 regular incubates and 180 virtual

incubates. Our incubates also include 60 student startups. Startup Village has campus ambassadors in 40 different campuses in Kerala through our Campus Connect initiative. The aim is to reach 100 colleges in 2013.

Why focus only on technology startups?

We're focusing on telecom and internet startups due to two simple reasons; our host institute, MobMe Wireless, works in the telecom sector, which makes access to that knowledge repository very easy. We can leverage their experience in the telecom sector and provide the relevant knowhow to startups in the same domain. The second reason why we are focussed on telecom and Internet businesses is their ease of infrastructure requirement. Unlike manufacturing industries, a telecom or Internet business can work out of a plug and play office with infrastructure like tables, chairs, Internet and air conditioning. However, we do have startups that are working on other fields such as healthcare, augmented reality, exploring alternative energy sources etc. At present, these are virtually incubated while sufficient infrastructure for their expansion is being set up.

Is the PPP model working?

The sheer volume of applications and potential investor interest in the products of our startups has shown that the PPP model is very relevant to the present entrepreneurial climate of Kerala. The model has shown itself to be very advantageous till date.

What is the selection process adopted before incubating a startup?

Potential applications are scrutinised based on the business plans submitted. The applicants are then asked to present their plan to our selection panel through a pitch session of three minutes, during which the panel will aim to understand how the startup founders aim to monetise their ideas. Companies are selected based on the team, the team's and product's potential, market competency against similar products and economic viability. On being accepted into the incubator, they are encouraged to apply for virtual incubation. Once space is available, they are moved to regular incubation.

What are some of the challenges you face today?

The greatest challenge we faced was convincing established agencies that we are in this for the long haul and are not a one-startup hunter. Our aim is to incubate 1000 product startups over a decade and the sheer volume and performance of applicants has enabled us to overcome this, our greatest challenge. At present, our challenges include evangelising the vision of Startup Village across Kerala, India and the world and attracting viable product

startups and potential angel fund contributors while at the same time trying to instill in our startups the need for social entrepreneurship.

What, according to you, are the primary challenges startups face in India and how is startup village addressing those concerns?

Any startup anywhere in the world faces the same challenges; startups in India are no exception. A startup has limited funds, network and resources like manpower to work with. Incubators, and in particular, Startup Village addresses these challenges by providing plug and play offices that takes care of the space, internet connectivity and infrastructure for a startup while working to connect them to a large network of professionals who can mentor and guide the startups.

Tell us about how you brought companies like KPMG, Inolyst and Kinfra to offer their services to Startup Village at heavily subsidised rates.

Our advisory council members were gracious enough to evangelise the vision of Startup Village and companies like KPMG and Inolyst were only too happy to be of assistance to this revolution. MobMe is our host institute and has offered all their technical expertise to our startups while KINFRA has been very supportive with the provision of resources like space at subsidised rates.

We hear there is something known as an energy innovation zone at the Village. What is it all about?

The energy innovation zone is still exploring theoretical avenues of alternate energy. This will help provide a realistic expectation of the infrastructure required for the setting up of the innovation zone. Once the zone is setup, our inventions are poised to revolutionise electrical energy; one such invention is the power saving inverter switch off.

Please take us through the startup school initiative at the Startup Village.

The startup school offers a three month residential program that imparts entrepreneurial skills training and on hand mentoring to aspiring entrepreneurs to provide a holistic approach to converting ideas into monetised avenues of revenue generation.

What are your future expansion plans in terms of space?

We will be moving into our new 1000 sq. ft. facility in the next week while our one lakh sq. ft. facility is expected to be ready to move in by the second quarter of 2014. 25000 sq. ft. of the one lakh sq. ft. is expected to be ready by the end of 2013.

—Mahathi R. Arjun

This article was first published in The Smart CEO Magazine (www.thesmartceo.in)

Caring for childhood

While child rights itself has got its activists grappling with multiple things, addressing issues of children due to different circumstances needed its own space and attention. Especially for children living on the streets, it is all the more imperative to implement a well thought out strategy to ensure that their childhood is not all mired with the vagaries of street life.

Don Bosco Anbu Illam in Chennai was established in 1985 with the objective of rehabilitating children rescued from the streets. Rescue efforts were organized from a small centre in Mannadi. "Eventually, we realized that we had to provide shelter to rag pickers, children working on the platforms and those loitering on the streets as they had nobody to care for them," says Fr Johnson, who has been Don Bosco Anbu Illam's Director since 2010.

A humble beginning with 25 kids beset with numerous challenges in their rehabilitation saw Anbu Illam growing more pronounced in their strategies and pertinent efforts. They had to first draw the children out of street life's trauma. Inculcation of moral values and de-addiction counselling created more space for the children to realise their purpose in life and get mainstreamed.

"Those were the days when schools would not be ready to accept our children," recalls Fr Johnson. The centre therefore began to impart basic education to these children. Children targeted were those below 13 years of age and over the years, Anbu Illam reached out to children below 18 years of age, as the universal definition of a child goes.

With some basic education and vocational training, the rescued children were able to secure jobs in the informal sector, and plan their future. As children were now being admitted in formal schools, the focus became to encourage them to continue at least till class 10. "Certificates in class 8 and 10 are becoming very crucial. Children are forced to take non-formal courses even in vocational training otherwise. With a class 10 certificate from the Government, they will be able to secure jobs in companies, which does promise a better pay structure and thence a better standard of living," says Fr. Johnson.

Vocational training for the children like tailoring is managed through network organisations like Don Bosco technical institutions. With the centre providing them all basic amenities, boys particularly are encouraged to do part time jobs so that they can manage their educational expenditure themselves. All



children rehabilitated in the three centres have a personal bank account to save their earnings and are also covered under medical insurance, which is a commendable effort indeed.

Funds raised from Indian and foreign donors have been the centre's lifeline. Although foreign funding is now plummeting drastically, Anbu Illam has been constantly on the quest for donors. "Donors would want to celebrate their birthdays here with our children, who get to feel the sense of belongingness. Competitions are organized to commemorate specific events or in memory of great leaders and sponsors. It is very heartening to see the children participate with all zeal and try to win," smiles Fr Johnson.

In the 90s, it was the centre's conscious decision to send the children to private schools, the reason for which was twofold. One, government schools would not admit without the requisite documental proof and secondly, the quality of education at the private schools were much better than that in government schools. As the donors were

able to support children and were more concerned about the quality of education for the children the choice of private schools became a norm for majority of the students, except those who preferred/required teaching in specific languages. "Private schools promised the concern we wanted for our children. They were very considerate and regularly kept us abreast of our children's academic progress. However, government schools are really picking up. Some of our children in government schools narrate enriching experiences during sports hours and other extra-curricular activities," says Fr Johnson.

Presently, there are 57 boys at Royapuram centre, 26 boys at Mullainagar centre and 39 girls at Kudangayur centre. Of the 39 girls, ten are in a boarding facility for better experience and socialization. They were also looking forward to that opportunity as it allowed them to focus on their studies better. From the 29 girls staying at the centre, three of them are attending college and one is pursuing nursing. Children, both boys and girls avail the centre's facilities until they attain 18 years of age. Once adults, the centre intervenes to mainstream them in the society, which is the premise for this rehabilitation.

Fr Johnson says: "Children are with us until they complete their graduation. After securing a job, they move out independently and are also encouraged to do so, so that they learn to handle their lives independently. They are always in touch with the centre as meetings, celebrations always provide an occasion to come together. For girls, this is the first batch and therefore, the centre is not yet clear with concrete plans to settle them."

Efforts are made to reunite the child with his or her family. This is always the preferred choice. Unfortunately, this

"Private schools promised the concern we wanted for our children. They were very considerate and regularly kept us abreast of our children's academic progress."

does not work in many cases. "Sometimes, the child comes back to the centre, when the family does not accept him/her. These circumstances affects the child emotionally and all the years' work in boosting their self-morale takes a beating. In one case, the child had returned to the centre thrice. He was not received well by his family," he adds.

"The help from a full time counsellor does not completely eliminate the trauma. With these impending challenges, the institution felt the need for a Social Reintegration Policy which will allow the people in charge to take appropriate steps when necessary. There are parents who wish to come to the centre and meet their children. Such parents are requested to come to the head office in Mannadi and not to the centre directly, as they are more conscious about the yearnings of the other children who do not have their families visiting them.

Three decades of being with the street children and the recent work on a Social Integration Policy have much to communicate regarding the plight of vulnerable children living on the streets. But, how long the street children would have to thrive on such support is a deeper question that needs prudent answers.

—Shanmuga Priya.T

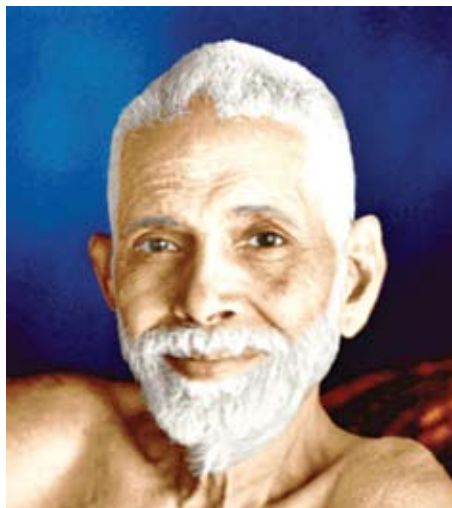
Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

A Cochin Brahmin, Professor in the Ernakulam College, had an interesting conversation with Sri Bhagavan. Sri Bhagavan advised surrender to God. The visitor gave a glimpse of an ICS Officer. The gentleman while a student was an atheist or an agnostic. He is very pious now and the change has surprised everyone who had known him before. In further conversation, the following points were noteworthy

The visitor said: "One must become satiate with the fulfilment of desires before they are renounced." Sri Bhagavan smiled and cut in: "Fire might as well be put out by pouring spirit over the flames. (All laugh). The more the desires are fulfilled, the deeper grows the samskara. They must become weaker before they cease to assert themselves. That weakness is brought about by restraining oneself and not by losing oneself in desires.

D.: How can they be rendered weaker?

M.: By knowledge. You know that you are not the mind. The desires are in the mind. Such knowledge helps one to control them.



D.: But they are not controlled in our practical lives.

M.: Every time you attempt satisfaction of a desire the knowledge comes that it is better to desist. Repeated reminders of this kind will in due course weaken the desires. What is your true nature? How can you ever forget it? Waking, dream and sleep are mere phases of the mind. They are not of the Self. You are the witness of

these states. Your true nature is found in sleep.

D.: But we are advised not to fall into sleep during meditation.

M.: That is stupor you must guard against. That sleep which alternates with waking is not true sleep. That waking which alternates with sleep is not true waking. Are you now awake? You are not. You are required to wake up to your real state. You should not fall into false sleep nor keep falsely awake. Hence: *Laye sambodhayeccittam vikshiptam samayet punah*. What does it mean? It means that you should not fall into any one of these states but remain amidst them in your true unsullied nature.

D.: The states are of our mind only.

M.: Whose mind? Hold it and see.

D.: The mind cannot be held. It is that which creates all these. It is known only by its effects and not in its true nature.

M.: Quite so. You see the colours of the spectrum. Together they form the white light. But seven colours are seen through the prism. Similarly, the one Self resolves

itself into so many phases, mind, world, body, etc. The Self is seen as the mind, the body or the world. That is to say, it becomes whatever you perceive it to be.

D.: These are difficult to follow in practice. I will hold on to God and surrender.

M.: That is the best.

D.: How can I do my duties without attachment? There is my wife, there are my children. I must do my duty towards them. Affection is necessary. Am I right?

M.: How do you do your work in the College?

D.: (laughing) For wages.

M.: Not because you are attached, simply as doing your duty.

D.: But my pupils expect me to love them.

M.: "Detachment in the interior and attachment in appearance," says Yoga Vasishtha.

—Excerpted from talks with Shri Ramana Maharishi

Belongingness Dimensions –Body, Mind and Soul Connect

The scope of learning and development in any organization covers Body, Mind, and Soul and connect to individual excellence. Many a time it is left at the mind level and health is taken care of through insurance and curative processes. The true role of HR is in the space of preventive care and education on health inclusive of physical and mental health. The organizational excellence is directly influenced by the well-being of the employees of the organization. If any dimension of body, mind and soul are imbalanced it affects the wellbeing of the person and thereby his/her capacity to pursue excellence. Therefore the approach of HR has to be one that will enable holistic well-being.

Body: The health dimension deals with preventive care. While a lot of social organizations work in health care, pretty less is being done with regard to organizational health in social organizations. The amount of field work that is done by the employees is large. Being funded the amount of comfort and infrastructure is greatly compromised. They have to take the stress and strain of travel that are usually not easy ones. Many of them reach to the nook and corner of the villages and this call for long hours of exposure to the vagaries of the environment. Some social organizations work in the high risk health zones like HIV, cancer and so on. It is important for the HR to ensure the safety and health of the employees as its critical activity. This will require education on health care, frequent health checkups and support to

handle health issues. The employees on field work require education to handle physical stress and regular practices that will help them keep their immunity high. Yoga and pranayama have proven beyond doubt in their capacity to maintain health and wellness. Nutrition and regular eating habits have to be appreciated and be made a part of organizational culture. Occupational health issues have to be identified and preventive mechanisms should become a part of induction process itself. If social organizations can also ensure health insurance as a part of its financial planning it will go a long way in caring for the employees.

Mind: Mental health of the employees is most taken for granted in the East. The attention to mental health is given only when it reaches abnormality levels and action is inevitable. Until then all minor issues of imbalance of mind are handled within peer group using unstructured counseling methodologies. The stress of the urban life style, uncertainties of the project life cycle in social organizations and the situations faced at work can leave many employees in depression and low morale. It is critical to have mechanisms that will identify the state of organizational mental health. Preventive processes of de-stress has to be planned and a healthy emotional environment has to be maintained. The organization culture needs to have a space for expression and sharing of thoughts, feelings and emotions without it becoming a ritualistic periodical activity. Meditation and reflection with intake of nutritious simple food will

prevent stress and balance mental health.

Soul: While body is taken for granted and mind is forgotten, soul is lost most of the times in organizational culture. It is unfortunate that the spiritual dimension of organizations today needs to be awakened and attention to the same has been called for in most organizations. In corporate organizations, words like love, service, humility, submission, acceptance have entered work sphere ... Strong spiritual evolution, traced by Michael Ray and others in relation to the new paradigm in business, shows one sect of people who are innovative, adaptive, creative, trustworthy, dedicated and committed. It indicates customers who are more intelligent; more refined, and have an ability to appreciate more products and services on one side and customers who are less in need of unnecessary material, less tolerant of unsustainable growth impacts on the environment and society (Loverde, 2002). Spirituality as an inner growth and part and parcel of business and life itself is actually not new for the east. Last century has seen a lot of slow changes and while knowledge base in science grew, the soul connect became a lot distant. This has led to 'human doers' than 'human beings'. Social organizations which deal with society need to be anchored strongly in love, service and larger well-being. It's much beyond merely a job and if that is not a part of the culture there is a serious question on the sustainability and stamina of the employees of the organization. Many organizations in the name of secular have got distant from human processes

and human connect too. Religion, rituals, forms of worship, symbols have all been confused with spirituality. Spirituality is being closer to being a human and is governed by appropriateness. It is an essential part of learning and development to ensure maturity and evolution of individuals as a part of organizational excellence.

A true spirit of spirituality lies in

- being value based
- willingness to make a difference to oneself and people around
- willingness to give and live with gratitude for what we receive
- willingness to stretch and live in an inclusive culture with equanimity
- live a life fulfilling purpose and vision beyond self

These have to be a part of the organizational culture and processes that establish equanimity. Appropriateness is to be focused in every transaction. The role of HR would be as a conscious keeper constantly observing and gently pushing people and process towards higher realms of spirituality.

Reflections:

1. What are the activities that ensure body, mind and soul enhancement within the organization?
2. To what extent is the body, mind, soul connects monitored and managed?
3. What are the specific actions taken in learning and development to enhance spirituality within the organization?

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath, PhD.

CSIM's XIII Annual Convocation



CSIM's 13th Annual Convocation was held on 9th October at MOP Vaishnav College for Women Nungambakkam, Chennai.

Shri. Rajendra Ratnoo IAS, Director of Town Panchayats, Government of Tamil Nadu was the Chief Guest for the event. Speaking on the occasion he said, "I am happy to note that there is a dedicated institution for social entrepreneurship. My hearty congratulations to all the Trustees, especially the Founder Shri PN Devarajan for having the vision to launch this organization. CSIM has been triggering the social change process by giving training to budding social entrepreneurs and socially minded individuals."

Shri. Rajendra Ratnoo IAS conferred the diplomas to 6 Prospective Social Entrepreneurs who completed their PGDSIM course and 40 participants who completed the SEOP module.

Shri. N.K. Ranganath, CEO and MD, Grundfos Pumps India was the Guest of honor for the event. He released CSIM's Annual Newsletter—Prajyoth. He said, "If we really need India to grow and to be a

country which is respected, we need to have its entire population having the right to needs and a decent life. For years, people have been talking about eradicating poverty. Hopefully, we need to be something and it depends on people like you—the younger generation of India—to bring that change."

Unsung Beacons – Volume 4, a compilation of articles featured in Conversations Today 2013, was released by Shri. Rajendra Ratnoo IAS and the first copy was received by Shri N.K. Ranganath.

Dr. Uthira, Vice-Principal of MOP Vaishnav College for Women delivered the welcome address; Shri PN Subramanian, Managing Trustee of MSDS, presented CSIM's annual report for the year 2013-14; and Smt. Latha Suresh, Trustee of MSDS & Hony. Director of CSIM, delivered the Vote of Thanks.

CSIM Alumni and students of MOP Vaishnav College participated in the event.

If you wish to have an e-copy of Unsung Beacons - IV, please write to conversations@csim.in



“People do not realize the value of what we give them. Anything given for free is not realized and not accepted the way it should be.”

Shri. Ravi Sam shares with Marie Banu his thoughts on CSR and social issues

Shri. Ravi Sam is a leading Industrialist in Coimbatore and a Philanthropist. He is a commerce graduate and holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Textile Technology from University of Manchester Institute of Science & Technology.

He hails from an Industrial Family and is the Director of Adwaith Lakshmi Industries Ltd; Adwaith Textiles Ltd; Titan Paints and Chemicals Ltd; Lakshmi Ring Travellers (Coimbatore) Ltd; and Parry Agro Industries Ltd.

Shri. Ravi Sam is the Founder Trustee of Siruthuli, the movement for preservation of water bodies in Coimbatore which is a famed Public movement of the State. He runs Sree Annapoorneswari Temple and a Veda Patashala which has a Gurukulam style of Vedic teaching for students belonging to the age group of 7 to 15. He is an active Trustee of the Sruthi Seva Trust at Aanaikatti; and is the Founder Trustee and Correspondent of Sri Gopal Naidu School and Correspondent of Adwaith G.N.S Matriculation School.

He has been personally involved in renovation of various temples across the country through South India Art and Heritage Conservation Trust. He is the Chairperson of the Academic Wing of Academy of Archaeology and Ancient Sciences of India which is a part of the REACH (Rural Education and Conservation of Heritage) foundation. Shri. Ravi Sam is presently the Chairman of CII Tamil Nadu State Council and Green Rameshwaram. He is a member of various associations like CODISSIA, FICCI, SIMA, SITRA, TEXPROCIL, and Textile Institute. He is also a member of the city technical advisory group (CTAG) of JNNURM scheme for the Coimbatore Corporation.

In an exclusive interview, Shri. Ravi Sam shares his thoughts on CSR and social issues.

About the Companies Act 2013. How do you think it would be feasible to engage local NGOs in the CSR programmes?

It all depends on the industries concerned. Most of them have their



Photo credit: Marie Banu

ongoing CSR programmes aligned to their objectives. All the managements, if they are an aware management and have considerable amount of CSR strength, already have an exposure to what is social responsibility. There are a wide range of classifications in the social sector which can be addressed by NGOs as well as those that they can't address. Healthcare, sanitation, education, and environment issues would be the major areas that would be focused upon by the corporates.

I am sure that many corporates do not have their own projects or areas that interests them very much and for such organisations it would be good for NGOs to tell them what it is. Accountability on the NGO part is very important today.

This would be the first year of the Companies Act 2013 being implemented, so we need to see how it goes. A lot of corrections will have to happen. It all differs from company to company.

It is now mandatory to form a CSR committee to evaluate the programmes before the board meeting. This will enable the company to know the funds spent for their CSR activities each year.

I would say that the biggest beneficiary would be the educational institutions that corporates have as most of their CSR funds would go into that.

There are organisations, mostly bigger corporates, who would like to implement programmes in their own vicinity. Because, they can have onus on it and at the end of the day they would be able to get something back in return.

What are the social issues that you think should be focused upon?

We should ideally look at environment and sanitation issues. Reclamation of water bodies can be looked at seriously.

There are a lot of activities happening in the area of education. In Tamil Nadu, there are Government run educational institutions and we know that they could do better. Many corporates are helping in upgrading the facilities of these institutions. I know companies in Coimbatore who have adopted 8 to 10 Government schools to bring it to a certain level so that these students are exposed to the level of a normal matriculation school student in terms of access to labs, etc.

Except in the lowest socio-economic strata in Tamil Nadu, if there is a school that is mediocre and is run by the Municipal Corporation, very few parents would want to send their children here. They would rather send their child to a school where they would have to pay the school fees, and buy uniforms and books.

People do not realize the value of what we give them. Anything given for free is not realized and not accepted the way it should be.

About Veda Patashala attached to the Sree Annapoorneswari Temple. What was the inspiration to launch this?

It is basically to keep the tradition going. All students at Veda Patashala hail from poor economic backgrounds. 80 percent of them are single parent children, with a parent working as a domestic help or cook. The family's acceptance in the society is very low, but once the child has studied Veda, the acceptability goes up. The boy has the capacity to earn an income even before completing the period of Vedic studies. When he goes home for summer, he accompanies the local priest. By chanting slokas which he had studied in the first two years he is able to earn a minimum of 1000 rupees a day.

We have stipends offered to students to encourage the child complete the Vedic studies. The funds are transferred to his bank account and he has a savings of 40,000 to 50,000 rupees when he completes his education.

Through REACH Trust you have renovated several temples across India. Has your involvement been because of religious or social commitment?

It is more on terms of protecting the monument in which I am really very interested. The monument should not lose its originality, style, and period. If it is a monument and we could revive it back to a place of worship, then sustainability happens.

The government has not clearly defined where we can work on. Giving our money to HRCE or any other organization to restore the temples, destroys the existing architecture of that monument. It would be better to leave it as it is. There are no systems on how to take care of the monument.

There are many monuments in Tamil Nadu which are uncared for. I was wanting to talk to the erstwhile Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu about asking corporates to work on a directory on every art object – movable and unmovable – and precious jewelry which is available in our State.

About the sculptures which were taken to Australia and America and which has been retrieved recently, we had to depend upon documents that were available with the French society in Pondicherry which were all made during pre-independence. The French had the foresight to photograph all the sculptures and this is the only record we have till now.