

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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Cover Story - Pg 6

Impacting lives of Tribals through Rubber in North East India

About Rubber Board and its activities across India



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Alumni Talk Pg 3

Beautifying women through empowerment

About Vibha's efforts to use cosmetology for economic empowerment of women



Profile Pg 9

Serving Happiness

Nitin Kumar's work for the health and educational needs of local communities through the HMP Foundation



Chit Chat Pg 12

"Just like how social work education has undergone change, social service has also undergone change."

An exclusive interview with
Mrs Girija Kumarbabu,
Secretary ICCW

From the Editor

Dear Friend,

India may have set its sights on Mars and is aspiring to become a key global player, but its ambitions are in stark contrast to some of the realities it faces. Global Survey Index has revealed one of the most shocking truths. It mentions that India is home to half of the world's modern slaves, meaning severe forms of bonded labour to forced and servile marriage. The worst form of slavery is child labour and commercial and sexual exploitation.

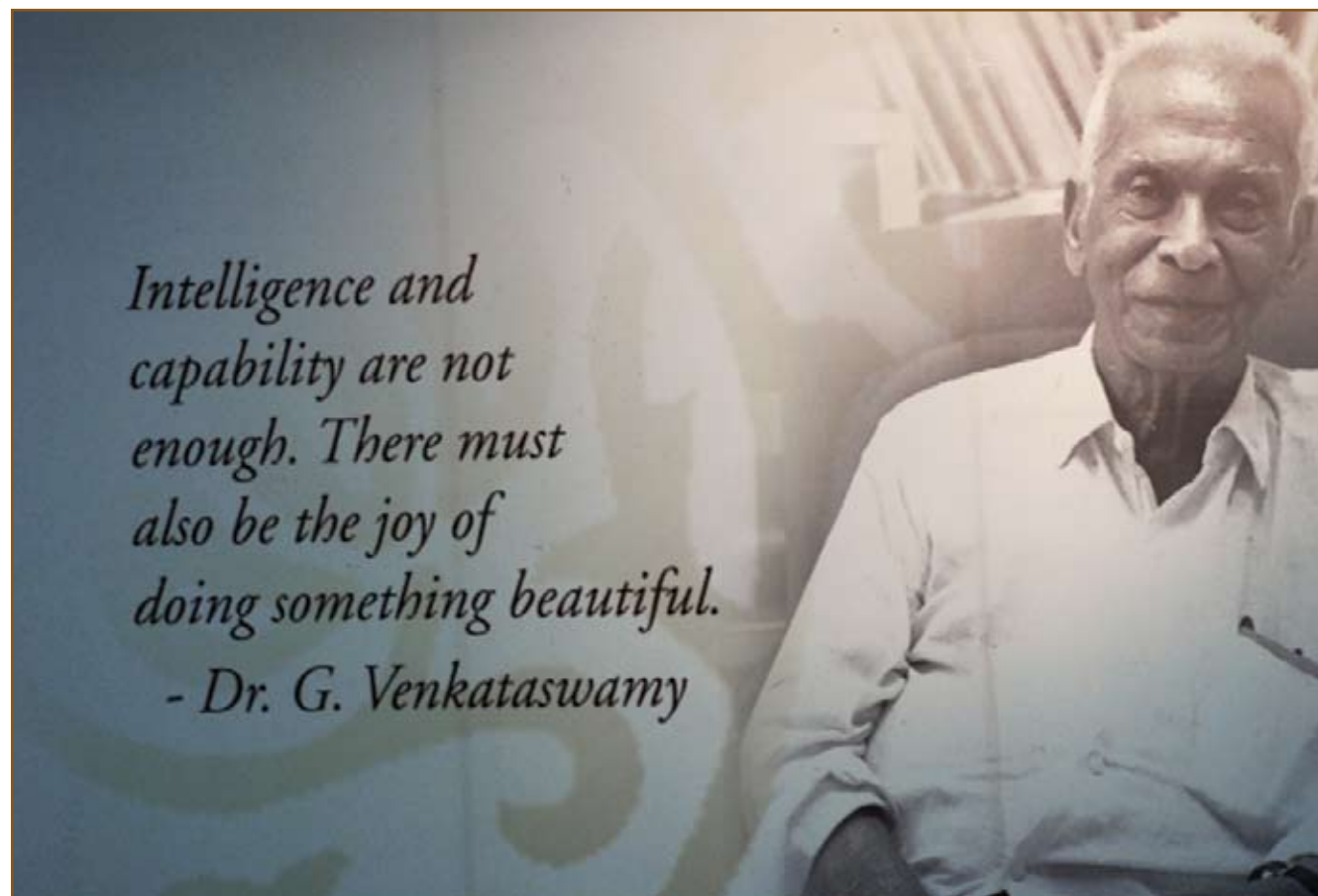
Children are the greatest gift to humanity and the same gift is being misused in the form of child labour. One in every five children below the age of 14 is a labourer. They constitute 36% of India's population, and a large majority of children belonging to the age group of 5-14 live in distress.

Indian government banned all types of labour for children under the age of 14 in 2012. This was followed with the implementation of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, which states that all children between the age of 6 and 14 have the right to free schooling. Yet, there has been little visible result on the ground.

India's ranking among the fastest growing nations in the world will stand shaken if its children are continually marginalised. Poverty alleviation is key to eradicating child slavery. It requires cumulative efforts to wipe it out and NGOs have an important role to play. Government does not have the infrastructure to reach out to every section of the society and particularly those living in remote areas. Therefore, NGOs should bridge this gap.

Marie Banu

The work of Aravind Eye Hospitals is a perfect example of pursuing a cause larger than oneself.



In our daily work, not very often we come in touch with the deeper meaning of our existence and our contribution to the world. I urge you to take a mindful moment, reflect on Dr V's legacy and draw your energy to create a future that you have a calling for!

Dr. G. Venkataswamy or 'Dr. V' as he is affectionately called is the founder-chairman of Aravind. The mission of Aravind is to prevent needless blindness.

Dr V, a legendary eye surgeon, did not do what he did by chance. It was his deepest calling to be of service, to remove needless suffering. We have lessons from his leadership. Growing beyond conventional limitations, Dr V's transformational journey gave millions the boon to "see" the world. His journey is a powerful example of pursuing a cause much larger than oneself!

I am fascinated with the manner in which Dr V went about setting-up this magnificent institution. Starting the hospital in 1977, after his retirement, Dr V scaled-up the institution from an

eleven-bed hospital to one of the largest facilities in the world for eye care. Supported by a team of leaders, low-cost technology and efficient means of handling surgeries and patient care, Aravind is globally acknowledged for their innovation and services in eyecare.

Aravind revolutionised eye care by innovating the production of high quality, low cost ophthalmic products, which make cataract operations affordable. Aravind started manufacturing Intra Ocular Lenses (IOL), driving the price down globally from \$150 to \$10. It now makes 7% of all IOL's in the world.

An Aravind surgeon conducts an average of 2,000 cataract surgeries a year, far above the typical Indian surgeon's average of 400 and the typical U.S. surgeon's average of 200, thus making eye care accessible and affordable. The organisation has the benefit of reaching out to 3 million patients each year, two-thirds of them for free.

Aravind keeps the needs of patients

central to their way of working. Infinite Vision, a book that captures Dr V's life story of triumph over unthinkable odds, presents how Aravind is, the world's greatest business case for compassion. I recall, in a heart-warming, award-winning documentary with the same name, Dr V narrates how the simplicity of his patient's soul leaves him deeply connected with her. His experience of oneness, from such moments, has spread in the entire organisation, making the staff and leaders care for every single patient, irrespective of whether they pay for the services or get it free.

I am inspired by Dr V's journey of inner transformation, which to me appears as a critical ingredient in the way Aravind developed as an organisation. Though not trained in management methods, Dr V brought together a perfect recipe of care and success.

You can see the documentary on Dr V here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MA5Dzlf7JEE>)

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.

Beautifying women through empowerment

CSIM opened a whole new set of allies for me. I began to take in the concept of running an NGO with ease, comfort and professionalism.

All parents put in their best of efforts to ensure that their children pursue education and develop leadership qualities so that they can lead their own lives independently. Every individual uses this education and leadership in different ways. Here is the story of Vibha Jain, Founder of Wave Foundation in Hyderabad, who used her domain knowledge to create livelihood and entrepreneurship opportunities for women.

A graduate in Nutrition, Vibha diverted to Cosmetology. Backed by sound training under a renowned cosmetologist, and in the service industry with around six years of extensive research on products, she launched her own brand — ‘Nature’s Way’. “I had always wanted to be a woman entrepreneur. Manufacturing sector interested me! I could not think of working for someone else,” says Vibha, whose brand now hosts more than hundred products that cater to a range of skin care, face masks, hair colors, de-tanning products, etc. “Women and children can be very vulnerable, whether within or outside the family system,” says Vibha, who wanted to expose women in need of livelihood opportunities to the huge demand for skilled beauticians. She had also organized numerous workshops for these women free of cost.

Even as a business woman, Vibha spent her time with non-profit organizations enhancing their functionality with her strengths. Her engagement with orphanages and schools became more frequent and planned. While all these happened at an individual level, Vibha wanted to start her own charity and work for the welfare of women and children.

Wave Foundation was inaugurated in July 2014 out of the enthusiasm of a group of women, led by Vibha. “As beginners with no particular focus structured in the form of activities, we decided to organize one event every month. We conducted charitable activities and cultural programmes in different institutions like schools, orphanages and other places that had no sign of fun and liveliness,” shares Vibha, who came to know about CSIM’s Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme (SEOP) from a friend. Interested to do these activities in an organized and professional manner, Vibha took up the course in February 2015.

Much like others, Vibha too grew fond of the flexible routine that ensured participation of all those who registered for the SEOP programme. “CSIM opened a whole new set of allies for me. I began to take in the concept of running an NGO with ease, comfort and professionalism. I learnt the criticality of self-sustaining my contribution to the society,” she elaborates.



As successful NGO leaders and activists handled the classes, shared their stories and experiences, she became clear on her pursuit. She was interested to do many things, but the course at CSIM, helped her realize what to focus upon. Since knowledge in Cosmetology was Vibha’s strength, she wanted to use this to create economic empowerment amongst women.

From the focus on charity, Wave Foundation transcended to work from an entrepreneurial perspective. The first mega skill development workshop was organized in August 2015. The organization provided training for women in parlour services and also employed them in the chain of beauty parlours with whom they had a business connect.

Wave Foundation offered placement for women who were trained under the government vocational programme — Setwin. The foundation, however, continued to organise educational and cultural programmes in schools, homes for aged and orphanages. Slowly giving up on

charity, Wave Foundation decided to adopt a small private school Vaitik Virachananda Vidyalaya, which was located in the neighbourhood. “We advertised for teacher recruitment and also supervised science assignments in the school. We organise a range of activities for children during festivals—science exhibitions, skill training, soft skill training, sports events, medical services—to retain the interest and motivation of children to study. If a number could say it, we have organized 20 programmes for 114 children in the school so far. Infrastructure is being taken care by others as Wave Foundation concentrates on education alone. We therefore, are in critical need of teachers and volunteers to administer the school,” she explains.

Beyond workshops and placement, Vibha became a resource person to guide those women who were eager to start their own business units. With a clear focus and vision, Vibha has been able to focus on introducing scholarships for students and provide a platform to link them with other

schools and colleges for higher education. Drawing largely from her learnings, Vibha has consciously networked with other institutions to sustain Wave’s contribution in the society. She has collaborated with Akshaya Akruti to help underprivileged procure hearing aids. Alongside, Wave also organizes training programmes to equip parents handle special children.

In spite of having moved away from activity approach to charity, Vibha feels that there is no need for fundraising in order to sustain Wave Foundation. “I have my business to support these initiatives. There are plans to introduce medical services for the poor through Wave Foundation. Instead of spending time on mobilizing resources, I would prefer to concentrate on promoting Wave Foundation and its activities,” says Vibha, immediately adding that there is a need for volunteers to scale up the organisation’s activities.

—Shanmuga Priya. T

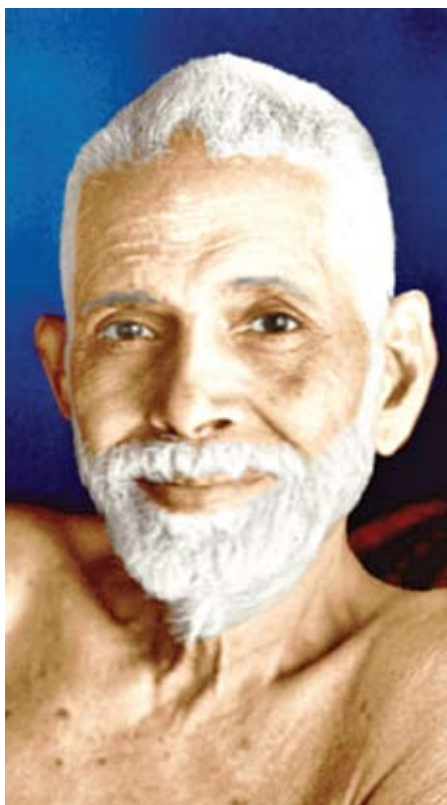
Inspiring Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

Miss Umadevi, a Polish lady convert to Hinduism, asked Sri Bhagavan: I once before told Sri Bhagavan how I had a vision of Siva at about the time of my conversion to Hinduism. A similar experience recurred to me at Courtallam. These visions are momentary. But they are blissful. I want to know how they might be made permanent and continuous. Without Siva there is no life in what I see around me. I am so happy to think of Him. Please tell me how His vision may be everlasting to me.

M.: You speak of a vision of Siva. Vision is always of an object. That implies the existence of a subject. The value of the vision is the same as that of the seer. (That is to say, the nature of the vision is on the same plane as that of the seer.) Appearance implies disappearance also. Whatever appears must also disappear. A vision can never be eternal. But Siva is eternal.

The *pratyaksha* (vision) of Siva to the eye signifies the existence of the eyes to see; the *buddhi* (intellect) lying behind the sight; the seer behind the *buddhi* and the sight; and finally the Consciousness underlying the seer. This *pratyaksha* (vision) is not as real as one imagines it to be, because it is not intimate and inherent; it is not first-hand. It is the result of several successive phases of Consciousness. Of these, Consciousness alone does not vary. It is eternal. It is Siva. It is the Self.

The vision implies the seer. The seer cannot deny the existence of the Self. There is no moment when the Self as Consciousness does not exist; nor can the seer remain apart from Consciousness. This Consciousness is the eternal Being and the only Being. The seer cannot see himself. Does he deny his existence because he cannot see himself with the eyes as *pratyaksha* (in vision)? No! So, *pratyaksha* does not mean seeing, but BE-ing.



“To BE” is to realise - Hence I AM THAT I AM. I AM is Siva. Nothing else can be without Him. Everything has its being in Siva and because of Siva.

Therefore enquire “Who am I?” Sink deep within and abide as the Self. That is Siva as BE-ing. Do not expect to have visions of Him repeated. What is the difference between the objects you see and Siva? He is both the subject and the object. You cannot be without Siva. Siva is always realised here and now. If you think you have not realised Him it is wrong. This is the obstacle for realising Siva. Give up that thought also and realisation is there.

D.: Yes. But how shall I effect it as quickly as possible?

M.: This is the obstacle for realisation. Can there be the individual without Siva? Even now He is you. There is no question of time. If there be a moment of non-realisation, the question of realisation can arise. But as it is you cannot be without Him. He is already realised, ever realised and never non-realised.

Surrender to Him and abide by His will whether he appears or vanishes; await His pleasure. If you ask Him to do as you please, it is not surrender but command to Him. You cannot have Him obey you and yet think that you have surrendered. He knows what is best and when and how to do it. Leave everything entirely to Him.

His is the burden: you have no longer any cares. All your cares are His. Such is surrender. This is *bhakti*.

Or, enquire to whom these questions arise. Dive deep in the Heart and remain as the Self. One of these two ways is open to the aspirant.

Sri Bhagavan also added: There is no being who is not conscious and therefore who is not Siva. Not only is he Siva but also all else of which he is aware or not aware. Yet he thinks in sheer ignorance that he sees the universe in diverse forms. But if he sees his Self he is not aware of his separateness from the universe; in fact his individuality and the other entities vanish although they persist in all their forms. Siva is seen as the universe. But the seer does not see the background itself. Think of the man who sees only the cloth and not the cotton of which it is made; or of the man who sees the pictures moving on the screen in a cinema show and not the screen itself as the background; or again the man who sees the letters which he reads but not the paper on which they are written. The objects are thus Consciousness and forms. But the ordinary person sees the objects in

the universe but not Siva in these forms. Siva is the Being assuming these forms and the Consciousness seeing them. That is to say, Siva is the background underlying both the subject and the object, and again Siva in Repose and Siva in Action, or Siva and Sakti, or the Lord and the Universe. Whatever it is said to be, it is only Consciousness whether in repose or in action. Who is there that is not conscious? So, who is not realised? How then can questions arise doubting realisation or desiring it? If ‘I’ am not *pratyaksha* to me, I can then say that Siva is not *pratyaksha*.

These questions arise because you have limited the Self to the body, only then the ideas of within and without, of the subject and the object, arise. The objective visions have no intrinsic value. Even if they are everlasting they cannot satisfy the person. Uma has Siva always with Her. Both together form Ardhanariswara. Yet she wanted to know Siva in His true nature. She made tapas. In her *dhyana* she saw a bright light. She thought: “This cannot be Siva for it is within the compass of my vision. I am greater than this light.” So she resumed her tapas. Thoughts disappeared. Stillness prevailed. She then realised that BE-ing is Siva in His true nature.

Muruganar cited Appar’s stanza: - “To remove my darkness and give me light, Thy Grace must work through ME only.”

Sri Bhagavan mentioned Manickavachagar’s: “We do *bhajana* and the rest. But we have not seen nor heard of those who had seen Thee.” One cannot see God and yet retain individuality. The seer and the seen unite into one Being. There is no cogniser, nor cognition, nor the cognised. All merge into One Supreme Siva only!

—Excerpted from talks with Shri Ramana Maharishi

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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Farming the right idea

Though an agricultural economy, Indian harvesting and post harvesting technology is quite outdated. Aspada Investments-backed LEAF aims to correct this while simultaneously benefiting the farmers and the consumers

Ooty-based Lawrencedale Agroprocessing (LEAF) provides end-to-end service, from harvesting to packaging, distribution and logistics while ensuring freshness, taste, texture, appearance and nutritional value to the customers of fruits and vegetables. A social venture, it also has developed a business model that benefits the farmer by providing them not only a better margin, but also access to best practices in agriculture from across the globe. Having successfully established a client base in large format retail and wholesale stores, LEAF now plans to reach out to the smaller retailers.

Unconventional beginning

LEAF began as a casual conversation between a buyer and a seller of land in Ooty. K.P. Nair, a serial entrepreneur who co-founded ventures such as ETT Ventures, 24/7 Customer, Computer Point and Microland and has more than 30 years of experience in IT and ITES industries, bought (along with his friends) eight acres of land in Ooty to build a gated community for themselves. He met property developer P. Vijayaraghavan, and over time, there sprang a friendship between these two; enough for Vijayaraghavan to propose that instead of building houses, Nair and his friends should consider starting a farm spread across 100 acres of land. His conviction, the research that he had already done about farming and the impact it could create on the lives of the farmers on the one hand and the consumers on the other, appealed to Nair and the idea for the creation of an agro-based company took shape.

One of the greatest strengths for LEAF was that we started delivering directly at the doorstep of our clients at the specified time. This is what won us the initial set of clients.

Four co-founders – Vijayaraghavan, Nair, R. Balakrishnan and L.K. Narayanan came together to form Lawrencedale in 2008. An NRI readily forwarded the money for the venture, but it had to be returned due to regulations about foreign investment in land. Fourteen of their friends made generous contributions to this venture knowing very well that they may never see any returns.

With Rs. 4 crore thus mustered the company bought 30 acres of tribal land in Tambetti village that had been left inactive. “We literally hopped from farm to farm getting each cleared,” says Balakrishnan. They also saw the plight of



the farmers, who could only sell in a mandi in Mettupalayam at the price dictated by mandiwallah and also pay him a commission of 10 percent. The farmers also followed primitive methods of farming adding to which was the 25-30 percent returns that would also eat into their income.

One step at a time

Much groundwork was done by Vijayaraghavan about the best practices in the business globally before LEAF became fully functional. Just to get a feel of the market, LEAF started buying Ooty carrots from farmers and selling them in the Bengaluru market. Different buyers have different size requirements, so the carrots needed to be sorted, cleaned and transported.

“The cleaning was initially done in drum rollers,” says Balakrishnan. As there are better technologies available LEAF put up a plant in Palada near Ooty, where other washers were already present, in March 2011. It started delivering directly at the doorstep of its clients at the specified time, which was one of the greatest strengths for LEAF that won over the initial two to three clients. At this stage LEAF only handled four to five tonnes of carrot a day.

But the next problem was that the transportation in open trucks reduced the life of the carrots which would rot quickly due to the increase in temperatures as they were taken across from the cool landscape of Ooty’s hills to warmer climates. So in 2012, the company

invested in cold storage at Ooty and Hosekote, Karnataka, as it also wanted to scale up. It also invested in packaging machines, imported from Italy, as packaging is critical for retaining freshness. It has six large and eight small trucks for transporting the vegetables all of which have temperature control mechanisms.

Growing ambitions can only be met by seeking out more and in this case, what was needed was close to Rs. 7 crore. “Since I was in the financial sector I knew enough investors. But for some of the investors I got in touch with, this was too small an amount for them to be interested,” recalls Balakrishnan.

Aspada Investments, backed by Soros Economic Development Fund, and which focusses on socially relevant ventures, invested Rs 10 crores, enabling LEAF to expand its reach. It started supplying 15 tonnes of carrots a day in Coimbatore, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad and some parts of Kerala. Retail and wholesale majors such as Wal-Mart, Big Bazaar, More, Reliance Fresh, Spar and Nilgiris became part of its customer network over time. “Getting the first one or two customers was difficult. But, because of the convenience we offered of delivering to the stores directly, the subsequent expansion was easier,” comments Balakrishnan.

Reaching all audiences

The first plant could deliver only 12-15 tonnes a day and was becoming a bottleneck as the market demand was for

100-150 tonnes of carrot a day. LEAF decided to set up a larger plant in Jadayampalayam near Coimbatore. The plant, commissioned by the in-house team completely, can handle 100 tonnes a day and expects to achieve 50-60 tonnes by next March.

LEAF’s current plan for growth includes reaching out to the local retail vegetable markets. In addition, the company has started growing more varieties of exotic vegetables after experiments on their suitability to grow in Ooty’s climate.

The team has grown from 12 people in the first plant to 60 with the second and 30-40 indirect employees. “Only now people from the industry have started joining us,” says Balakrishnan, admitting that it has started seeing the numbers to justify the recruitment just now. The company registered a turnover of Rs 15-18 crore last year but is cautious about projecting future revenue figures. The company also wants to raise more funds, about Rs. 50-75 crores, after achieving 50 tonnes in the next one year.

The company plans to continue to strengthen its presence in the south and touch parts of western India. North India is still not on the cards but experiments are being carried out to source vegetables from there.

Friends of the farmer

At the core of this venture is the impact LEAF intends to create in the lives of the farmers and the farming community. It has initiated a community farming drive by connecting to 2,500 farmers in Nilgiris, Chikbellapur and Hyderabad, providing them with high quality seeds at lower costs, helping them right from the time of preparing the soil to selling post harvest. It has employed agriculture graduates and also employs agri-experts to provide farmers with access to best practices that can improve their yield.

“Initially, it was difficult to convince them to sell to us and so we paid cash up front, that really helped us win their trust,” recalls Balakrishnan. Now, LEAF has encouraged the farmers to open bank accounts so that they can receive cheques as well as for money transfers.

On its 30 acres of land LEAF practices organic farming. Greenhouses are being built to grow exotic varieties under controlled conditions. “The world has advanced in agricultural technology while we are lagging behind. Our dream is to introduce new and efficient methods of farming right here,” says Balakrishnan.

— S. Meera

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

Impacting lives of Tribal through Rubber in North East India

Rubber farms have created an enormous socio-economic impact for farmers and have transformed the conditions of subsistence for farmers, who have now emerged as entrepreneurial farmers in the region

Agriculture in the North Eastern states has been subject to various social and institutional constraints, the most obvious being the land holding pattern. Nearly three-fourths of all operational holdings are either 'marginal' or 'small'. The small farm size limits the scope for commercial farming. Apart from this, another social / institutional issue affecting the North-Eastern states is the prevalence of Jhum or shifting cultivation wherein the forest land is temporarily utilized for agriculture purpose. This activity is repeated after a certain number of years. Such practices not only affects the forest cover adversely but also reduces its productivity and increases soil erosion.

Understanding these agricultural realities and enabling the tribal communities in the North East to lead sustainable livelihoods, the Rubber Board - a statutory body of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, introduced rubber farming in North Eastern India. After establishing a few trial farms in association with the Forest and Soil Conservation Department, the Rubber Board established its presence in North East India, and has successfully influenced many small farmers to engage in rubber cultivation.

Rubber farms have created an enormous socio-economic impact for farmers and have transformed the conditions of subsistence for farmers, who have now emerged as entrepreneurial farmers in the region. The rising demand of rubber in the national and international markets is good news for farmers in the Northeast. It has helped them boost their economies and improve their living standards. North East contributes nearly 15% of India's rubber production. Today, 103,500 hectares of land is under rubber cultivation in North Eastern states including Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland, producing 46,000 tonnes of rubber annually.

Role of the Rubber Board

To meet the growing demands of rubber growers in India and to cater to the interests of the rubber industry, the Indian government passed the Rubber Production and Marketing Act in

April 1947, and the Indian Rubber Board was constituted forthwith. The Rubber Board is instrumental for the overall development of the rubber industry across the country. The functions of the Board, as defined by the Act, is to promote measures that it thinks fit for the development of the rubber industry. To cater to the increasing demands of rubber products in India and across the globe, the Board is actively involved in introducing rubber farming in non-traditional areas where rubber has never been grown before.

One of the unique features of the Rubber Act is that it caters to all the main components of agriculture and offers the following services to rubber farmers:

- Production —ensure good quality seedlings and cultivation
- Extension services —offer advice, technical support and a package of best practices to be followed
- Value addition —enable processing at farm level and in groups and provide technical support to large processors
- Research —develop location specific clones
- Marketing —Formation of Rubber Processing Societies with market linkages

The Rubber Board Officials handle all the above components with great efficiency and technical officers are available in all the new growing areas. These officials handhold the rubber farmers from planting to production and provide them with market linkages. This holistic approach of the Rubber Board has resulted in many states adopting Rubber farming as in the North Eastern states, Jharkhand, Bihar, etc.

By encouraging direct sale of rubber to the cooperatives and linking cooperatives with the buyers directly, each rubber farmer earns 90 to 95 percent of the farm gate price. This is a positive shift in rubber trading when compared to a coffee grower in Uganda who earns 14 cents for one kilo of coffee beans produced at his farm but sold by Starbucks in UK for 47 dollars.

Traditionally, rubber has mainly grown in Kerala and adjoining

districts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. As the traditional rubber growing tracts in India has reached the saturation level, Rubber Board has identified states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and North East for expansion of the rubber crop cultivation. Tripura, Assam, lower reaches of hills of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh in the North East India have been identified as areas that are marginally or fully suitable for rubber cultivation. Around 450,000 hectares of land has been identified for rubber farming in the North Eastern states.

Since 1980s, the Rubber Board Extension Officers at the North East have been instrumental in influencing many small farmers and Jhum farmers to switch to rubber farming. These officers have braved their way into the hearts of these farmers despite the insurgency in the North East during the 80s and 90s.

The arrival of the rubber industry in the tribal areas of Assam and Meghalaya has been instrumental in the socio-economic development of the communities living here. It has brought about significant social change, particularly for the marginalized tribal societies, who were otherwise living impoverished lives and were not mainstreamed into society.

The life period of rubber trees in plantations is around 32–35 years. The trees remain immature for 6–7 years initially and then start production which continues for 26–27 years, sometimes even more without any disruption. This means that in this sector the investment is made one time only. For one hectare of production, Rs 2 to 3 lakh is required for investment which will yield higher returns or dividends for minimum 25 years. Thus Rubber has proved to be a sustained livelihood option for these tribals.

Rubber Board also influenced the marginal farmers to organize themselves into groups and form cooperatives or producer companies to help them generate surpluses and sell their yield at comparative prices. Another feather in the cap for the Rubber Board!

—Latha Suresh



Meghshala, a school on the cloud that looks beyond textbooks

In India, one in every five primary school teachers in India, lacks the stipulated minimum academic qualifications to teach a class. A group of intellectuals decide to fix this problem using technology. The result is Meghshala, which literally means ‘a school on cloud’. Meghshala is a charitable trust that creates thought-provoking learning experiences designed and delivered using cloud computing.

The problem is that teachers and students in government and low income schools lack resources, motivation, and skills to be effective. This results in poor teaching outcomes with students not proficient in basic math, language or science knowledge and skills. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2014 report shows that barely half of children in grade 5 could read a grade 2 level text. “The dire need for reinventing our teacher training system in the country got us to start Meghshala,” says Ullas Kumar, VP Education Operations at Meghshala. The founders of Meghshala—Jyoti Thyagarajan and Sridhar Ranganathan—decided to equip teachers with advanced tools to create an engaging classroom experience for the students. Meghshala aims to accelerate student learning and ease classroom instruction by using technology as a medium.

The Meghshala team comprises of an enthusiastic bunch of eighteen people who have deep expertise in multiple fields, ranging from digital media and graphic arts to content writing and education. “Most of us have been teachers in government, private and international schools,” says Amrutha Murali, the implementation and partner manager at Meghshala. “The one common thing that binds us together is our innate drive to bridge the education gap.”

The name Meghshala aptly portrays the way this social enterprise operates. In Sanskrit, ‘Megh’ means cloud and ‘Shala’ means school, Meghshala, therefore, stands for ‘a school on the cloud.’ The name encapsulates idea of delivering thought-provoking learning experiences using cloud technology across different schools.

The charitable trust is currently based in Bengaluru, working with 15 classrooms and is planning to reach 219 classrooms, 520 teachers, and 6570 students in Karnataka by the end of this year.

Creative learning process

Meghshala believes in creating a classroom where students and teachers enjoy the process of learning. “Curiosity and fun are an integral part of any classroom,” says Ullas Kumar, VP education operations at Meghshala. “Our lessons are built to bring the ‘AHA!’



Photo courtesy: Meghshala website

moments in the classroom for both the teachers and students.”

The unique initiative provides an adaptive learning solution called Teach Kits. This learning solution incorporates a deluge of multimedia content such as videos, images, real-life stories, activities and powerful questions. These Teach kits are hosted on a cloud-based learning management system which can be accessed by teachers across different schools. Through Teach Kits, Meghshala transforms prescribed list of topics into an exciting, informative and thoughtful curriculum.

“The virtual platform allows us to scale across borders and impact the maximum number of teachers,” says Ullas. “Our impact is gauged using data collected through phones and tablets used by our implementation managers.”

Meghshala trains teachers by supporting them with ‘virtual master tutors’ in class. “The support will be in the form of instructions which are customized to the level of the teacher,” says Ullas. “Teachers will also be provided physical support in the classroom to ensure better adoption of our material.”

The Meghshala cloud is populated with lessons on every chapter—from Grade 1 to Grade 10. All these lessons are taught with the skill of a master teacher, a person who has deep knowledge in the field of education or a specific topic. The units

help students learn and recall facts understand the process, think about applications, analyze data, evaluate answers and envision creative solutions to authentic real life problems.

“Each unit will be informed by a set of basic values and ethical stances. Supported by our instructions, teachers will execute these lessons in class. Teachers will initially follow these instructions but will later be encouraged to customize and create new lessons according to their requirement,” says Amrutha.

Meghshala team encourages students to actively participate in debates, discussions, while showing powerful videos with relevant questions. “These kinds of activities help students hone and develop other skill sets,” says Amrutha.

Looking beyond textbooks

Meghshala has paved the way for students and teachers to look far and beyond textbooks. The Meghshala lessons give access and exposure to information to teachers and students which are not available in textbooks. The teachers who are working with Meghshala have been highly receptive and understand integrating technology within education is the way forward.

“The students enjoy learning this way. They like the videos and the activities the teach kits provide. They specifically ask the teachers to use the Meghshala lessons

to teach,” says Amrutha.

Meghshala has conducted pre and post tests during its pilot project and witnessed tremendous increase in test scores. The company could see the growth in as less as four months. “Going beyond the marks or the scores, we see a huge change in the classroom atmosphere. Kids are engaging in discussions, teachers are conducting activities to improve understanding. It’s an engaging, vibrant learning environment we see,” says Amrutha.

Creating social impact

Unlike other reputed institutions that educate students with an individualistic approach, Meghshala aims at creating social impact by incorporating ‘learner profiles’ which push students towards realizing their responsibility towards society at large.

“For example, during the implementation of one of our Grade 8 Mathematics lessons on Simple Interest, the teacher delivering the lesson also created the space for students to empathize with struggling farmers and the farmer suicides prevalent in rural Maharashtra. The Teach Kit guided the teacher to ask powerful questions and propelled students to critically examine about the community around them. This whole exercise was completed whilst learning a basic concept of Grade 8 Mathematics,” says Amrutha.

Meghshala motivates teachers to create rich learning environments which in turn help where students become aware of existing social issues and collaborate to find solutions. The company makes an effort to inspire students to be a helping hand and bring what they have learned to their community and grow up to become responsible citizens. “We believe that a population gainfully employed in finding solutions to social problems will have positive impacts on the global economy and conscience,” says Amrutha.

Broadening horizons

This unique initiative has received positive response from both the teachers and students in its partner schools. Meghshala aims to impact 100,000 teachers by 2020. The company further plans to expand its operations across the country and abroad. “In the coming year we are planning on expanding into Kenya and few other African countries,” says Amrutha. “We see our self as enablers of human resources. We dream that we can help set the stage for India to be a true leader of the global economy.”

—Supriya Kumarswamy

This post originally appeared on www.billionbulbs.com

Serving Happiness

Drawing inspiration from Jagruti Yatra and Yuva Prerna Yatra, Nitin initiated the Narmada Prerna Yatra in 2013. A four day bus journey in the Bharuch-Narmada region, the programme intended to expose the youth, who were selected through an application based process, to rural challenges and potential opportunities to create sustainable social enterprises.



Happiness is the key to success in life. True! Every individual's notion or source of happiness could be different, yet the energy and impact happiness can have on whatever one does is magical. More than creating a positive environment for one to act, happiness drives one through the journey of establishing inner hope.

Globalisation and liberalization did have their own fall outs. 'Job' became critical to economic development and families disintegrated. The homogenous aspiration to move up the social ladder coupled with many other factors like lack of development of traditional livelihoods forced a large part of the population to look at cities as their respite. Thus, the cycle of poverty became vicious.

As the macro systems play out on the lives of our people, what is heartening are the efforts by some to make others' lives relatively easier and independent. This is the story of a Computer Engineer who graduated from IIT, Bangalore and has worked with companies in Europe, Bangalore and also some start up companies.

Mr Nitin Kumar Kirtibhai Tailor, CEO and Founder of Serve Happiness Foundation, could not realize the happiness quotient in spite of the material progress that he was part of. "Inner satisfaction brings happiness. That's what Abdul Kalam taught us and I firmly believe in this," shares Nitin who gave up his job and returned to his hometown, Bharuch, to work towards the health and educational needs of local communities through the HMP Foundation.

Embarking on a journey to inspire

youth to contribute for the national development, Nitin established Serve Happiness Foundation in Bharuch. "Social anomalies need pragmatic solutions at the micro level. They have to be sustainable and scalable for replication. While there are many to suggest, there are very few who dare to go down that road. Serve Happiness Foundation wishes to be the platform for those crusaders," he explains.

Connecting youth is the trend that Nitin wanted to emulate,



but by creating opportunities that facilitated self-realization and triggered the entrepreneurs in them. Through his initiative, youth were able to venture into the communities, spend time with the people and work with them, thereby putting their skill sets to productive use.

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youth, who were selected through an application based process, to rural challenges and potential opportunities to create sustainable social enterprises. Facilitators and Mentors engaged in this programme added value to the experience by allowing the youth interact with change makers. "It was a tough task to select 20 participants from over 100 applications from seven states," exclaims Nitin, who felt that

such field interactions from the yatra must be supported by entrepreneurship programmes as it will further strengthen the competency of the youth to progress with this vision.

August 2015 saw the third edition of Narmada Prerna Yatra and Serve Happiness Foundation is definitely more than happy with the enthusiasm shown by the youth across the country. "Three of our yatris have started their own projects. One of them is working on a model for developing mobile blood donation banks," says Nitin.

This happiness was still not complete. Serve Happiness Foundation wanted to reach out to more rural youth who can be brought under urban mentors. Thus evolved 'Gramin Yuva Yatra' that was launched in the presence of late Shri APJ Abdul Kalam. Collaboration with the Centre for Entrepreneurship Development, Government of Gujarat helped the youth gain knowledge on dairy technology, agriculture, food processing and other areas which

brought in development of the communities along with creating new livelihood opportunities.

Nitin, pleased with the foundation's work and its reception, is not very keen to develop this into a business model. "We are happy. Fee from the yatra participants and the earnings from workshops allow us to indulge in our intentions satisfactorily. What more do we need to look for?," smiles Nitin who has received many awards like the Entrepreneur of the year from IIT Bangalore and winner at the Startup Weekend, NASSCOM, organized by IIM Ahmedabad. Serve Happiness Foundation's resounding success in a short span also got Nitin an invite to be a part of the World Happiness Consortium organized by United Nations in March 2014.

There are now plans to launch the Tapi Prerna Yatra in Surat city. While details are being worked out, Nitin also engages in designing and conducting social entrepreneurship programmes. He was invited to be the speaker at the Agripreneurship Development Programme organized by CED in September 2015. Alongside, the foundation, has also revived the traditional sujani looms through exhibitions in Gujarat and Delhi. There are also regular awareness programmes organized for rural youth in partnership with institutions like SEWA Rural, Jhagadia Bharuch, CED and others.

New initiatives, new inroads to promote entrepreneurship and thus new found happiness among the passionate youth and the needy communities. Let's wish them success and more happiness!

—Shanmuga Priya . T

Risk of Not Having Efficient Risk Management

‘No Risk No gains’; a very well-known saying. Risk exists whenever we want to push the edge or change and contribute. Many say what may be the risk in a social organization? Actually social organizations face a very high level of risk in several dimensions; from finance, people, to the completion and continuity of projects. Since they are continually seen as outsiders coming to set right or provide something that is non-existent to the insiders, there is a continual threat of that acceptance drying up in several places. The projects stand under the mercy of political sanctions, community acceptance, financial sponsorship, people and infrastructure availability and many more.

So how to identify, manage and mitigate risk? First of all, identifying, accepting with full awareness the risks that are possible to emerge is the first step. Having a great depth of knowledge on all possible pitfalls, areas one may get into trouble or problem is surely the key for success. Different people see risks in many different ways; some see it as an opportunity, or as a challenge, or a problem to be resolved and few just want to avoid /ignore and not have them. The possibility of mitigating risk without losing courage and conviction is to a large extent dependent on the perspective form which it is viewed. This defines a true leader’s ability to foresee and plan for any possible roadblocks and failures.

Identification of risks:

Identification is the first step. It is important to also identify the orientation of the Leader/ team towards risk. Are they:

- Risks Averse- A person who prefers lower returns with known risks rather than higher returns with unknown risks.
- Risk Seeking- A person who searches for greater volatility and uncertainty in investments/ initiative in exchange for anticipated higher returns.
- Risk Neutral- His/ her preferences are neither risk averse nor risk seeking. A risk neutral party’s decisions are not affected by the degree of uncertainty in a set of outcomes, so a risk neutral party is indifferent between choices with equal expected payoffs even if one choice is riskier.

This understanding gives the initial preparation that has to be done with the Leader/team to handle risk. Further using the 5 w 1 h methodology, a complete analysis is done on the possible risks the project may face.

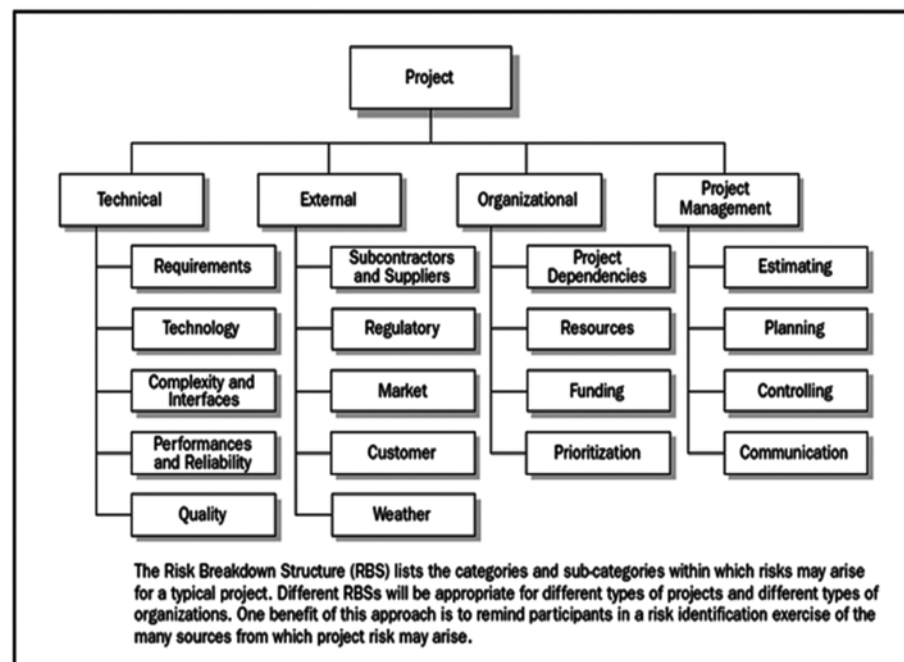
- Is there a possibility of risk in the enterprise / intervention / process / task?
- What will this risk do to me?
- Why is this risk likely to come?

- Who can create this risk?
- Who will get impacted from this risk?
- When will the risk occur?
- Where are the points this risk can occur?
- How to envisage this risk in advance and manage / reduce / remove risk?

Breakdown structure for Risk:

For effective and complete analysis, it is essential to make a breakdown structure and mark the spaces that may be most sensitive to risk. The pre-work for this would be to make a full list of all possible steps involved in a process and organization. This list of all processes / activities needs to be brainstormed, studied and documented in its full and true sense. Any miss of any critical steps involved may have its impact to the risk management. It is better deep dive when coming up with the list of steps for every process –both critical and non-critical. Expert judgement, analytical methods, meetings and other methods can be used to list them.

A sample risk breakdown structure is given for reference below.



Defining impact of the risk:

Identification of risk also requires the impact to be connected to that. The impact of risk can be on Cost, Quality, Time, and Scope of any initiative. It could be organized into a 5 point scale marking as very low - low - moderate - high - very high impact. This is a critical process since it enables the Leader/team to decide where the energy has to be invested and plan how to mitigate the high risk factors. Without a prioritization, there is the danger in a social project of small risks



occupying time and energy leading to major breakdowns. Therefore, it is essential to plan mitigation steps with sufficient alternatives.

Manage Risks:

One of the old and familiar techniques to plan risk management is called the FMEA - Failure Mode Effect Analysis. This is one of the simplest ways to identify the list, all the potential failures and the causes for the failure. Each cause can be graded based on



not match the market conditions; raw material quality turns out poor; there is sudden rise in raw material cost and so on. Then how severe is it? What is the frequency - How many times does it occur? How easy or difficult is it to detect the rejection from market? Number rating is given. RPN is calculated. Action plans to mitigate each with higher RPN is planned. RPN is recalculated.

Risk analysis is both qualitative as well as quantitative. Just numerical risk analysis or just subjective discussion and talking would not suffice. Both in appropriate proportion and detailed and usable documentation is very critical. Identifying the probability and impact matrix with judgement, assessments and advises both from expert and historical references would help.

We get into a reactive risk management than proactive risk management mode. A reactive mode leads to a lot of post mortem exercises which eats into time and morale of the group further. Having appropriate checks and balances at different milestones / critical junctions would help mitigate and manage risk much more seamlessly. Every instance reported for a possible risk or an incident that happens needs to be well documented and this needs to be available to all in the organization to ensure regular update and understanding of the possible pitfalls. A good communication system which will re-iterate the risks factors and impact needs to be frequently and constantly updated to all. This document needs to be an important organization asset and knowledge base.

Along with all these methods, what is more important is to be mindful all the time and in all transactions, thoughts and actions. Experience of staff, gut feel and intuitions also play a key role in managing and mitigating risks.

Happy Risking... Enjoy Contributing !

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath and Prathaap B

the intensity as Severity (S), Occurrence (O) frequency, and ability to detect (D).

A Risk Priority Number - S, O & D are rated on a scale of 1 to 10. 10 being highest and 1 least. RPN - Risk priority number is a simple product of S x O x D. For all line items where risks are above a specified number/ avg of risks, then action plan needs to be documented and executed. The post action revised SOD and RPN needs to be calculated. Sample FMEA could be:

A social enterprise working on the creating products using local artisans –

- Risks could be that the design does

Sadguru Gnanananda National Fellowship Awards



Mr. P.N. Subramaniam, Managing Trustee of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani, in his welcome address, extended a very warm welcome to the Chief Guest, Dr. Bhaskar Ramamurthi, IIT, Madras and Mr. G. Sundararajan, Group Director, Shriram Capital Ltd. He then welcomed all the awardees, their families, other office bearers and the audience who had gathered in the auditorium.

He informed that the most-revered Swami Nityananda Giri could not attend the event due to some personal exigencies. An audio version of Swamiji's speech that contained his blessings, appreciation and best wishes was aired to the audience.

PNS shared the milestones of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS) since 1999 till date and elaborated the mission of the organization— To promote social consciousness in the society thereby creating social citizenry. He further highlighted the various activities and milestones achieved by MSDS and their unique approaches and sustainable solutions to create social value.

Sadguru Gnanananda National Fellowship Awards was launched in the year 2000, Mr. P.N. Devarajan, Founder

MSDS. The 2015 Awards was awarded to:

Mr. Arun Fernandez of 'Blink Foundation', Chennai works towards minimizing the social differences among the children by creating change agents for better co-existence and peace amongst the children.

Mr. Sandeep Mehto of 'Bharath Calling', Hoshangabad has been responsible to provide relevant and suitable opportunities to the rural school students in terms of enabling them to join higher school studies including collegiate education subsequently.

Mr. Asish Arora and Mrs Divya Gupta are from Himachal Pradesh who teach rural children and make them understand their own rural environment.

2013 and 2014 MSDS Fellows were also felicitated during the event. Mr

Release of Books:

'The Path Finder', an authorized biography of Shri. P.N. Devarajan, the Founder Trustee of MSDS Trust, by Marie Banu, was released and the first copy was given to Mr. G.S. by Dr. Bhaskar Ramamurthi.

'Unsung Beacons', a compilation of

articles featured in Conversations Today 2014 was released by Shri Elango Ramaswamy and the first copy was received by Dr. Bhaskar Ramamurthi.

'People Connect', a book authored by Dr. Kalpana Sampath on 'Feeling of Belongingness in Social Organisations' was released by Dr. K. Prabhakar, Professor, School of Management, SRM University and the first copy was received by N.K. Ranganath, CEO, Grundfos India.

Dr. Bhaskar Ramamurthi conveyed his hearty congratulations to all the chosen Fellows of the Sadguru Gnanananda Awards. He highlighted the roles and responsibilities of NGOs in a large democratic country like India and how they have to identify and accumulate resources of different kinds; skills and support from various agencies – corporate and Government – and philanthropists to make a difference in the society.

He also mentioned about the importance of Social Accounting and Audit for social entrepreneurs and wished the enterprising social entrepreneurs all success in their continued efforts.

Mrs. Latha Suresh, Trustee of MSDS delivered the vote of thanks.



“Just like how social work education has undergone change, social service has also undergone change.”

Girija Kumarbabu shares with **Marie Banu** the change in the social work sector over the last 40 years

Girija Kumarbabu is the Secretary of Indian Council for Child Welfare, Tamil Nadu and has over 35 years' experience in the social service sector. She serves as a Member in Juvenile Justice Board Chennai and is the Managing Director of Sankalp, an NGO in Chennai that is committed to the cause of promoting the rights of girl children.

She won the Best Social worker award 2009 from the Government of Tamil Nadu with Chief Minister's Gold Medal and Citation. She was also awarded the Outstanding Woman of the year 2009-2010 by the Inner wheel club-Madras Cosmos.

She has evolved a guidebook for grass-root level workers for training adolescent children and has co-authored a research study on the Impact of legislation on the situation of child labour that was sponsored by National Labour Institute. She serves as a trainer for UNICEF and other organisations including corporate houses on Child rights and child protection.

In an exclusive interview, Girija Kumarbabu shares with Marie Banu the change in the social work sector over the last 40 years.

Your first engagement as a social worker?

My introduction to the social service as such was during my undergraduate years in Stella Maris College. I was really captivated by the services rendered by one nun. She was in the department of Social work and was looking after Shanti Bhavan. She was the one who motivated me to pursue Masters in Social work.

My first placement was in the Artificial Limb Centre, now called Government Rehabilitation Centre. It was earlier part of Government Hospital. I am a basically a Medial and Psychiatry social worker and I worked as part of a research team. The idea was to see how we can completely rehabilitate an amputee. We were getting cases of people getting amputated, either for diabetic gangrene of accident reasons.

I took a break for a while, and then entered the field of child welfare. It has been more than 35 years in this field now.

Do you see any change in the social service sector when compared to what was 40 years ago?

Yes, I should say so. At that time, social work education itself was not very much sought after. But, now I see that it has really branched and this is a welcome sign. People are looking at it more as a profession. Earlier, we had to fight for our identity. Today, we have become more skilled and there are a lot more openings



for employment.

Just like how social work education has undergone change, social service has also undergone change. 40 years ago, you had martyrs and builders in the field of social work. There were large funding bodies and people were doing yeomen work in building people and their capacity. They were not working for personal gains. Only some of them were missionaries. Many were not missionaries, but worked with a missionary zeal and dedicated their entire lives working for people. That is the change that I see!

Being attached to a voluntary organisation, I find it very difficult to identify volunteers. Again, this is the change that has taken over! The more you say professional, immediately the word compensation gets into the background. You have trained people, but they do not have the time.

Life has become more complicated and the attitude of people have changed. We are not living in compartments but in an open society where every sphere of activity gets adjusted or accommodated to these changes. I suppose that in the field of social work also, we have become professional but the type of commitment and volunteering has taken a backseat.

leads to various problems as the child grows older.

Being a member of a Juvenile Justice Board, there must have been several cases that you might have dealt with. Can you share your experience?

I would say that the experience of being a member of the Juvenile Justice Board has been very revealing to understand how society functions and how the marginalised get further marginalised by the system as a whole. That is a big learning!

Children come from broken families, some are pavement dwellers and from a very difficult family where the father has a criminal record. So, the socio-culturalisation of children themselves becomes a huge task and they fall victims to criminal behaviour without knowing that this is a wrong way of life. There is no one to correct their behaviour and there is inadequate support services.

On one hand, you have a group of negative factors that are working overtime and on the other there is a vacuum - in terms of services to extend to these children. Both combined, you have a very difficult situation.

The cases related to theft are more related to children from the underprivileged background. We do come across children who belong to the upper class. There was a case where a child's father was a government servant and the mother was a nurse.

Can you share one case that was challenging to judge?

I had a case of a child who belonged to the fishermen community aged around 11. He was caught for a cell phone theft and had dropped out of school after the fourth standard. He has been using drugs and been drinking and smoking. When questioned, he innocently narrates how he has access to drugs. I consider it more heinous to make drugs available for children than the theft that he had committed. That is the way I look at it!

He has now gone on bail and the case will go on. He does not have anyone back home as he does not have a father and his mother lives with her other three children. They do not have a proper house to live in. What is going to happen to him? Situations like this emphasises the need for creating a strong child protection system

Children are most vulnerable and if you do not really save them from criminalising situations, we are helping the creation of hardcore criminals. That is the greatest challenge for all who are working with children at present!

How do we improvise this scenario?

You see more and more groups of young volunteers and professionals leaving their job to work for a cause. This is a good change and a welcome change. Because, we are also identifying new social issues related to the larger social context which calls for really committed leaders. They might not be professional social workers but are committed to the cause for which they want to work for.

About the family structure today. Your thoughts?

It is really worrying. Most of the families today have only one child. The child growing up with two or three siblings has learning taking place within the family. They learn to adjust to rules, family rules, sharing secrets, and learn to give — all these are part of social learning which is a challenge in most families is.

Today, there is only one child in a family. This child is indulged even though the parents are very strict. When the child comes to school and meets similar types of children — that becomes a problem as every child is trying to assert himself/herself. An environment of competition is created from a very young age which

Photo: Marie Banu