

# Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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**EDITOR: MARIE BANU**

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An exclusive interview with  
Ms. Shabnam Siddiqui, Executive  
Director, United Nations Global  
Compact Network India



## FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major health crisis that has brought about a sense of fear and anxiety among people around the globe and has affected the life of millions globally. Alongside, it has raised concerns about the mental health of a generation of children. The pandemic and lockdown phenomenon has led to short term as well as long term psychosocial and mental health implications for children and adolescents. This is just the tip of an iceberg – an iceberg we have ignored for far too long.

Anxiety and depression constitute more than 40% of mental-health disorders among those in this age group. Their mental health is highly complex, understudied and underfunded as they are at a vulnerable stage of development, with the majority of mental disorders emerging during adolescence.

A child's behaviour and development is heavily influenced by variations in socio-demographic and cultural processes operating within social eco-systems. Researchers have found that improving young people's cognitive and interpersonal skills can be more effective in preventing and treating anxiety and depression under certain circumstances. For instance, a concept known as 'decentring' or 'psychological distancing', i.e. encouraging a person to adopt an objective perspective on negative thoughts and feelings, can help both to prevent and to alleviate depression and anxiety.

In child and adolescent mental health services, such organisational envisioning is needed to cope with the foreseeable psychological effects of prolonged social isolation induced by nation-wide public health measures such as online schooling.

There is no 'silver bullet' for preventing and treating anxiety and depression in young people — rather, prevention and treatment will need to rely on a combination of interventions that take into account individual needs and circumstances.

Conversations Today brings to light the stories of changemakers working with adolescents and children and addressing this issue in their own way.

Marie Banu

## EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh

Marie Banu

# Being a Leader: Unfolding the Spiritual Energy dimension

*"When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy." — Rumi*

**B**eing a Leader not because of a position or title given by others, but being a leader through sincere pursuit of knowing and leading oneself – this is the first step towards unfolding Spiritual Energy.

Spiritual energy means being with oneself, developing a practice of listening to oneself deeply, in a committed manner. Often this energy dimension is misunderstood. Most tend to think of spiritual energy as something esoteric. The common notion is that spiritual energy can only be experienced when one has grown old enough and evolved. However, fact is that all of us experience spiritual energy right through our lives, albeit fleetingly. The drawback is that neither do we recognize such experiences as spiritual nor are we able to make them more consistent and enduring. The journey of personal evolution is learning to become aware of such experiences and practicing rituals that contribute to making such experiences enduring and consistent, until it becomes a 'state of being'. Deepening one's awareness of spiritual energy converts it from being an acquaintance to a dear friend, to finally becoming 'the self'.

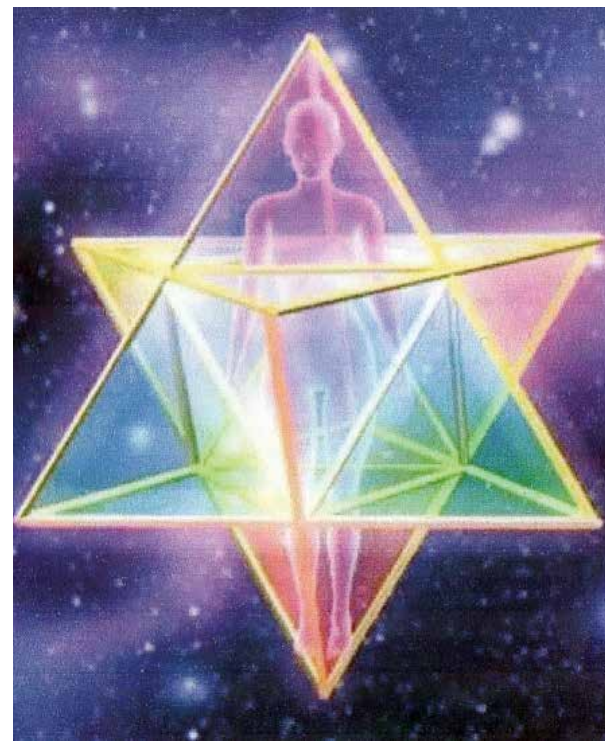
### Finding the Leader within

When one tunes into tapping this dimension of energy, one can create a life program. Most of us live our life with programs given by our parents, our teachers, our peers, and incomplete life experiences. These programs are not meant for us and therefore we experience 'bugs' along the way. These bugs are energy blocks that impede our natural growth and flowering. We can remove these energy blocks and move ahead. However, a more sustainable way of living, is to create a program that does not have a bug in the first place. This is when Spiritual Energy becomes an ally. When the spiritual energy dimension opens up, one can experience a 'clean slate' and the capacity to be in wonder, learn, do, experience, and discover living life. In such a state, the spiritual being is in a flow and is guided by the energy of life. Such beings radiate energy in their sheer presence.

When one starts leading oneself, then healing begins. Healing essentially means erasing old patterns, living life in a 'light way' so that even new patterns do not become heavy imprints.

### How is this Leadership nurtured?

1. Being with nature: Nature is the purest form of energy and one can get in touch with their spiritual core when the environment around does not deplete energy. In fact, nature enriches and cleanses the being and provides a sanitized environment for energy to flow freely.



2. Doing day-to-day activities mindfully: Being completely present to the moment is an approach that not only helps complete the activity, but also gives the doer a true experience of that activity. When we experience something wholesomely, we generate energy for ourselves.
3. Developing the ritual of meditation: Silencing the mind gives an opportunity to go within and locate the seeds of creation. Energy stems from within and flows into our entire existence.
4. Pursuing a cause beyond the self: When one strongly believes and pursues a cause that impacts a larger section of the universe, the self melts into the collective energy. This pursuit translates into an existence where one experiences the universal flow of energy.

Leaders, who have thus unfolded the spiritual energy dimension for themselves, serve every individual and the society at large. Through their spirit of compassion and detached attachment, their wholesome presence and deep involvement, and their pursuit of truth, they become the guiding light for humanity at large.

### Yours Energetically

Ms. Bhuvaneshwari Ravi is trainer, facilitator and coach of the Positive Energy (PE) program. She is a spiritual seeker with a vision of transforming her own energy state from surviving to being. In this journey she has gathered deep insights and is continuously working towards creating a pathway for more seekers. With years of exposure to spiritual practices like yoga, reiki, and personal development interventions like coaching, she is working in the Organization Development and Leadership Development space.

She can be contacted at [bhuvaneshwari@teamthink.co.in](mailto:bhuvaneshwari@teamthink.co.in) for arranging Positive Energy training and Coaching sessions.



# Parenting the marginalised

Seven decades after independence, India has come a long way in every aspect. But, the story of development also has its pitfalls. There is still a section of the population that is not visible, their existence is not often relatable and the intentions behind their mobility is mis-interpreted. Always being judged upon, tribals continue to live with fear – a fear which only they comprehend and learn to live with. “Political representation is slowly changing the tide but recognising their presence is an important pre-requisite. That is where the larger picture emerges,” says Mr. G. Kumar, Founder of Rural People Welfare Organisation (RPWO) in Chengam Block.

Coming from a middle class background, Kumar was not unaware of the marginalised sections of our society. As he grew, he was startled by the systemic factors that unintentionally contributed to sustaining inequality. Unable to complete his education, his compulsion to work exposed him to harder realities. The organisation he was working with conducted a baseline survey on Scheduled Tribes in two blocks of Tamil Nadu. “These people were completely dependent on forest resources. There were no roads or pavements. Their locations had to be discovered. It was a painstaking effort, but the observations became a strong driving force for me. They faced several issues, but were adapting to manage with what they had. It was evident that they did not know about their rights and what they were entitled to. So, the fact that someone from outside would come and resolve their concerns was a distant thought,” shares Kumar, who has now spent about three decades working for the welfare of the Irula tribes.

RPWO began in 1986 with hardly any resources. With few volunteers, Kumar embarked upon an arduous journey where his benefactors did not know that he was working towards improving their lives. Respecting their work routine, Kumar and team waited for the sunset to interact with tribal families. Self-help groups, he thought, provided a relatable objective for them to come together but it turned out to be a difficult task. After about a year in the field, Kumar and team earned the community’s trust and helped them open up about their concerns. “Now that they trusted us, we had a huge responsibility in hand. Communities, for whom outsiders were no more than visitors, started hoping that their lives will improve for the better. They began to cooperate,” recalls Kumar.

Rigorous homework and documentation helped provide land pattas for more than 300 families. With



pattas in hand, as land owners they were able to claim their rights for basic amenities. Kumar and team also worked on the provision of caste certificates. “Giving them their identity in the form of a legally valid document was extremely difficult but imperative. Scheduled Tribes who were once reported as non-existent by field officers from government departments were now listed in the census. With consistent work, we were able to convince the government officials that tribal people also lived on plains and not

only on the mountains. This was a big leap for us. We were able to help the authorities identify the Schedule Tribes who did not fit into the conventional criteria,” he adds.

RPWO also intervened to release bonded labourers. Having rescued more than 200 families from bonded labour, the team started working on their livelihood options. In order to secure livelihoods, Kumar and team approached banks, but the very nature of the lives of the Scheduled Tribes’ became an impediment. So now, the

team created space for banks and the community members to interact. With new access to credit facilities, construction of houses became a possibility. “Four years back 35 families got their pattas and they are now building their houses. Children are regular in school and new vocational training programmes have also been launched,” Kumar sums up.

Describing how difficult the issue of identification and rescue of bonded labourers is, Kumar goes on to elaborate how the team works to map the movement of these communities. Extremely complicated and thoroughly dependent on local linkages, every effort in this mapping, he strongly believes, helps watch over the micro and macro realities. “You miss one or two links, the communities will become invisible again,” he warns.

For how long will RPWO handhold them? Kumar, after deep introspection, says handholding marginalised communities is very much like parenting. “CSIM is the place where I saw the need for a long term field presence. We facilitate all our work with people’s cooperation and this is only the beginning. Scheduled Tribes must be able to claim their rights themselves without any fear. We must not only educate them, but make them claim their rights. At the end of the day, it is not what we do for them that matters, it is what we make them do for themselves. CSIM mentors have guided and prepared us for this larger responsibility,” explains Kumar.

*Shanmuga Priya.T*



# 3RS OF FOOD WASTE: REDUCE, RESCUE & REDISTRIBUTE

*Employed by a Malaysian social enterprise, the urban poor prepare free meals for their community using raw food bound for the landfills.*



“It just doesn’t make sense. Food has always been widely available, yet there are those that go without,” the Malaysian shares.

Global hunger is a growing issue, according to a study conducted by the United Nations. In 2019, an estimated 690 million people went to bed hungry each night. Due to the pandemic, an estimated 83 to 132 million more people may go hungry.

In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a 2018 UNICEF Malaysia study reported that one in 10 children living in poverty has less than three meals a day.

An architect by profession, Alvin’s epiphany came about when he was working on a low-cost housing project for underprivileged communities in Selangor. He witnessed a family of six, including young children, sharing one plate of food; it was mainly rice.

“It’s very hurtful to see this happening

in a thriving neighbourhood. I felt something needed to be done, to improve their quality of life,” recalls Alvin.

On another occasion, Alvin had the opportunity to visit a landfill in Selangor to learn how construction waste is disposed of.

He was shocked to discover tonnes of food: whole fruits, large cuts of meat and more — still fit for human consumption — laying to waste. It got him thinking; what if excess food could be diverted from landfills to the homes of the needy? Further research revealed that on a daily basis in 2016, Malaysia produces 38,000 tonnes of waste, nearly half is food waste.

“I think there’s been a lack of respect towards food... We have got to be more responsible when we order food, when we buy food, when we cook food. Let’s not overdo it, let’s do it in moderation.”

He adds, “When we prevent food from going into our landfills, we are also directly preventing greenhouse gases. So, it is a direct benefit to our environment.”

The way to What a Waste

For two years, Alvin and his wife Angela, went door-to-door in low-cost housing areas to understand the issue better and build community relationships. They gathered a list of who and where the needy households are; most are from the B40 community, the bottom 40 per cent of income earners in Malaysia.

Armed with that database, Alvin and Angela started What a Waste (WaW) in 2018 to reduce food waste and poverty hunger. Their goal: to bring regular free meals into the lives of these households.

WaW collects extra cooked food and ready-to-eat meals from events, households, retailers and F&B outlets,

as well as surplus raw produce and food products from wholesalers, manufacturers or distributors.

“It’s a matter of making use of existing resources and see how we are able to re-channel it and put it to better use,” says Alvin. “When we receive a request from our food donor through our social media, we will deploy our nearest available food warrior to the point of rescue to collect the food.”

“These are ready-to-eat meals, or perishable food, packed through a food safety protocol that we have set. They will then immediately deliver the ready meal to the nearest available beneficiary.”

WaW currently operates with a staff of five including the two founders, and has about 100 active food warriors, including B40 individuals, who are readily deployed on rescue and delivery missions.



“Every rescue mission is a race against time,” Alvin states. “We have to keep to a strict three-hour time-frame from the moment our food warriors pack the food to when it’s delivered for consumption.”

A social enterprise, WaW sustains its operations by charging event organisers a fee for collecting their excess food, based on the amount of food collected and the complexity of the operation. Food warriors who collect and deliver the food are then paid a flat fee per delivery. They aim to hire more food warriors from their beneficiary communities so that they can earn supplementary income.

To date, WaW has served over 100,000 families and rescued over 1.256 million kg of food, preventing around 800kg of methane gas from being produced in landfills. They also distribute food to nursing homes, refugee communities, the homeless and even frozen meats and veggies to animal shelters and the zoo.

From receiving to giving Sasmawati Mokhtar, a mother of four, who goes by Wati, is among the recipients of WaW meals. “Life was difficult after my husband was in a motorcycle accident. I was crying every day, worried about how I was going to pay my bills. My children are all very young. At that time, I only had RM2 (US\$0.48) in my pocket. When What a Waste came to help me, I felt relieved. They gave my family food and milk.”

But her story does not end there. In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit large events — the bulk of WaW’s food surplus collection avenues — hard. With more people in need, but a shortfall in supply, WaW got creative.

The social enterprise decided to reach out to more manufacturing companies and farms to collect surplus meal ingredients, etc. It then partnered with chefs and recruited individuals from the B40 community to train and pay them to cook meals for others in need — among the B40 cooks is Wati.

“We started this B40 Partner Cooks Programme to provide them with a source of income and to empower them to contribute back to their community,” Alvin shares proudly.



Food donations from the public are encouraged as ninety per cent of the ingredients used by these B40 cooks are rescued raw food.

Wati shares, “After I got a job with What a Waste I was able to pay my debts through cooking. I was also able to buy food for my children and milk and books for their schooling. When I cook, I’m able to give back to my community. I feel so happy to see them receiving food.”

Alvin acknowledges that the journey hasn’t always been easy but finds satisfaction in seeing his mission validated. “It really does fuel me to see how some of these beneficiaries have so willingly come forth to represent us... wanting to replicate this movement. So, this motivates me.”

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



## Centre for Social Initiative and Management

### Contact Persons:

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

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

**Ms. Marie Banu**  
Director, Chennai  
@ 9884700029

**Mr. Ramesh Balasundaram**  
Director, Bangalore  
@ 9845211311

**Mr. K L Srivastava**  
Director, Hyderabad  
@ 91- 9912656112

**Dr. Madhuri. R**  
Head, Coimbatore,  
@ 91-9840222559

**Dr. Agyeya Tripathi**  
Head - North & NE India  
@ 91-8058662444

**Mr. Sandeep Mehto,**  
Head – Hosangabad,  
@ 91-96696 77054

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

For further information, please contact: **Ms. Latha Suresh**  
Director, SAN, India  
@ 92822 05123.  
[www.san-india.org](http://www.san-india.org)



# THE GANDHIAN WAY

Ever since the Barefoot College was established in 1972, a Gandhian approach to its work has been at the centre of its functioning. The key reason for this: the need to reach last-mile communities while tackling issues like water, health, livelihood and education through rural wisdom and knowledge. “Mahatma Gandhi’s central belief was that the knowledge, skills and wisdom found in villages should be used for development before getting skills from outside,” explains Jaswanth Dadi, organizing secretary at Barefoot.

“Gandhiji also believed that sophisticated technology should be used in rural India, but it should be in the hands and in control of the poor communities so that they are not dependent or exploited as it leads to replacement,” Jaswanth adds, “Barefoot College has internalized and implemented this message of Mahatma Gandhi since our early beginnings.”

The college has, since inception, worked with the marginalized, exploited, and impoverished rural poor — typically those living on less than \$1 a day — to deliver them from poverty. The college’s adoption of Gandhian ideals has found relevance even in 21st Century India. For instance, Barefoot has successfully applied traditional know-how to build homes for the homeless, collect rain water for communities where potable water sources are scarce, and helped spread socio-economic messages at the grass-root level.

In keeping with its approach of adopting only technology that can be understood and controlled by rural communities, Barefoot College has demystified technologies and decentralised their uses by transferring their access, control, management and ownership to rural communities. “The College believes that even the uneducated poor have the right to use technologies to improve their life and skills,” says Jaswanth.

Through it all, the focus has clearly been on working with the poor. “Even though the core projects have been temporarily halted, thanks to the pandemic, the organization stepped up to provide much needed support to the rural communities of Rajasthan,” says Jaswanth, “We distributed survival kits throughout the first and second COVID wave.” Barefoot’s survival kits include rations (wheat, salt, turmeric, chilli powder and lentils) in addition to sanitizers, sanitary pads, soap and masks. “Disseminating relevant information in the form of IVR and videos in multiple languages has helped communities build resilience towards curbing the spread of COVID,” he adds.

When COVID restrictions lifted, Barefoot College began bridge schools in last-mile villages to help students have access to education. “The plan was to ensure that children don’t suffer due to the digital divide induced by the pandemic, and we arranged for equipment like iPads, tablets and solar projectors, to help overcome this,” says Jaswanth.

Recently, Barefoot College assisted the Rajasthan Government’s ‘Prashasan Gaon Ke Sangh Abhiyan’ initiative across 50 camps, to help reach government benefits to the poor. “All



our projects aiming to empower rural communities are important to the organization’s mission till we reach the last person,” says Jaswanth, “This work will continue as the organization believes in the optimal utilisation of the local traditional knowledge not only preserving it, but also making sure that it helps in providing a decent and dignified way of living to marginalised communities.”

Barefoot measure success only when it is able to reach the last person, and help empower every human. The organization turns 50 next year, and is set to meet new challenges head-on. “We have made an impact by creating a sustainable model to scale across the world,” says Jaswanth, “Our initiatives have reached 96 countries and more than 20 Indian states.”

Today, Barefoot College is the first fully solar electrified campus in rural India with a capacity of 250kW. The organization has trained over 3,300 solar ‘mamas’ from 96 countries. “Over a million people today have light through clean, decentralised solar electricity, which has effectively replaced kerosene lamps and thus offset carbon emissions from thousands of households across the world,” says Jaswanth.

Barefoot has also pioneered provision of sustainable drinking water and sanitation solutions to rural communities for 50 years. “Over 70 billion litres of water have been harvested through the creation of rainwater harvesting tanks, ponds and small dams which have revived multiple traditional water sources,” he adds.

Barefoot has helped educate over 90,000 students from last-mile villages and has supported the livelihoods of over 300 artisans in Rajasthan. Today, these artisans earn and sustain revenues from their native craft.

Over 300,000 individuals from rural Rajasthan have been able to access health facilities like dental, birth control

and TB camps at grass-root levels thanks to Barefoot’s health initiatives. On the environmental front, Barefoot College has promoted plantations in wastelands, government schools and nurseries throughout Rajasthan.

“Through the interventions from the nursery team, Barefoot currently manages more than 20,000 trees and plants on campus and nearby villages,” says Jaswanth.

“In addition to the forestation drives, we have developed Rajasthan’s first zero-waste and plastic-free village.” Today, the programme has been scaled to four villages and a panchayat.

During the COVID second wave, Barefoot distributed over 10,000 survival kits to rural communities in 12 districts of Rajasthan. It conducted a survey covering over 100 villages to understand the impact of the pandemic at the grass-root level, which helped build programmes and projects addressing some of the pressing issues. In fact, against all odds, Barefoot College was at the forefront of COVID relief efforts in 2020 and 2021. “Having known very little about Coronavirus in 2020 never came in the way of the organization’s determination to travel and distribute survival kits, which helped create hunger-free villages in Rajasthan,” says Jaswanth.

After 49 years of supporting rural communities, Barefoot believes much of its work is yet to be done. “Our mission and vision remains the same, and that is to use traditional knowledge and skills to empower rural communities,” says Jaswanth, “We are bound to our Gandhian approach and guiding principles — non-negotiable elements like equality, collective decision-making, decentralization, self-reliance, austerity and transparency.” Barefoot’s goal is clear: to ensure that everybody has access to the basic amenities that help one live a decent and dignified life.

*Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC), popularly known as 'The Barefoot College' is a community-based grassroots organisation working since 1972 based on the Gandhian concept of reaching the last person. It was founded by Sanjit 'Bunker' Roy, to harness the skills and intelligence of rural people and 'specialists' people with degrees and formal professional competence, to work together to empower local communities. The SWRC/ Barefoot College aimed to specifically address the issues concerning marginalised communities and individuals, including women, the exploited and the impoverished rural poor. The work took shape in practical domains like water, education, solar, health, advocacy and rural livelihoods including handicrafts. Barefoot has also sought to enable marginalised rural communities to participate in planning, executing, and maintaining their own frameworks for development. These processes have provided the opportunity to the rural poor to lift themselves out of relative poverty with dignity and self-respect. The Barefoot College discussed, defined and consolidated the non-negotiables within its body politic (equality, collective decision-making, decentralisation, self-reliance, austerity and openness to learning skills). Barefoot College will be celebrating 50 years of impactful journey at Triveni Kala Sangam, Delhi from February 5 - 11, 2022.*



# Avdhash Kaushal : The Man Who Regained The Lost Paradise of Doon Valley"

The Doon Valley in Uttarakhand once had numerous limpid water streams emanating from limestone aquifers. Abundant growth of the bushes held the soil together. But unscientific mining and unbridled cutting of trees wrought havoc with local conditions and greatly altered the ecosystem.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man. Once, a young Avdhash Kaushal was browsing a newspaper. A news item caught his attention. Tribal people in the hilly region were violently fighting for their share of water!

"It shocked me that they were stabbing each other for something that is in abundance in the valley - water!" recalls Kaushal. "I knew this had to be stopped at any cost." He consulted environmentalists, hydrologists and social activists. And found out the cause of the dearth of water in the area was unbridled mining and indiscriminate felling of forests.

In early 1970s, when Avdhash Kaushal relocated to Dehradun from his native Meerut, he founded Nehru Yuva Kendra to motivate young people in environmental issues facing the local areas. It was kind of a start-up to the activist in him. Later, he initiated an entity called Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra, RLEK for short in 1989 and undertakes a host of issues like legal literacy, human health, veterinary health, milk marketing, non-formal adult literacy, and children's education.

For decades, limestone mining operations in the Doon Valley were very widespread. The Valley had not only lost its natural beauty but had become prone to landslides, flash floods, water shortages, rising temperatures and failing crop production.

Kaushal decided to take on the mining cartel. Friends and well-wishers had warned Kaushal against taking on the powerful mining mafia of Dehradun-Mussoorie belt in Uttarakhand. He went on regardless without a care for his life and limb.

"It's not that I was looking for a fight. These poor people of rural Uttarakhand were not aware of their rights and the laws that can protect them. I just took the law to them," reminisces Kaushal.

He filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) on 14th of July, 1983 in the Supreme Court seeking a complete ban on quarrying. The limestone quarries case fought by Avdhash Kaushal was the first environment case in the country to be heard by the Supreme Court. A fierce legal battle was fought between the affected citizens on one side, and the rich limestone contractors, powerful industrialists and even the government, on the other, bringing into sharp focus the conflict between development and conservation.

After having won the historic environmental battle in the Supreme Court, Avdhash Kaushal decided to harness the energies of people, particularly the youth, to rejuvenate the abandoned mines and denuded foothills. Kaushal promoted reforestation in the Doon valley. He undertook a massive afforestation programme with 30,000 students in the valley.

The afforestation programme became a feature of many a 'school curriculum' as groups of children dug pits, planted saplings and fenced areas. After some years, the ecological balance of bare hillsides in the Dehradun district was partially restored.

Having won the people's rights to their ecological environment, Kaushal continued to promote the traditional lifestyle of Uttarakhandis.

Avdhash Kaushal also addressed a host of other issues through RLEK.

## Right to Breathe:

A number of chemical and cement factories located in Dehradun district were causing serious damage to the health of the people. RLEK successfully went through the lower courts to the Supreme Court of the country demanding the closure of the polluting factories.



## Bonded Labour:

RLEK led an initiative to help free large groups of such bonded labourers. It was due to RLEK's untiring efforts that the presence of 19,000 bonded laborers was officially accepted by the Government and they were released.

## Land Ownership Rights:

RLEK filed a case before the Supreme Court regarding non-allotment of land to freed bonded labourers and the Supreme Court ordered the State government to facilitate the allotment of land to the freed bonded labourers.

## Illegal Poppy Cultivation:

The tribal area of Dehradun had the wide-ranging practice of poppy cultivation for smuggling to the national and international market. The real beneficiaries were the rich and influential classes. Drug addiction also created many social problems among the youth of these tribes. RLEK filed a suit against them in 1986, leading to the passing of the "Prevention of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act" in 1988.

The United Nations granted Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations on RLEK for having competence in empowering indigenous groups. In fact, Kaushal was invited to address the World Summit of the United Nations at Geneva.

Avdhash Kaushal received Padmashree Award 1986 and The Week's "Man of the Year 2003". He continues to run RLEK with the help of his children.

Harry Jayanth



*Bhatar is located 11 kms from Lakhamandal in the Chakrata Block of Dehradun District in Uttarakhand. Like in other parts of rural Uttarakhand, Bhatar is also home to an abundance of traditional water harvesting structures. Even after hundreds of years after their construction, most of them continue to supply water even today. They are living examples of sustainable technologies. These structures have been sustained by a combination of cultural and customary practices of reverence towards water.*

*The presence of sacred trees and plants, e.g. peepal and banyan trees or tulsi, symbolized their sanctity. People often built small water structures like dharas, naulas, or baoris as an act of piety. Even now, a new Uttarakhandi bride on first reaching her husband's home offers ritual prayers at the village naula or dhara.*

*The forests surrounding these water structures are also considered as sacred by the local community. The trees in the sacred forest are deemed to be a manifestation of the Lord Kedarnath and any harm done to them is considered to be not just on the tree but on the deity. Cutting of trees is strictly prohibited. But the villagers are allowed to collect dead wood from the forests. Outsiders are allowed to collect dead wood for a nominal amount.*

*The water from the nearby spring is bifurcated into two separate channels. One channel leads to a small cemented pool called Devta ka Paani (the deity's pool) where the water collects. The water collected in this pond is not utilized by any person, for any other purpose except by the pujari for usage in the worship of the temple.*

*The other channel is used to divert the water into separate outlets which have elaborately carved wooden snouts. The water flowing through these outlets is utilized for drinking, washing and other daily chores by the communities.*

*The villagers are also aware of the favourable ecological impacts of the sacred forest. There is a big water source just below the forest and according to Pramila, a village resident, "the abundance of water in the source is ensured through the preservation of the trees above it." Thus the sacred forest is perpetuated by both religious and ecological motives. And now, some communities have found medicinal properties in plants and herbs.*



# WHEN THE GIRL CHILD READS

The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) Scheme was introduced by the Government of India in the year 2004, for setting up residential schools at the upper primary level for girls belonging to under-served communities. The scheme is being implemented in Educationally Backward Blocks (EBB) of the country, to bring the female literacy rate in these areas up to par with the national average. With a greater share of the seats in these schools reserved for girls from historically marginalized communities, these KGBV schools are one of the most inclusive institutions in the country today.

As is the case with any system, the KGBV's suffer from a variety of issues, mostly arising out of a deficiency of resources, both in terms of infrastructure and in terms of training. On a mission to make model schools out of these KGBV's, is Ugam Educational Foundation, a not-for-profit organization focused on transforming education systems and empowering girls in needy districts.

Ugam was founded by Lopa Gandhi in 2015. A lifelong resident of Mumbai, Lopa Gandhi has been working in the field of education, curriculum development, training, coaching, and organizational leadership for over 20 years, having been closely associated with leading organizations such as Akanksha, Kaivalya and Mukangan, among others. Yearning to create change in rural regions where access to education is even lower than in the urban landscape that she was already familiar with, she set out on assignments in rural regions all the way across the country, in Jharkhand, trying to understand how things work there. It was on one such assignment that she felt a compelling need to start Ugam.

Says Lopa, "We have been witness to several incidences of violence and crimes against the girl child. It is one thing to go on a candle march to protest against these things. But it continued to bother me and my team as we wondered what we could do to address the systemic factors that are enabling repeated incidences of crime and violence. It was then that one of the district collectors we were working with, suggested that we take a look at the Kasturba Gandhi schools in the state. We studied this space for four to five months, understanding how these schools are run. We recognized the challenges faced by adolescent girls in these socio-economically underprivileged societies."

The challenges faced by adolescent girls struck Lopa as unique. Having to navigate puberty, poverty, the prospect of being married away early and subsequently burdened with early motherhood, these young girls had challenges stacked up against them at an early age. Lopa and her team also noted that in 2015, there weren't many NGOs servicing these regions in Jharkhand yet. A small change in a Hindi-speaking rural heartland would have a ripple



effect on the larger economically backward rural belt.

Currently Ugam works with 61 KGBV schools spread across five districts in Jharkhand. Ugam works with students, teachers, and wardens who run the schools, creating different levels of training and meaningful engagement with each of them. The Ugam team conducts sessions on Menstrual Hygiene, Self-Awareness, Critical Thinking and Career Guidance for the girls enrolled in the KGBV's.

Urja, a bi-monthly newsletter, created for the girls, by the girls, helps expand their world view by featuring stories and creative expressions of people of their own age group, who are living in geographic regions. Special attention is paid to fluency and comprehension in English. Urja is the girls' window to a larger world, outside of the confines of their residential campus. Designed in-house, the girls eagerly look forward to every upcoming edition of Urja.

Teacher-training workshops are conducted to help build a culture of continuous learning among teachers. The training involves becoming familiar with current technology. "The teachers come from the same environment that the girls come from. They also carry some of the implicit biases that the society has laid on them." Says, Lopa. Therefore, aside from pedagogical training, the teachers are also trained in socio-emotional support and reflective practice.

Ugam stands out for the support and training they provide wardens. Wardens essentially run the school, says Lopa. They have the most responsibility both in terms of direct care of the girls, as well as administrative/managerial responsibilities of the institution. Wardens are provided with



individualized coaching to harness their leadership skills, and are given documents, workbooks and additional resources to improve their institutional processes. "We conducted a 'visioning' exercise where wardens described their ideal KGBV graduate" says Lopa. These kinds of exercises help bring out the pride and sense of ownership among wardens.

Lopa is sympathetic to the difficult situations that the teachers and wardens face, as they fight their own personal battles while trying to do their best at work. Sometimes a teacher might juggle two to three jobs.

Since the onset of the pandemic, many of the girls had to go back home, where they were once again reduced to doing chores. Some were married off before the lockdowns ended. However, even those few who have been married off, have requested their school's support to complete their 12th Std. from home. In response to the pandemic, Ugam collaborated with wardens to identify dynamic alumni of their schools and

enlisted these alumni to become teachers in the communities.

Ugam established the "Sashakti Fellowship" a name given by the girls themselves, to provide a new purpose to girls who have graduated from the KGBV schools. Sefali Soren is a Sashakti Fellow. An undergraduate student, Sefali has been delivering Ugam's educational tools and conducting sessions for her juniors in her community. Even if the gates of the school closed for the season, the books, education and training now find their way to the doorsteps of girls.

Ugam is currently in talks with the district collector of newer districts in Jharkhand to expand their programs and services. When asked about her vision for a post-pandemic Ugam, Lopa says, "The vision stays the same, pandemic or no pandemic—that every person in KGBV is empowered and educated. We wish to create model KGBV schools in the whole of Jharkhand, if not the entire country".

*Archanaa Ramesh*



# Uplifting the Dalit community

The story of HOTHs begins with a young girl and her tale. This little girl hails from a Dalit community who is clever and cheerful. She often bunked schools for silly reasons and this made her father anxious about her future. Hence, he decided to send her to Lutheran Girls High School, a residential school located in Andhra Pradesh. She was quite upset with the sudden uprooting and found it difficult to adjust to the unfamiliar Christian setting there with over 5,000 girl students. Something changed over the course of her time there. She got selected as one of the foster children among 500 children for the Kinder Not Hilfe (KNH), a German-based charity organisation that the school was associated with. KNH was founded in 1959 by a group of Christians in Duisburg, Germany in order to help poor children in India.

Over time, KNH became one of the largest Christian organisations in Europe supporting poor children in developing countries. Receiving support from her foster parents Prof. Robert Hoth and Prof. Gerda Hoth was life-changing for the little girl as she aspired to do something for the needy in rural areas especially.

This is the story of Mrs. Nirmala Bai, who started a voluntary organization to support children who are in need of care and protection and worked for women empowerment. A post-graduate in Sociology from Nagarjuna University, Andhra Pradesh, Nirmala established HOTHs, an organization for the Human Services in 1993, in the name of her foster parents Prof. Robert Hoth & Prof. Gerda Hoth.

Singaripalli is a hilltop village where schools was not accessible. Children either dropped out of school or never enrolled in one in order to rear goats and cows in the village. In 1995, with support from Kinder Not Hilfe (KNH), Nirmala started an integrated primary school exclusively for the Dalit children in the village and introduced formal education. KNH started to realise her efforts and came forward to aid her educational initiatives through the The Churches' Council for Child and Youth Care, an organization based out of Bangalore.

During this time, Nirmala realised that the families living in remote hill areas not only lack quality education but also awareness of their rights against violations and discrimination. They lacked the skills that were necessary to combat the evils of the society they lived in. She understood that merely imparting education wasn't enough. There were deeper issues connected to the Dalit communities who lived away from urbanisation - social, economic and health-related. To tackle this, she approached Sathish Reginald Samuel, coordinator of KNH in India with a proposal to execute Child Focused Community Development (CFCD) Programmes in 25 villages of Bestavaripeta Mandal, Prakasam district in Andhra Pradesh.

The plight of Dalit children coupled with Nirmala's passion made KNH extend support towards the upliftment of human dignity of Dalit communities through its programme - Child Focused Community Development (CFCD). Along with school programmes, after school study centres were formed to help children hailing from low-income families. Also, education committees, children's clubs and community committees were established to improve their sense of ownership so that they can take forward various activities for its sustenance.

KNH supported HOTHs in building capacities of the programme staff on project management, facilitation, documentation and communication skills. HOTHs developed an outstanding rapport among the Dalit communities, thus extending its activities to women

***The plight of Dalit children coupled with Nirmala's passion made KNH extend support towards the upliftment of human dignity of Dalit communities***



and Dalit empowerment. Nirmala has earned good recognition among the communities for her dedication and commitment to the fight for educational and human equity. She dedicated her life to address the issues of women and children from poor

backgrounds who lived close to forests and remote locations in the Prakasam, district of Andhra Pradesh. Unfortunately, Nirmala had an untimely death in 2020.

HOTHs has established Self Help Groups (SHGs), Cluster Level Association (CLA), Children Groups and Children Rights Resource Centre (CRRC), Youth Groups and Education Committees in the district of Prakasam. Through their intervention, the Dalit women improved their capacities through training, savings and linkages with banks & SHGs.

HOTHs conducts awareness programmes on child rights, women rights, human rights, health, cleanliness, environmental change, disability, and HIV/AIDS in the target villages. The organisation has been primarily involved in women welfare, especially widows and destitute women. They conducted various programmes and activities for the families belonging to these women in order to ensure that the children do not drop out of school or end up becoming child labour.

HOTHs has programmes planned for the benefit of children whose families have migrated and for children who belong to destitute and vulnerable families. These

initiatives ensure schooling, food security, shelter through seasonal hostels and short-stay homes. They also took care of their additional needs like uniforms and school supplies.

The organisation conducted an awareness programme with the support of Mercury Pronex Trust, U.K on the prevention of HIV/AIDS. They also held a Wheelchair Distribution Programme in 2020 with the support of Indian Christian Mission Hyderabad.

HOTHs joined hands in helping victims of COVID 19 and the underprivileged in

Bestavarapeta Mandal, Prakasam District and approached many organizations like BOSCO and SHAMDASANI for support. With the kind support and cooperation of these organizations, HOTHs distributed five types of green leaves, vegetables and groceries to the migrants, daily labourers, pregnant women, physically challenged and destitute women during the COVID phase. They covered 7 villages and 3,212 poor and needy beneficiaries. Health awareness campaigns were also conducted.

Another project is the eradication of Leprosy through awareness and participation. The project was initiated in 2019 in 20 villages in Bestavarapeta Mandal in Prakasam. This is in collaboration with Government District Medical and Health Department and PHCs in Prakasam. Medical checkups were also conducted to diagnose and treat any such cases.

HOTHs also conducts awareness programmes on the eradication of child marriages, domestic violence and human rights, child protection, food security, community issues, livelihood and its promotion.

Although Nirmala is no more, the staffs at HOTHs try to fulfil her dreams to this very day.

*Angela Anish*



# HUMANITY OR RIGHTS?



**H**umanity and Rights are two interesting words that signify two different world views. For Mr. Devaneyan, Founder of Thozhamai Trust in Chennai, the choice was very clear. “When it comes to Rights, it is never about giving but acknowledging the entitlements of every human being. Why should the underprivileged always be at the receiving end? Why should their stories be read through those who have come forward to better their lives? In true sense, rights imply independence,” convinces Devaneyan. Having seen his parents engage in a wide range of social service activities he became passionate about social work and the more he delved into the subject during his college days, the clearer he became about his long term plans.

While working with People’s Watch Tamil Nadu on Human Rights Education (HRE) and later with Centre for Child Rights and Development, he began to see the need for both education and action that must be backed by field scenario based facts. Thozhamai was established in 2006 to demonstrate why educating the masses should go hand in hand with appropriate actions/ interventions. “Unless people begin to see that they can act to change the lives of underprivileged communities, they can only give or contribute when they can. The poor cannot survive only on goodwill. Their lives need a push, a force that can put them on par with others. Bringing about the culture of rights is the only way,” he says.

The context of Human Rights is an ocean and in a country like India it is very much relevant to work in every sector. Whether women or children or aged or differently abled or transgender, all of them have their rights by virtue of being a human being but their struggles are not on the same page. This calls for a



focused approach as manifested by Thozhamai’s work. While evolving as a resource centre on HRE, Devaneyan and team reached out to a wide range of audience – from students to retired bureaucrats, officials at work, community members, etc. As they established a strong and active network, they began to act by engaging network members. “For example, we have trained over 5,000 persons on Right to Information Act. Having seen how Thozhamai filed over a 1,000 petitions and the responses received has enabled network members to do the same at their level. So now, when we try to highlight a human rights issue from a remote village in the State, the approach and response are both manifold. Every stakeholder turns out to be a rights’ defender,” adds Devaneyan.

Thozhamai’s strength lies in its field action research where evidences from grassroots are used in both addressing issues though the system and also identifying systemic gaps that cause their recurrence. The slum rehabilitation colony in Semmencherry located south of Chennai city, about 18 km from the

city centre, houses 6,754 families and has faced a lot of issues. Abuse, livelihood crisis, children discontinuing education, lack of adequate food and water, etc. made lives difficult for the families. Thozhamai’s presence has gradually changed things here and today, the only Middle School in this region has now upgraded to a Higher Secondary School. Transit into and out of Semmencherry has become easier and affordable owing to the new roads and bus stands. The primary health centre that worked only half days is now operating full time and more number of ration shops have been established.

“It is not that their absence were not known; just that they were not seen as a right. Rehabilitation is a long term, multi-pronged process that must be executed strategically. All entitlements must be ensured in the new place of settlement. Perspective can completely alter the course of implementation. We demonstrated that in Semmencherry. Our advocacy efforts has finally convinced the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board to plan for 400 sq ft homes in rehabilitation

colonies (it was 158 sq ft earlier),” explains Devaneyan, whose team is now raising voices for all other rehabilitation colonies.

Child Rights has also been Thozhamai’s focus and is an integral part of all their interventions. Having delved into both micro and macro realities, their role in preventing over a hundred child marriages and rescuing trafficked children has put them on authorities’ good books. As they support institutional mechanisms in interventions, it becomes an enhancing process for both groups. Their rigorous training workshops on child friendly and protective environment has reached more than 20 schools, over 600 media persons and several city colleges. Thozhamai’s Life Skills Education programme has trained more than 2,000 adolescent girls in identifying and acting on abuse. The Trust has been very categorical about one fact – not only schools and families, every individual who must be educated about child rights and protection mechanisms. “Even a school bus driver must know how to handle a situation that affects the issue of child rights. Remembering a helpline number is not too much to ask for,” smirks Devaneyan.

Thozhamai dreams of an abuse free society where every child goes through a happy childhood. Fully aware of the milestones in this journey, their work attempts to reiterate that child rights is the foundation and we need to establish the culture of rights in our society. “Children are full of hope and trust. By reaching them rights, we are building a protective and responsible society,” says an optimistic Devaneyan.

*Shanmuga Priya.T*



# “The more we work together the greater impact will be; otherwise everything will be like a drop in the ocean.”

## Shabnam Siddiqui talks to Marie Banu about United Nations Global Compact Network India and its role

**S**habnam Siddiqui is Executive Director at the United Nations Global Compact Network India. An academic practitioner with twenty-five years of experience, Shabnam specialises in developing and executing strategic intervention through multi-stakeholder networks, is skilled at training and research and has several national and international publications to her credit.

Shabnam is a great believer and practitioner of Collective Action, and believes that the private sector plays a critical role in the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals. She has made significant contributions to creating an active community of changemakers committed to accelerating positive change and innovation to achieve SDGs. Academically, Shabnam has a Masters in Sociology from India, a second Masters in International Peace Studies from USA and embarked on a PhD in Public Policy at Singapore. Additionally, every couple of years Shabnam is engaged in academic pursuit so as to be abreast of new knowledge and thought leadership. Her most recent foray was to the University of Oxford as a Chevening Rolls Royce Innovation, Science, Policy and Leadership (CRISP) Fellow based at Said Business School, St. Cross College.

Shabnam is also an amateur wildlife photographer, a biodiversity conservationist, passionate about wildlife and forests and intends to work towards their holistic development.

*In an exclusive interview, Shabnam Siddiqui tells Marie Banu about United Nations Global Compact Network India and its role.*

### Your tryst in the social sector?

I started my professional career in 1990s working on women issues. I went to a girls educational institute right from school to post graduation, hence was in touch with women's issues. While conducting a session with a Jhuggi group in Delhi, one lady said, “we understand what you are trying to say and are in agreement, but please explain the same thing to our men. If they change, we will change.” That was such a basic thing that we needed to do and I realised that it is not only a ‘women’ issue, but a ‘gender’ issue – as that is the way our society is programmed. Being a sociology student, that understanding was more clearer. From there on, I adopted a systems approach to understating and solving societal problems.

In my current position at United

Nations Global Compact Network India, I have been working for over 10 years now and it has been the longest period that I have stayed with an organisation. Still, there is so much to do on the SDGs and much to do with the organisation.

### About United Nations Global Compact Network India and your association?

United Nations Global Compact Network India (UNGCNI) is a voluntary initiative for corporates to join in the change that's happening in the world. It was founded two decades ago when Kofi Annan at one of the World Economic Forum meetings got together business houses and said that because businesses are part of the problem of the society they need to also be a part of the solution.

Currently, we are working in 63 countries where we have established the Global Compact Networks. This Network is based on 10 principles around the issues of human rights, environment, labour and anti-corruption.

Our role is to facilitate businesses in understanding, inculcating and transforming their actions based on these 10 principles.

For instance, we are working on the issue of anti-corruption and looking at the issue of public procurement.

When we met business houses, the public sector thought that

the private sector were more privileged as they had more independence while the private sector thought that the public sector was more privileged because they were close to the government. After hearing their individual stories, we got them together in a room and businesses realised that the issue was the same and it was just that they were not speaking with each other.

### In what ways does UNGCNI promote networking?

We have both corporates and non-corporates (civil society organisations, academic institutions, and think tanks) as UNGCNI members. We try to engage a dialogue with them as both come from different angles.

We have been promoting collective action to a large extent. The idea is to do internal reporting and share it with the external world. You then work together on different issues – for instance in your CSR programmes. No company can sustain any particular CSR initiative for a long time as their role is limited only for few years. So, Company B can take over the responsibility after Company A's period to ensure continuation of the programme, thus sustain its impact for the future. This Collective Action can be based on geography or social issues like health, water, or education. The more stakeholders work together the greater the impact will be; otherwise everything will be like a drop in the ocean.

Businesses have evolved nationally and globally in the last decade. If you see the issues of child labour that were in a lot of manufacturing companies, it has substantially come down because people wanted to be seen on the side of progress. So, labour issues are now been tackled and human rights issue is no more an exclusive issue.

Presently, we are dealing with a case of human rights abuse of an Indian company in Myanmar which is being tackled by lawyers in Australia along with our headquarters. We are living more and more in a global situation now and we need to see how we can connect together – both for

progress and accountability. The challenge though is in communication.

My colleague was recently part of a dialogue between a US company and local government officials. The US company were waiting for government to engage with them for their CSR activity while the government was waiting for the company to

approach them. In such a situation, there is a need to facilitate the dialogue and this requires an external neutral non-profit agency. That's the role of UNGCNI, to act as neutral facilitators. We speak the universal language of the 10 principles, hence facilitating dialogue becomes important.

For instance, during the COVID phase, many companies did substantial work and published it in their individual reports which was meant for a limited audience. We asked our members to share with us and we reported the work of the 35 members that we managed to gather in the limited time frame. The collective contribution of UNGCNI members was valued at millions of rupees – right from philanthropy to setting up hospitals and opening community radios for awareness. The scale of their work was tremendous and the global audience was appreciative of the work done by our members.

### How does UNGCNI ensure transparency and accountability?

When the Global Compact was found in 2000, initially we had only 9 principles. In 2004, we realised that not much has not been achieved hence we added the 10th principle of anti-corruption to ensure that all the gaps/loop holes were tightened. Anti-corruption reporting and transparency and accountability systems were ensured in the organisation's internal and external reporting systems and we also have a team of compliance and vigilance officers on board.

I was attending a meeting in Mumbai where we were talking about values and giving examples of Tata and Birla when a participant asked “at what point of profit do you start becoming transparent?” That was an interesting question for us to mull over as small agencies do not have the wherewithal or resources to focus on transparency and accountability.

As UNGCNI works with big corporates, we have ensured that their entire value chain and their vendors also follow the principles and when we get reports of any ill doing, we take suo motto action.

### What are the efforts taken by UNGCNI for corporates to report on SDGs?

The UNGCNI has come a long way. Since September 2015, when the Sustainable Development Goals came in, our work was to ensure that the corporates and governments follow the SDGs and take priority in setting their goals in their respective areas of work.

UNGCNI is assisting companies to align their CSR work with SDGs and report to the nodal ministry for SDGs and CSR as they are both different.

In the last year, beyond SDG, ESG has come in and is taking a dominant position, especially with the entire focus on climate. From CSR to SDG to ESG – this has been the journey for corporates and CSR reporting.

