Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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Cover Story - Pg 6

Celebrating Social Entrepreneurship

About Sadguru Gnanananda National Fellowship Awards

MSDS

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Editor : Marie Banu

Phone : 044-42805365

Changemakers

Pg 3

Inside the North East

About Mr Hejang Misao Director of InSIDE-North East in Saikul, Manipur

Pg 10

Sustaining Livelihoods

About Mr Ramesh Babu who works for the tribals in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh

Pg 11

Villages managing development

About Mr Thiruppathi's efforts to make villages in Kolli Hills, Namakkal District self-sufficient

Chit Chat

Pg 12

"At first, women empowerment must happen in my own industry."

An exclusive interview with Actor Nasser

From the Editor

Dear Reader,

Social entrepreneurship is growing rapidly and attracting increased attention from many sectors. The reasons behind this are many. On the most basic level, there's something inherently interesting and appealing about entrepreneurs and the stories of why and how they do what they do. People are attracted to social entrepreneurs like Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus for many of the same reasons that they find business entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs so compelling. These extraordinary people come up with brilliant ideas and succeed against all the odds thereby creating new products and services that aim at improving people's lives.

In the past few years, the social enterprise space has evolved rapidly from a concept that required explanation to a trend everyone is eager to join. Business schools have increased their social entrepreneurship course and club offerings, and many businesses and startups can get away with calling themselves a social enterprise. While grateful for the rise in people and businesses caring about making a positive social impact, an over-emphasis on business solutions overshadows the need to address root causes of societal problems and this is a point of concern.

CSIM's involvement in the field of social entrepreneurship started in 2000 with Shri PN Devarajan identifying the need for sustainability in social work. Since then, we have been providing training and handholding support to budding social entrepreneurs across India.

Reflecting our commitment to strengthening social entrepreneurship in the social sector, we have been offering Sadguru Gnanananda National Fellowship Awards for budding social entrepreneurs since 2011. On 22nd October, we are celebrating three Awardees who have been featured in this issue.

We look forward to having you join us in this journey of celebrating Social Entrepreneurship.

—Marie Banu

Values & Ethics

In the designing of vision and mission, we need to also outline the values for the organisation. Vision and mission becomes insipid without values governing it. Vision is long term and mission is short-term with defined results.

In order to get these in place and make it a sustainable vision and mission, we require values. It is the back bone. Unless the giver and taker have mutually accepted values, sustainability of the vision mission will not be effective.

Vision or mission is always guided by values and derived in consultation with stake holders. They should continuously keep in mind and follow it on whatever activity they perform in the field. Therefore, the impact will not only be for impact sake, but it will be permanent in the beneficiaries. It will stand off very clearly as somebody who has been impacted by a role model. Not only NGOs, but beneficiaries can also become role models.

Values can be listed as 100 or more. But, it is not possible for an NGO to follow all the 100 of them. You will have to write down the values that NGOs and beneficiaries cherish, prioritisation, and write down the top 3 values. This will serve as a guideline for the vision and mission and objectives of the organisation.

Everyone should recognize and identify themselves with the values. For instance, 'transparency' as a value. The NGO should express clearly the work that they are doing with all its stakeholders so that they are all on the same page and will work together. If there is lack of transparency, then each one will be in guessing game on what is being told and what they mean. There will be a variance.

Ethical is another value, which means that you should do the right thing. In Sanskrit truth is known as 'sathyam'. Truth can be bitter and so people will run away from truth. This is a natural phenomenon. 'Priyam' in Sanskrit means 'like'. Therefore, when we tell the truth, we should tell it in a manner which is palatable. To say be truthful, people will forget. But, to see how people will consider truth as a value will enhance the impact.

The values should not only govern the organisation or beneficiaries, but the leaders and staff as well.

For example, smoking. We need to correct people who are smoking in public places. We need to tell them that they are affecting the passive smokers. Of course, we are not law and cannot take legal action. Instead, we should be responsible and accountable for their actions. We can say that we are working towards eliminating smoking in the neighbourhood and try to correct their behaviour. The logic is responsive, responsible and accountable.

Each person can reach to one more person and demonstrate responsibility and accountability.

Being accountable does not means that you are accountable to any authority, it is being accountable to oneself and to one's own consciousness. The basic principle to bring out these attributes is through attitude and the concept of 'Each One, Reach One'. Each person can reach to one more person and demonstrate responsibility and accountability.

—P.N.Devarajan

Nruthya Bodhini – Musings of an Artiste

02 – Comfort zone and Hope

That Thai tha ha- Dhit thai tha ha Thai thai didi thai – Thai tai didi thai …

The sound of feet tapping and teacher giving the rhythm; thus Sadhana entered the dance school along with her mom. Her Mom spoke to the teacher and got her admitted into the class. The classes were to be held on every alternate day about 3 to 4 times a week in the evening. *"Come straight from school to class and stay here after the class. I will pick you on the way from office"* told her mom hoping she had put Sadhana in a safe place. *"God, I know no one here, how do I stay? Oh, Grandma, why did you need to leave me?"* tiny tears formed in the corner of her eyes not daring to fall down.

The walk back home was paradoxical. The tiny anxious hand of Sadhana was held by the relieved confident hand of the mom. There was silence. For both the mother and daughter, there was much talking in the head with no sound outside.

The first three classes for Sadhana were exciting. One mind said, she can do it, but the other doubted. What if the words of Revathi comes true that plump people cannot dance?

How much we get influenced by others especially if they are our best friends!!! Many unfounded fears while starting something anew, or make a change emerge from the cautious advice given by well-wishers and friends.

Every new space is a place to be explored. Similarly for the inquisitive little Sadhana, this was a new place and she wanted to know more than just the dance. After the first three classes of sticking to just one room till her mother arrived, she slowly got up one day to explore the rest of the house. In the adjacent room she found an elderly gentleman reading a paper and relaxing. He did not even lift his eyes from the paper. She saw a kitchen and a Pooja room typical of South Indian houses. She felt a lot familiar with the smell emanating from the dosa on the tava. Her teacher was busy making them. She moved on to a half open room and slowly peeped in. Oh! The first thing that caught her eye was the full grey hair atop an old lady's head. She recognised it was an elderly lady sitting on the bed knitting a sweater with a ball of wool next to her. She heard the tiny footsteps and looked up straight into Sadhana's eyes. A tiny smile curved the edges of her pink old lips and at the same time a tiny firework of joy light up in Sadhana's heart! Oh, a Grandma here also!!

Whether it is a new idea or new place or new person, our eyes seeks for familiarity first. It's a natural process of seeking comfort. Leaving the comfort zone is not easy whatever the age or gender. But great inventions, innovations and changes have happened only when they came out of their comfort zone. Social entrepreneurship is in itself a movement out of comfort zone from me, myself towards me, the world around. How much do I see the unseen in every new situation?

"Come in my child" softly spoke Rukmini Amma fondly called Rukkamma. Her smile and assuring eyes were very inviting. *"Have you come to learn dance"?* Sadhana wondered what to say, *"Have I come to learn dance or stay here till Amma comes back from office"?* Deciding what best to say, she said, *"Yes, I have come to learn dance".* Feeling a bit guilty she quickly added, *"But, you know there is no one to take care of me after school and I am here till my mom comes back from work".* With tiny tears in the corner of eyes, she added *"my grand mom died recently".*

With grey wisdom in plenty, Rukmini Amma grasped the situation immediately and stretching out her hand, she lightly touched Sadhana's little fingers, and said, *"Oh, that's sad. But I am also your Grandmom and you can stay with me. So don't feel bad. You come sit with me after class and we will talk till your mom comes to pick you".* Immediately, Sadhana jumped onto the bed and sat next to her confidently.

"So, do you like dancing", asked Rukkamma. Lost in thought, Sadhana answered, "*I do, but maybe I can't dance". "Why", s*miled Rukkamma. Hesitantly, Sadhana fumbled, *"they say I am a plump girl and can't dance". "Oh, that's all? The dancing will easily eat away your plumpness if you dance. Of course you can and you just have a healthy baby fat. It will melt if you practice. You are so beautiful I know you will look lovely. So just do it every day".* A wide grin adorned the face and a flash of twinkle passed on Sadhana's face. The next few years of life in dance class suddenly looked very hopeful and purposeful to Sadhana.

Before the journey of social entrepreneur begins, the idea germinates. When there are familiar encouraging words, stretched hands of support, tiny volunteering efforts and listening ears to encourage the person, the inner resolve and strength increases. Most people exploring and wanting to break boundaries actually need that understanding support, be it a silent one or active one, something that says 'you can do it and I know it and I trust you'. That's the best someone can do for ideas to come out. In the name of caution, at times we are not aware we dampen most initiatives, be it in children or adults. There is an inner satisfaction we draw from warning people who are daring to step out of their comfort zones.

Sadhana trotted back home with a deep inner satisfaction of having found her grand mom in a different form as well as a hope for being a dancer one day. She sang to herself a peppy tune. She was oblivious that a new life had germinated in her and that will shape her personality to become who she will be at 25. Little did she know that she wasn't just learning to move her hands and legs to rhythm, she was going to actually culture her inner self to a life that only an artist will know.

Social entrepreneurship is not a mere profession. It is a way of life. The lessons and learning from being socially inclined changes not only the life but also the foundational orientations about life.

To be continued…stay connected…

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath

Catch Them Young

The more people civil society has, the better of us. This was the premise on which we started.

For the last 16 years, 'empowerment' has been the singular focus of the Children's Movement for Civic Awareness (CMCA). However, the last decade-and-a-half has also seen this concept of empowerment evolve through various means and methods. It all began of course in the year 2000, when CMCA began as a project as part of an organization called Public Affairs Centre. Two of CMCA's trustees, Dr Manjunath Sadashiva and Vrunda Bhaskar were engaged with the organisation. "Back then, there was apathy towards civic participation in engaging with the government," explains Ashish Patel, CEO, Children's Movement for Civic Awareness, retracing the organisation's early days. "The aim was to change that, to get more participation from people in meetings and workshops and in discussions with the government. We thought it best to start things off with a cycle rally for kids." In what was the first step towards civic participation, 3000 children turned up to participate. "When that was a big hit, we realized there was potential here. We didn't want it to go to waste and decided to start something sustainable," he says.

It was that decision that fuelled the growth of CMCA. As one thing led to another, the group began summer camps for children. "We started with 14 schools, but that was enough to grow our confidence with regard to citizen participation in governance," says Ashish. A key part of this approach was of course, to ensure that there was a sustainable balance between the State and society at large. "Ultimately, it's society that steps up, keeps pressure on the government and ends up keeping things in check," explains Ashish, "The more people civil society has, the better of us. This was the premise on which we started. However, what we decided was that we should focus on children to achieve better results."

Schools have always been an integral part of any outreach involving children, and so it was in CMCA's case. What began as a one off summer camp, soon became a one-class-per-week, part and parcel of curriculum in a year-long engagement. "These programmes at schools continue even today," says Ashish. "We call it a Civic Club," he explains, "Terming our activity a 'club' ensures that we don't give children the impression that this is part of their academia, while at the same time we ensure that it's on their timetable. It is after all, a form of citizenship education." Today, the Civic Club programme is CMCA's single largest programme. Delivered over a nine-month span, the model is designed to induce a ripple effect among schools. Over the years, close to nine cities and 299 schools have led to the formation of 400 civic clubs, in what has been CMCA's biggest success.

As years went by, priorities changed, and CMCA understood that focus on environmental sustainability alone wouldn't suffice in the quest to bring about civic participation in governance. "So, we gradually moved on and shifted our focus towards the values of the preamble — teaching children about their rights and responsibilities," Ashish explains. "A key focus area for us was to tell kids how change begins with each and every one of us; and this meant imparting knowledge about right to education, local government and so on." In a nutshell, the focus lay in areas like liberty, equality and other constitutional guarantees. "We began teaching children about respecting people from all backgrounds and communities, about gender equality, about acknowledging and respecting diversity," says Ashish, "That's pretty much how our curriculum has evolved over the years. So, today, it's a mixture of all these things."

With a presence in nearly 300 schools today, and a solid base in Bengaluru, Hubli and Mysore among other cities,

CMCA also boasts of presence in Nagpur, Pune, Trivandrum and Chandigarh, to name a few cities. Nearly 55% of its presence is in government schools, and this includes nearly 25 villages around Bengaluru. "Our students are typically from Grade Eight," says Ashish, "Once we begin engaging with these students based on the achievable outcomes that we list out, we do an impact-assessment test at the end of every year just to see how far we've come in achieving our goals," says Ashish, "Once our outcomes are listed, we create design an activity in our curriculum, to achieve it. Our work is all about facilitating a discussion, rather than preach"

Ashish does conced however, that the real impact-assessment results will be known only in close to 5-10 years or so, when children of today grow up to become adults. "Our work in the last 16 years is transformative in nature. So, our way forward is policy-advocacy. We've invested significant sums of money to understand what young people think about citizenship values through our national survey the Yuva Nagarik Meter," says Ashish. What this has left CMCA is a whole lot of data on what these thought processes are. "So, we have data on what our young people think. We are now learning from our direct intervention programmes and then expanding it through policy advocacy." The objective, of course, continues to be civic participation & caring, thinking, active citizens.The fact that CMCA has started with children has only meant that this objective has greater possibilities of being achieved. It will now hope policy advocacy and continuous engagement will be the way forward, towards achieving these goals and objectives.

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. **www.csim.in**

Contact Persons:

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

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

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

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

CSIM
to learn • to heal • to raise

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

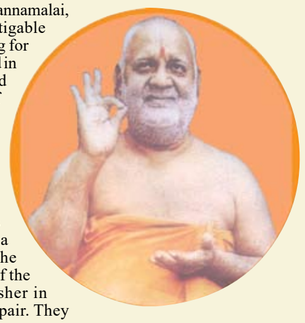
For more information, please contact Ms.**Latha Suresh,** Director @ 92822 05123 **www.san-india.org**

Celebrating Social Entrepreneurship

From the year 2011, the Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship programme was introduced and young budding social entrepreneurs are offered a monthly stipend of Rs.10,000 for three years.

Celebration is a kind of food we all need in our lives, and each individual brings a special recipe or offering, so that together we will make a great feast. Celebration is a human need that we must not, and cannot, deny. It is richer and fuller when many work and then celebrate together. The Sadguru Gnanananda Awards celebrates social change and transformation. It celebrates development and prosperity. It celebrates the Social Entrepreneurs who made it happen.

Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani instituted an award in the name of one of the great sages of our time, Sadguru Gnanananda Giri SwamigalofThappovanamnearThiruvannamalai, to salute individuals for their indefatigable will, for daring to dream and for caring for others. When social service is rendered in the spirit of love and joy and dedicated to the Divine, we find the signature of God in such acts. In fact, it is the grace and compassion of spiritual masters which inspire people to take up such social causes. The sage of Tapovanam says in his inimitable style, when we bring light, darkness will dissolve on its own. Sadguru Gnanananda awards are not just a recognition but a celebration of the great efforts of the change makers who are the bearers of the light that dispels darkness, they usher in hope and courage where there is despair. They are, indeed, entrepreneurs of spirit.



From the year 2000 – 2012, the Sadguru Gnanananda Awards were given to women social change agents who have been silently working in many remote areas of India. The mission of MSDS is to promote social consciousness and social citizenry, hence these award functions are audience centric. They are held in a grand manner on Saturdays only, so as to attract a diverse set of audience. The award functions have been held 10 times in Chennai, 5 times in Hyderabad, 4 times in Bangalore and twice in Mumbai.

The award comprises of,

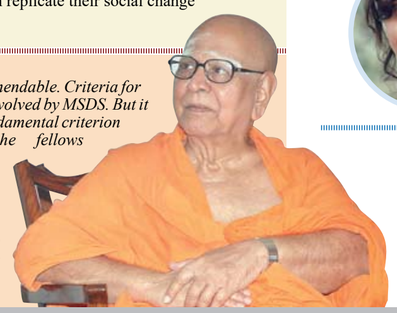
- A citation elaborating the services and commending the work of the Awardees
- A purse of Rs.75, 000 (Rs. 50,000 till 2008)
- A Silver plaque
- A Shawl

The 115 awardees include

- 95 women
- 9 husband & wife team
- 2 Socially responsible Corporate

They hail from 20 states of India and are doing commendable work.

From the year 2011 the Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship programme was introduced and young budding social entrepreneurs are offered a monthly stipend of Rs.10,000 for three years. This would help them to launch their new initiatives with great vigour and zeal and help them replicate their social change ideas also.



"The Fellowship programme is very commendable. Criteria for selecting these fellows have been rightly evolved by MSDS. But it has been observed that the unsaid and fundamental criterion is a natural inclination on the part of the fellows to offer spontaneously his or her service as a loving offering to God in the true sense of a Karmayogi. Only such an attitude will ensure the flow of Grace to his/her work and bless it with success."

— ***Swami Nityanandagiri, disciple of Swami Gnanananda and the Chief Patron*** of the MSDS Trust

Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship Award – 2011

Event Date: 12.03.2011
Place: Chennai
Chief Guest: Shri N Gopalswami
Former CEC, Govt. of India

Sadguru Gnanananda Fellow – 2011

Ms. Rubina Mazhar, SAFA, Hyderabad works for the empowerment of the disadvantaged women by enterprise creation and education of the girl children in the slums of Hyderabad.

Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship Awards – 2012

Event Date: 3.3.2012
Place: Bangalore
Chief Guest: Dr. R. Balasubramaniam
Founder, Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement

SADGURU GNANANANDA FELLOWS – 2012

Ms Akhila Ramesh, Nivasa, Bangalore, an architect who has designed a cheap and affordable prototype for rural housing in rural Kartnataka and has implemented them in a few villages

Ms Khusboo Kantharia, Disha, Mumbai, offering counselling services for the youth who are mainstreamed from orphanages and other shelter homes

Mr. Kamalakannan, Vizhuthugal, Punjampuliyampatti district near Coimbatore, has launched learning centres for children in 14 villages which focus on value education, sports, creative arts and General Knowledge

Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship Awards – 2013

Event Date: 30.4.2013
Place: Raj Bhavan, Chennai
Chief Guest: His Excellency Dr. K. Rosaiah, the Governor of Tamilnadu

SADGURU GNANANANDA FELLOWS – 2013

K. Rajamanickam, Action for Rural Upliftment and Leadership (ARUL) Foundation, Soorankottai, Ramanathapuram, works for the welfare of the manual scavengers and their children by inspiring them to live a life of dignity.

Sornalatha, Adivasi Social Service Educational Trust, Sembakkam, Kancheepuram, hailing from the Irula tribes (snake catchers) in Tamilnadu, works on education of the tribal children and encouraging women to start alternate livelihoods .

S.Chezian, Mercy Charitable Trust, Kadaladi village, Tiruvanamalai district, offers vocational training to the women and disabled of the district and enables them to start small businesses.

His Excellency Dr. K. Rosaiah, the Governor of Tamilnadu awarding the fellowship to S.Chezian

Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship Awards – 2014

Event Date: 30.8 2014
Place: Hyderabad
Chief Guest: Padmashri Dr. Saibaba Goud - Founder, Devnar Foundation for the Blind

SADGURU GNANANANDA FELLOWS – 2014

Mr. Akshai Abraham, Project KHEL, Lucknow uses sports as a platform to impart Life Skills Education to children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Lucknow and the nearby villages.

Ms. Shoba Gosa, Founder, Young People for Life India, Hyderabad, offers counselling services nd skill building for the underprivileged youth and school children in and around Hyderabad.

Mr. Dilip Patro, Founder, The Ability People, Visakhapatnam, is an accident victim, working for the rehabilitation and empowerment of Spinal Cord injured persons and the disabled community.

Mr.Dilip Patro recieiving the fellowship award from Padmashri Dr. Saibaba Goud

Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship Awards – 2015

Event Date: 10.10 2015
Place: Chennai
Chief Guest: Dr.Bhaskar Ramamurthi
Director, IIT Madras

SADGURU GNANANANDA FELLOWS – 2015

Arun Fernandez, Blink Foundation, Chennai, runs an online and offline intervention aimed at providing an answer to a wide range of issues faced by people especially students to promote tolerance, harmony and unity and minimise social differences.

Ashish Arora & Divya Gupta, Sahaj Foundation, Kunihar village, Solan dt, Himachal Pradesh, facilitates individuals in rural communities of Himachal Pradesh, to live in harmony with their hearts and to lead a peaceful & meaningful life by creating a space that will help people come over their mental poverty.

Sandeep Mehto, Bharath Calling, Pathrota Village, Hoshangabad dt, Madhya Pradesh, runs a youth counselling initiative in Madhya Pradesh that identifies the interests of rural and tribal students, provides career counselling and connects them to colleges and universities to facilitate their admission.

The XVII Sadguru Gnanananda National Fellowship Awards is scheduled on:
Date: Saturday, 22nd October, 2016. Time: 5.00 pm
Venue: Conference Hall, G. P. Birla Centre, BM Birla Science Centre, Hyderabad.

Come join us in our celebrations this year. Let us applaud the work done by Hejang Misao, Pandi Ramesh Babu, and Thiruppathi Perumal and spread the message of the great work done by them.

Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

A brahmachari youth who has graduated in science has been waiting here for Grace for the last four or five months in order that some job might drop on him like a ripe apple from the tree. He has been making no other efforts to secure a job. His brother yesterday came here to take him away to his parents. But the youth declined to go. An appeal was made to Sri Bhagavan.

Sri Bhagavan said: "I do not tell anyone to come nor ask him to go. Everyone pleases himself here. He says he finds peace in the hall and he also wants a job. Evidently the job must be found in the hall itself so that his peace may not be disturbed. Peace is not in the hall. It is in the repose of the Self. It can be gained anywhere."

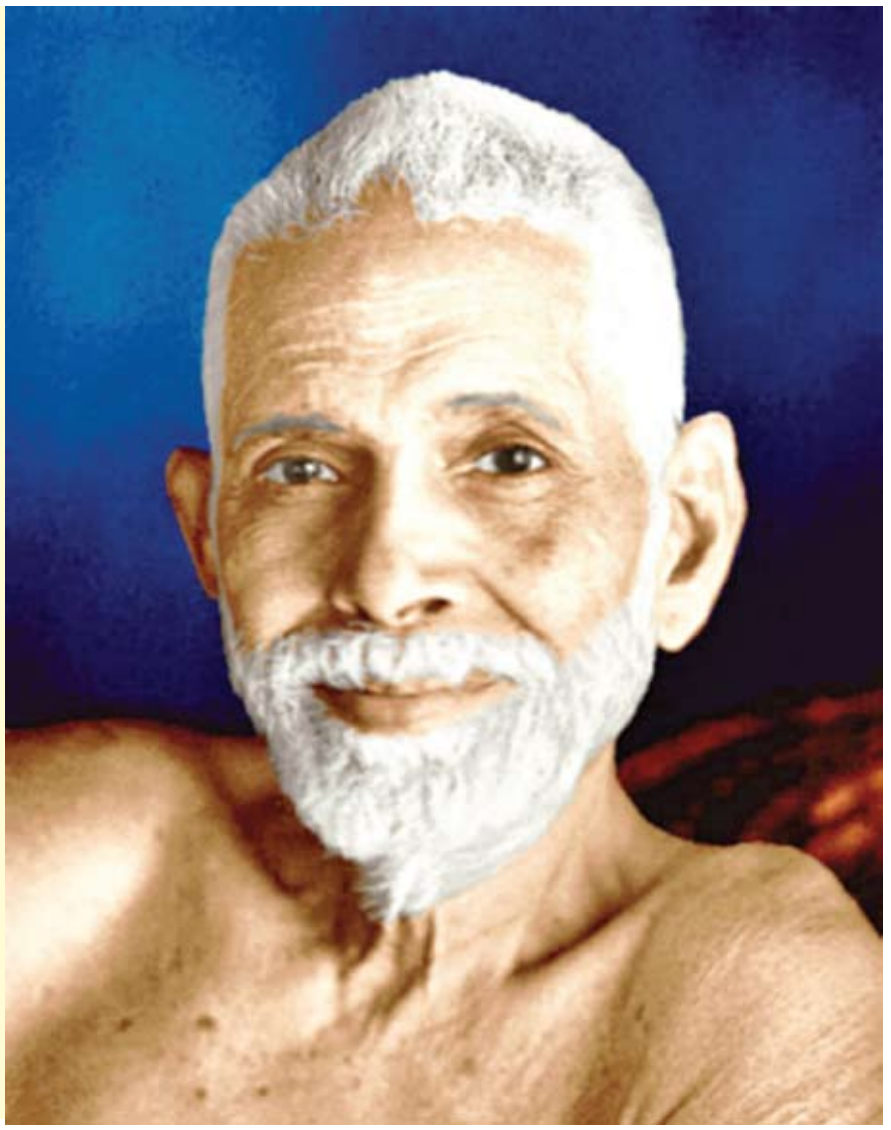
Some days later the youth threw away his sacred thread and appeared before Sri Bhagavan with his limbs shaking, which the young man later described as his Bliss (ananda). Sri Bhagavan told him not to make a habit of sitting in front of Him in the hall and ordered him out. Furthermore He continued: Even a fledgling is protected by the parent birds only till such time it grows its wings. It is not protected for ever. Similarly with devotees. I have shown the way. You must now be able to follow it up and find peace wherever you are.

The young man thinks that Sri Bhagavan gave him upadesa in the following words: "The self (i.e. ego) must be subdued by oneself.

The man however has refused the offer of a job to him in one of the local schools and thinks that he has been given a mighty job by the Hill or by Sri Bhagavan. "What that job is the world will know later", he says. He had further anticipated all this day's occurrences some months ago and had foretold them to his mother and to his friends. He is further happy at the happenings.

Sri Bhagavan however compared him to another man who is in no way of the right type. And yet the boy thinks that he is Bhagavan in embryo. Later he turned mad and died.

Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi



Responsibility

A disciple came riding on his camel to the tent of his *Sufi* Master. He dismounted and walked right into the tent, bowed low and said, "So great is my trust in God that I have left my camel outside untied, convinced that God protects the interests of those who love Him."
"Go tie your camel, you fool! And be responsible for yourself and your things" said the Master. "God cannot be bothered doing for you what you're perfectly capable of doing yourself."

Explicit Learning

A. Frequently we expect God to be responsible for what we are capable of handling ourselves.

B. To cover up our irresponsibility, we make God responsible for what we are.

C. In the name of God, we breed inaction.

Introspective Learning

A. What is the nature of 'Responsibility'?

B. Why do I shrug my responsibilities?

C. How much am I willing to own the consequences of my actions?

Inside the North East

"When children were exposed to a drawing class, most of them drew guns."

Non-profits working in conflict regions have their own unique set of challenges, starting with their entry into communities. Earning trust of local communities and living with them to improve their lives is not as straight forward as one can imagine. Within each community, strategies have to be adopted to be able to open dialogues with them. Perhaps, this could be a little easier for an insider, or at least, that is the commonly held perception.

Mr Hejang Misao, Director of InSIDE-North East in Saikul, Manipur, disagrees. For youngsters like him, all that they could aspire for is Civil Services. "Our parents cannot think beyond this. You will see Civil Service aspirants in every household, consistently preparing for competitive examinations. That is the only way we can acquire a government job and feel secure," says Hejang, who disappointed his parents by pursuing Social Work.

Saikul, popularly known as the Kargil of Manipur for the recurring civilian conflicts, has filled Hejang's childhood with memories of guerrilla training, combat operations and forceful recruitment by the rebels. "I was trained in guerrilla while studying in class 8. On the eve of my class 10 exams, I was captured by police and beaten up throughout the night. I was part of the village protection force too. Ultimately, choice was in our hands. While most of my friends chose to continue with the movement, I decided to pursue higher education," he says.

Like most others, Hejang also aspired to be an IAS officer. His mother, still tries to convince her 37 years old son, calling him a 'mad guy' who chose to work with the community. Despite his love for Science and Mathematics, he could not pursue science as it was 'expensive and unaffordable'. He therefore chose Arts and completed his graduation in History. "It was the most boring subject in high school," he smiles.

It was during this time that Hejang got exposed to community based organisations and started working with them. "Livelihood, micro finance, rural development and child development–I saw my community responding to these programmes in hope for a better future. This was when I comprehended the lives of forced recruits and those who were left behind and had nothing else to get back to. All of them were psychologically disturbed and had no one to help them find their directions. More than leadership and guidance, it was space and platform that they needed. A place where they can feel togetherness, happiness and hope, a place where they can connect for Peace," he says.

A few songs on the guitar brought smiles on their faces. Huge crowds came forward to be part of their musical evenings. Hejang and his friends were happy to see that simple gestures helped people connect and reminisce, amidst routine life that was dictated by terms of the conflict. They understood the desperation with which people, especially the youth, looked for options to get out of the situation.

InSIDE – North East (Integrated Social and Institutional Development for Empowerment) was born in 2006 in response to these wishes. The organisation focused on life skills, civic citizenship, women empowerment and adolescent health, and reached out to different communities thereby empowering them to be self-reliant.

"When children were exposed to a drawing class, most of them drew guns. When asked about ambition, many said that they wanted to join the militants. We had to take them beyond these circumstances and help them dream of a better future, where they could connect with their culture without being rendered powerless. Their low levels of self-esteem was the biggest challenge we faced," explains Hejang. As the journey began, he realised the significance of education in such a society. "Education starts from family. Schools are just one part of the cycle," he asserts adding that working with the young was incomplete without working with their mothers. Simple livelihood support programmes improved their earning capacity, empowering them in the process to make informed decisions for their children.

Their flagship project 'Guns to Pens' has attempted to revive grass roots education and experiential learning, in order to facilitate realisation of democratic values. Hejang feels that his post-graduation in Social Work helped him have a better insight of how things worked in the field. "I was able to develop the culture of analytical thinking among the youth we worked with. This is the magic that education does. It helps one recognise commonalities and differences as simple attributes. This is the foundation on which a peaceful society can be nurtured," he says.

Education, according to him, is the only hope for people of Manipur. Lack of opportunities, industries, history of conflict have kept these people at bay. Over the years, getting to see the children have dreams was a milestone for the team. "They have ambitions. They have their dreams. They no longer draw guns," apparently, he is over the moon.

Hejang is grateful to the MSDS fellowship and the opportunity it has provided him to connect with like-minded organisations outside Manipur. "This is an important milestone, validating our principle. We do not want to grow organically as an organisation. InSIDE – North East wishes to evolve as a platform for the young, letting them represent themselves at all occasions. They must be able to remain connected in spite of the disturbances in the region," he says.

—Shanmuga Priya.T

Sustaining Livelihoods

All that they needed was value addition that could strengthen the existing livelihood options and add new ones, if possible.

Tribal life is diverse across the country. So is tribal livelihood, but their close association with natural resources is something that remains the same everywhere. This is both their strength and vulnerability. Having understood this quite early in life, Mr Ramesh Babu, Founder of Social Work Organisation in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, aspired to work for the tribals by getting into the system. However, his not-so-good experience led him to establish his own community based organisation.

Hailing from a middle class family in West Godavari district, Ramesh completed his post-graduation in Social Work from Nagarjuna University in Guntur district. He also studied Social Work in his under-graduation, hoping it was the best fit to equip himself to serve as a government official. He followed the work of Social Welfare Department to keep track of the new developments, and possible implications on the lives of the tribals. "Every time, paying fees was a struggle," Ramesh recalls. Lack of financial support restricted his access to other opportunities that could prepare him for a government job. While he had decided to discontinue studies, his by-chance encounter with the Indo German Social Service Society encouraged him to pursue his higher studies without any obstacle. "I learnt that they supported poor students for their education. All they asked was an assurance to work for the cause of the poor and needy for two years, post the completion of my course. I happily agreed," he says.

Ramesh worked for different NGOs and his work with the Chenchu tribe in Nallamala forest in Srisailam area helped him comprehend the struggles that tribal poor faced on a daily basis. Whether food or education or health, the complex web of social interdependencies were determined by the livelihood options that were available to them at any point during the year. "I saw many challenges in reaching out to the poor tribals. Terrain only exacerbated things," he adds.

Experience at BOSCO and ITDA (Integrated Tribal Development Agency) prepared Ramesh to do his own way of service to his community. Dharamshala in Mangalore inspired him. "They did great work for poor people—mass marriages, educational institutions, mobile hospitals, free food for the devotees and poor, and the recent rural development project—all were administered in such a way that the local communities were engaged productively in the complete chain of processes. I was inspired by their scale of work," he says.

> ***Livelihoods have to be sustainable. They cannot be seasonal.***

Having realised that volunteering was the best way to serve communities, Ramesh established his Social Work Organisation (SWO). All his previous work experience allowed him to gauge tribal issues and recognise services that could improve the lives of the tribals. Simple methods like low cost technology that could cut short the distance they walked or trekked to fetch fresh water for consumption and better management of crop storage facilities made a difference. Value addition worked wonders for these people.

"All that they needed was value addition that could strengthen the existing livelihood options and add new ones, if possible. Livelihood is very critical for tribals as they have to invest in their transport as well. Their needs are basic, but operationally very challenging," describes Ramesh. What worked to his advantage was the association he had built up with the local community members. Hence, working with the communities was no longer a challenge.

Run with the help of volunteers and local members, SWO introduced low cost technology in agriculture that helped increase productivity of the farmers. But, crop storage remained to be an issue for long. This was also addressed through better storage methods and aids. Gradually, they also intervened to promote water purification and offered simple methods to purify water within their own homes. As these concerns began to settle down over the years, Ramesh decided to focus on forest based livelihood improvement to sustain the livelihood options people had. "Livelihoods have to be sustainable. They cannot be seasonal, nor can they depend on factors external to the community. Sustainable livelihoods was the answer to many issues they faced," says Ramesh who then introduced the idea of forest based entrepreneurship and formation of producer groups.

The versatility of local produce created scope for value addition. Therefore the producer groups' capacity building and chain management made the current practices efficient and reliable. Once this was ensured, value addition managed to improve the quality of present products, introduce new products, offer better price, and market them. "All these have to go on long term and must be internalised to realise the vision of self-sufficiency. I have had 15 years of experience in livelihoods and sustainability. I still have a long way to go, and it is so for the people too. We will move together," says Ramesh, whose long term plan is to establish a food processing industry that will be collectively owned and managed by the local tribals.

"Plenty of forest resources is a gift. The tribals must know how to fully exploit this in order to nurture their lives and the forest in return," he says.

"Running the NGO had its own challenges. My evolution as a social worker has had grey days too. I have travelled without reservation and survived on simple, low cost, street food. I have even borrowed money for my work now and then. My family put up with all these struggles, but now, when I see tribals happy and empowered, and having a vision for themselves, I am contended. We will continue to move together in this path," he signs off.

—Shanmuga Priya.T

Villages managing development

Rural development in India has a long history and has resorted to different approaches over the years. While the idea of schematic approach was criticised for one sided perspective and lack of people's participation, development thinkers gave a new identity to rural development by establishing participatory rural appraisals. They even cleared the myths and biases on rural development, calling for a new, holistic approach that resonated with local needs and resources. The concerns addressed from this perspective also gave way to the realisation of self-sufficient villages in our country. Much in line with this idea is the work of Abhinavgram Society in Namakkal district.

Its Founder Director, Mr Thiruppathi, grew up dreaming of a self-sufficient village. "I used to walk seven kilometres every day to my school. Children from neighbouring villages used to come by buses. I always wondered why some villages like mine were not connected. I discovered different answers to this question as I grew up," he recalls. Hailing from Dindigul district, Thiruppathi completed his schooling in public schools and Bachelors in Commerce from Gandhigram Rural University. One of the subjects, Rural Development, helped him comprehend the idea of development as an evolving phenomenon. "My professor, on learning the issues in my village, encouraged me to write petitions to the District Collector and follow them up with people's support. I did know that things will improve, but not that they have to be improved. I felt a sense of responsibility from within," he admits. Encouraged by his own insights, Thiruppathi pursued Social Work in his post-graduation.

Working as a Trainer on self-sufficient model villages for Kaveri Village Development Society in Mayiladudurai, and then as a Research Fellow with Gandhigram Rural University gave him opportunities to observe how local communities responded to the idea and the obstacles that prevented them from taking ownership about issues concerning development of their villages. "What seemed natural for me was not as straight forward as I thought it could be. Every community had its own struggles and coping mechanisms and I saw the rationale behind them," he says.

Soon after, Thiruppathi headed the Fundraising and External Affairs unit at Ekam Foundation. It was here he witnessed the PRA tools in operation, giving way for participatory decision making in the villages.

Thiruppathi envisaged Abhinavgram Society as a movement that will help people address their own needs as well as move on to other villages. On the field, this vision calls for rigorous discussions, planning and collective execution by the villagers. His experience from his own village helped him build on this vision. By 2009, he was able to influence bus services, electricity and construction of toilets in all households, and successfully handed over balwadis that were managed by youth groups to the Government. These new developments in Sikkubolagowndanpatti village, Dindugul District and active people's participation encouraged him to create a village forum that can be capacitated to administer and maintain these activities. Building such a representative forum was the next part of his strategy, to sustain the movement. The youth parliament that was formed to represent four villages in Kanyakumari district has now been closed due to new developments.

In 2015, Abhinavgram Society conducted a pilot study in Namakkal district covering 305 villages around Kolli Hills. "We gathered primary and secondary data; organised PRAs, focussed group discussions, conducted social mapping and door to door surveys to identify the remote villages from where the programme could start," he says adding that, "of the 57 villages identified, 3 villages each from Gundurnadu, Thevanurnadu and Cerakarainadu Panchayats were chosen for the first leg of operations. Agriculture, livelihood, education, health, infrastructure and IT were the focus areas."

> ***Thiruppathi envisaged Abhinavgram Society as a movement that will help people address their own needs as well as move on to other villages.***

Farmers' clusters were formed and they were trained on zero budgeting natural farming. These ongoing training programmes are often revised to update information amongst members. Direct marketing was revived and the farmers are now able to market their produce without any middlemen. Value addition on some of the traditional farm produce, like footwear from lantana crops, were promoted through local women's groups, farmers' clusters and other tribals as an income generation activity.

"Our next focus was on tourism. We did not want to call it 'tourism development' because the intention was not to promote the villages as a holiday destination. We rather wished to see visitors experiencing tribal life first hand without any intimidation. The village youth are trained to manage the visitors who eat the local food and stay in small tenements. This exchange between tribals and outsiders has contributed to the development process, both in terms of revenue generation and new insights on value addition," he says.

Thanks to the success of this programme, villagers have completed primary school and earn an average of 10,000 rupees a month. All programmes are administered by the respective Youth Parliament, who are in charge of identifying needs and initiating necessary interventions. Youth Parliaments are supported by a Village Welfare Committee, represented by a member from every household that meets once in a month, pooling in a contribution of 100 rupees per household. The fund collected is used to address needs and execute programs whenever necessary.

"They have managed to build a rented accommodation for teachers so that they can come and teach in schools in remote locations. Seeing the Youth Parliament focus on education, health, farming, sanitation, and infrastructure has given us the confidence to entrust them with all responsibilities," says a contended Thiruppathi.

Abhinavgram society has therefore managed to live the dream of self-sustained model villages. Tribal owned local livelihoods have grown to support the development of their villages. "We were earlier a catalyst, but now have been reduced to be a monitoring body. This is what we had wanted. By 2020, our work in Kolli Hills will be completely taken over by locals and we will move to another village to conduct pilot studies. This cycle will repeat," he smiles.

—Shanmuga Priya .T

"At first, women empowerment must happen in my own industry."

Nassar shares with Marie Banu his views on women empowerment.

Nassar is Tamil actor, producer, writer, director, lyricist, and singer. He hails from Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu and studied at St. Joseph's Higher Secondary School. He moved to Chennai after school, where he finished his pre-university at Madras Christian College. At Madras Christian College, he was an active member of the Dramatic Society. Later for a brief time, he worked in the Indian Air Force.

He joined the Film Institute in Chennai, in the year 1982-83, and received his diploma in acting. Prior to this, he also underwent training in acting at the Acting Training Centre, affiliated to South Indian Film Chamber, Chennai. He entered the film industry in 1985. He has acted in about 300 films, which include Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Hindi and English language films. He also became popular in TV serials. Nassar is married to Kameela and they have three sons.

Presently, Nassar is the President of The Nadigar Sangam, historically known as the South Indian Artistes' Association, a union for film, television, and stage actors in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, based in Chennai. Formed in 1952, the group has a charitable trust fund to provide pension to retired actors, voice support for actors caught in controversy, and have collectively protested socio-political issues.

In an exclusive interview, Nassar shares with Marie Banu his views on women empowerment.

What was your inspiration to join the film industry?

I chose acting as a profession. I don't put special effects to be remembered as an actor. This is my job and I do my best as I have to compete and stay long. Acting is no more an art here. I have to excel in my profession and stay long in my career.

One of my sons learnt music, but has taken up acting. Another son is getting trained to become a cinematographer. It is their wish and I am trying to give them the best education possible.

Can you tell us about your training programmes?

I train people who aspire to become actors in Blue Ocean Film & Television Academy (Bofta). I also have a trust called Adavu which looks into the native arts. Mostly, I look into 'Therukoothu'. Now, I have shifted my entire focus on Nadigar Sangam.

Being the President of Nadigar Sangam, what are the areas in which your present team is focusing upon?

We are trying to help the thousands of traditional theatre artists who are poorly paid. This is our prime focus. In due course we are planning to conduct workshops and bring back the conscience of the theatre, because it has lost all its colour.

Sangam will work better with the support of all the actors and committee members. With the help of Agaram foundation team, statistical data will be collected about the members of this association. According to the data collected each and every member will benefit through the policies and schemes. The committee will concentrate towards benefiting underprivileged members and their children's education.

How do you think we use media to create social change?

Theoretically, we call film as a media, but I doubt it has been used as an effective medium for social change. Probably, during pre-independence, when we only had theatre and film, we used it intensely to propagate the freedom struggle. But, now it is not so.

To accept the fact, films made now focus only on entertainment. To my knowledge, in whole world, it is only in Tamil language that we have made the most number of films against corruption. So, where did the message go? It is obvious that because the message will sell, such films were made. If the message is ineffective, it might as well not be told.

Now, I see a lot of social media sites active. I think it is because we were a suppressed community for a long time, people are using social media to spurt out whatever they think. One should be cautious while expressing his or her view in the social media. At times, without confirming or analyzing whether it is right or wrong, people post messages thereby creating problems.

Most of the people in our country can afford smart phones and various levels of interactions in social media are going on. But, I don't know if it would bring about a revolution as in Egypt or in other countries. It is time for introspection! The new generation should be responsible.

Your thoughts on women empowerment?

At first, women empowerment must happen in my own industry. We find the percentage of women in the film industry to be less. A lot of women should come to direct movies, work with camera, etc. Women have proved to be as capable as a man in doing any job—whether physical or mental. It is good that our country has given them space to fly fighter planes. Of course, somewhere, men are jealous. Finally, they have meet the challenge!

We still have a long way to go. Women empowerment should spread from urban to rural areas, thereby having our entire nation covered. Many jokes on husband and wife relationships are shared in social media. If power and responsibilities are shared equally amongst men and women, these silly jokes will fade away. This will solve a lot of problems.

Women empowerment should spread from urban to rural areas, thereby having our entire nation covered.

Picture taken at shooting location by Marie Banu