

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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Cover Story - Pg 6

SEEKING OUT SUSTAINABILITY

About The Timbaktu Collective and its activities



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Editor : Marie Banu
Phone : 044-42805365



Alumni Talk Pg 3

Contributing Welfare
Dr. Rajendran's efforts to
launch a welfare model in
the villages at
Thiruvannamali district



Profile Pg 9

**Understanding Common
Needs**
About Acwerk Rural
Development
Foundation in Salem



Chit Chat Pg 12

**"Although opportunities and
choices are more, our students
are focused."**
An exclusive interview with
Dr. Fatima Vasanth
Deputy Principal,
Loyola College

From the Editor

Dear Reader,

October 1st is celebrated as the International Day for Elderly People each year. This was first established on 14th of December 1990 by the UN General Assembly. It is an opportunity for us to highlight the important contributions that older people make to society and raise awareness of the issues and challenges of ageing in today's world.

Getting old is an inevitable process, and with age comes wisdom, maturity and respectability. Elderly are the truest form of wisdom as they have seen several generations. They teach us to respect, persevere, and inculcate family values to strengthen relationships.

To care for someone who once cared for us is the highest honour one can give and this leads to self-development. Caring for the elderly benefits us in many ways and prepares us to face life and overcome challenges.

Elderly people are precious and are the revered members of our family. It is when they are old that they need our help in things that they could have done effortlessly before. This is also a time when they need our love and affection. It is our responsibility to imbibe values amongst our children to care and respect the elderly.

Conversations Today has featured several change makers who have been working for the cause of the elderly. We take this opportunity to salute them!

—Marie Banu

Editorial

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

Contact with Saints

ADANGER:

“Seek the company of saints by all means; but do not remain indefinitely with them. The adage, familiarity breeds contempt, applies even to their case,” writes Swami Ramdas in the course of an article in *The Vision*.

“Spiritual growth is, no doubt, largely dependent on suitable association. Company of saints is, therefore, held to be essential for a seeker after truth. But it must not be understood by the company of saints to mean that the seeker should permanently stick on to them.

“He may, for a brief period, remain in their contact and, thereby drawing inspiration and guidance, get himself thoroughly awakened to the consciousness of the indwelling Reality. It would be well for him to depart from them before the light and inspiration that he has received diminishes or disappears.

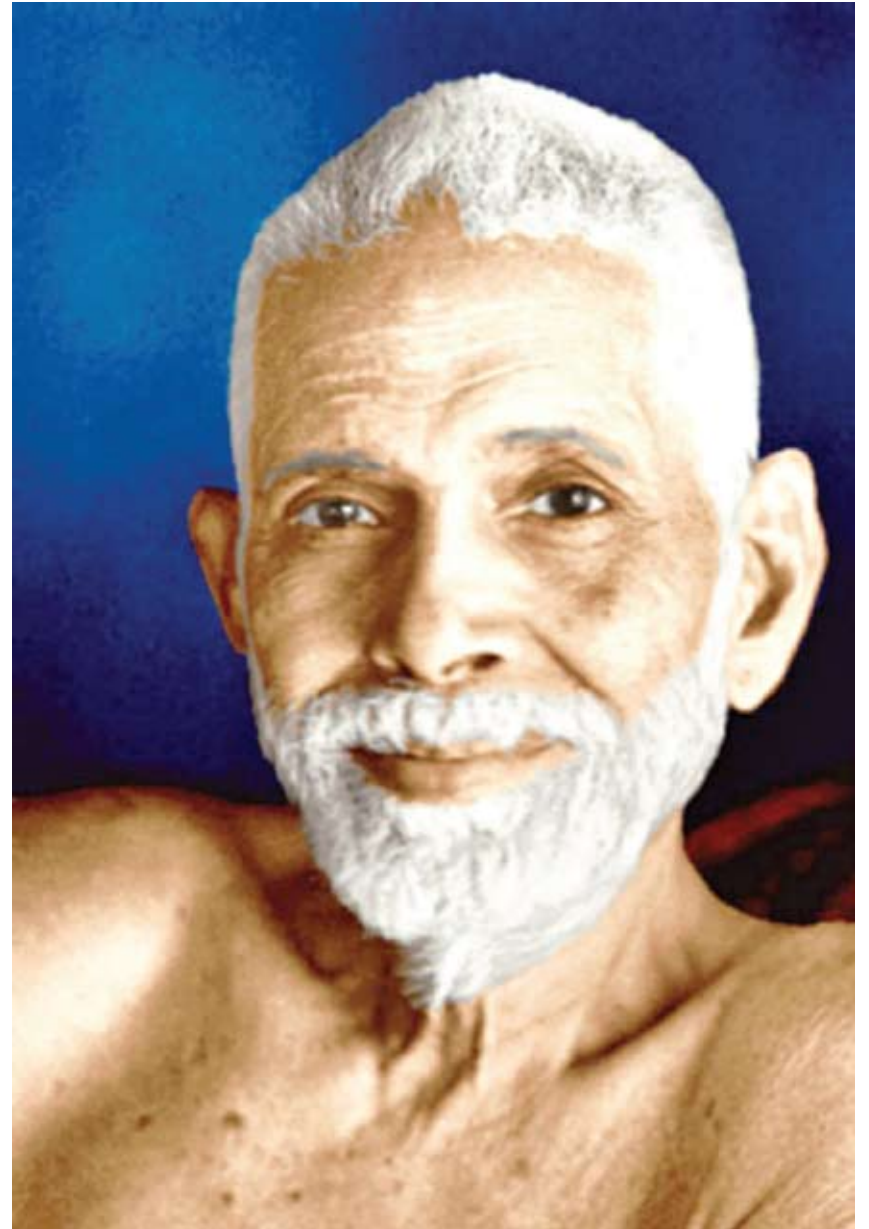
MAY TURN SCOFFERS:

“There are many cases known to the writer and many others of which he has heard and read, in which such continued dwelling in the company of saints has not only cooled down the ardour and aspiration of the seekers but also turned them into scoffers and sceptics. The fall of a *sadhak* from faith, purity and aspiration does him incalculable harm.

“A young plant growing beneath the shade of a full-grown giant tree does not develop strength and stature. Its growth will be dwarfed, shrivelled and diseased. Whereas if the same plant were put into the open ground directly exposed to the storms, heat, cold, and other rigours of changing weather, it is bound to grow into a mighty tree drawing sustenance both from above and below.

STIFLED GROWTH:

“This analogy of the plant aptly illustrates the stunted life of a seeker who is attached merely to the outward personality of a saint and spends all his days in close association with him. Here the initiative for a free expression of his unique spiritual possibilities is stifled. He fails to cultivate the fundamental qualities for his advancement - fearlessness, self-dependence and endurance. The one great Guide that should control his mind, speech and body should be the almighty Spirit within him. To surrender to this Spirit and become its very embodiment is his goal. To stand



on his own legs, struggle and grow by his own strength and experience and lastly to hand himself over to God by his own endeavour brings true liberation and peace.

“From what has been said above, it must not be construed that reflection is cast upon the greatness and efficacy of the company of God-realised souls. Such a contact is the most effective means for a rapid spiritual evolution of the soul. In fact, the grace of saints is an invaluable aid for *sadhana* and without it the condition of the aspirant is like a bird beating in vain its wings against the bars of the cage for freedom. Saints are the saviours and liberators.

The Hindu conception of a saint is that he is the very embodiment of God himself. So honour him, derive the rare benefit of his society, serve him with a frank and pure heart, listen intently to his words of advice, and strive to act up to them and achieve the

fullest knowledge of the Truth you are in quest of.

But seek not to remain attached to his person and lose the spiritual gifts you obtained from him by first contacts.”

This cutting was read out to Sri Bhagavan. He listened and remained silent. He was requested to say if contact with saints could be a danger.

Sri Bhagavan then quoted a Tamil stanza which says that contact with Guru should be kept up till *videhamukti* (being disembodied).

Again he asked where is the *Satpurusha*? He is within. Then he quoted another stanza meaning:

“O Master, Who has been within me in all my past incarnations and Who manifested as a human being, only to speak the language understood by me and lead me.”

—Source: *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*

Contributing Welfare

The record of model villages in our country emphasises the critical role of village leaders, especially the village sarpanchs and village panchayat presidents. Their way of managing resources at disposal and prioritising village needs from a position of authority and leadership has not only established new models of village development, but also reiterated the efficacy of social transformation in rural villages. More interestingly, the one common thread that characterises all model villages in our country is the participation of local people.

Dr. L. Rajendran, Founder of Best Action Trust in Bahdoor village of Thiruvannamali district was also motivated by the spirit of people's participation. His mission is not about a model village, but rather a welfare model in the village that ensures care of the vulnerable and marginalised.

Hailing from a family of Siddha practitioners, he also took to the profession by the age of 25. Being the only doctor in his village, his service to the people and concern with which he advocated household practices for good health made him immensely popular. "Institutional medical service was 17 kilometres away at Vandavasi. I had huge responsibility that dictated my actions and could not make the villagers depend on a system of medicine that was out of reach. I therefore felt that it was important to shape their lifestyle in such a way that health was an inherent value which was taken care of in all circumstances. Such efforts got me closer to people," says Rajendran, who was unanimously elected as the Panchayat Board President for Bahdoor village in 2001.

Rajendran spent five years in this capacity building overhead tanks, borewells to resolve water crisis and well laid cement roads that increased mobility of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who lived in remote pockets. When residents from marginalised areas began to move around, he believed, their accessibility to information and services also increased, balancing the asymmetry that had set in for ages.

His efforts to make the lives of dhobi community easier was also well paid off. "I am still overwhelmed by the kind of respect they have for me," he smiles. Rajendran understood that he must bridge the distance between system and the people through his position. This, according to him, was essential to make people comfortable in approaching the formal institutions for their needs.

Rajendran invited the District Collector to his village and organised a Grievance Redressal Day where more than 150 issues were resolved in a single day. "Issues concerning procurement, name change in



ration cards, processing of widow and old age pensions, distribution of land documents, etc., were all addressed swiftly, reinstating people's faith in these institutions," he says.

He believed that one individual cannot and must not become the face of a system or institution, defining the way people perceive it. However, his journey to realise such values was cut short as he lost in the following election.

After completing his tenure in 2006, Rajendran practiced medicine and simultaneously identified ways of serving his villagers. Having established an identity for himself, it also became easier for him to engage in social welfare activities. In 2011, he founded the Best Action Trust in memory of his father, to continue social services without any external influences. "I grew up learning about welfare initiatives and about helping the vulnerable. Education sponsorship for the abandoned children, institutional rehabilitation for the destitute and many such programmes inspired me. I wanted to



do something similar in my village that paved way for the economic empowerment of poor," he explains.

Through his Trust, he provided the aged with provisions and clothes and also helped them in obtaining their pensions. He selected children based on merit and offered scholarships, donated cycles for the differently-abled, and launched initiatives that enabled them to pursue their aspirations. For women, he initiated self-help groups to improve their credit worthiness and self-esteem.

In 2013, Rajendran received the Award for Social Service from the then Governor of Tamil Nadu, Dr K Rosiah. He was also awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the Global Peace University in 2013. "I am

both a Siddha doctor and a Social Worker, each encouraging the other," he smiles.

Best Action Trust is funded by contributions from Rajendran's medicine practice and from his friends. He utilises five percent from his daily earnings for all these social activities. While he was content with his engagements arising from both the roles, his friend

introduced him to CSIM's Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative Management. "All I wanted to know was whether there was more that I could do with the resources and exposure I had. But, listening to contribution stories from different realms, I dreamt of pursuing something big that can have a long term impact on the health of my villagers. All my activities that were scheduled for specific occasions have now become more frequent and more organised," he shares.

Rajendran's new mission is to ensure provision of clean drinking water to every household in his village, at the rate of half a rupee per litre. With all the ground work in place, he is looking forward to start operations in the coming year.

—Shanmuga Priya.T

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL IMPACT...

“When eating, an elephant takes one bite at a time.” - Creighton Abrams



Not without a great deal of hesitation, I want to try and look into the future and try and ‘see’ the future development of social enterprise and more particularly the role of social impact. In attempting to predict how present trends will unwind in future years is a fairly dangerous game and one that is setting oneself up for a fall. But here goes...one bite at a time.

As far as context goes we are living in an increasingly connected world with a globalised market. Governments have shrinking control over the wider economy as large privately owned corporations play a more influential role in the shift from public sector to private ownership. Collective working and organised mutuality are frowned upon in the belief that society exists as the sum functioning individuals.

Over the next decades there will be increased inequality, a decrease in forms of united action by trade unions (or equivalent), welfare will become more dependent on philanthropy and at the behest of the super-rich, personal debt will rise and will continue to be used to control the mass of the population. And despite the UK voting narrowly to stay in Europe

there will be a rise in a destructive and xenophobic form of nationalism – dividing the ‘us’ from the ‘them’.

Amid this turmoil sits what can be referred to as the ‘third sector’. This includes civic society, volunteering, business with social purpose, community development, clubs and societies. In times gone by they might expect some form of support from the state as they aim to improve social and economic livelihoods. In the future their funding will become more and more difficult and they will be pushed into working alongside and with private sector institutions. Some of these institutions will be benign but some will expect the third sector organisations they support to ‘toe the line’ and act in their interests.

Some of the more established, and it has to be said, bigger voluntary enterprises will survive and grow at the expense of smaller organisations. This will happen as competition rather than collaboration is encouraged and sanctified by the dispensers of funds and capital.

However, within this bleak landscape, I think there will be a counter swing at a local level. As services to communities are gradually withdrawn, local people who are concerned with their community’s future will react by forming local multi-functional community based enterprises intent on improving the ‘good’ of the community. The future of ‘social enterprise’ will be community. It will be based on local mutual self-help and in a way that erases the divide between

‘economic’, ‘social’ and ‘environment’ impacts. Instead it will try to address all these three aspects for the benefit of their particular community.

Essentially, there will be a split in the ‘social enterprise’ sector – and indeed the term ‘social enterprise’ will become more and more meaningless. There will be large competitive organisations taking on government contracts alongside the private sector and they will operate so well in the market place that the difference between them and privately owned businesses will be academic. Then, in the alternative direction, there will be the community-based enterprises hanging on to socialist and collective principles in the belief that solidarity and a sense of belonging can provide for the good of all.

So where does ‘social impact’ fit into all of this? Looking into the crystal ball of the future, it is necessary to consider the past. In the mid-2000s, just as social accounting and audit was beginning to gain traction, along came a US import in the form of Social Return on Investment (SROI). It burst on the social reporting scene but over the years it has been increasingly criticised as an approach. It is changing its spots and recognising that monetisation of

The future of ‘social enterprise’ will be community. It will be based on local mutual self-help and in a way that erases the divide between ‘economic’, ‘social’ and ‘environment’ impacts.

outcomes is not an absolute necessity in measuring the impact social enterprises have on stakeholders.

In the future this trend will continue and there will be a gradual realisation that the focus in this area should be on regular and systematic reporting by all organisations that want to demonstrate to themselves and others the positive social and environmental changes that happen as a result of their activities.

Over the next decade, the split in the social enterprise 'movement' will be mirrored in a 'split' in the world of social impact. On the one hand there will be an industry around social reporting with an array of tools, structures and off-the-shelf aids to help organisations report on their social impact. Despite this there will be confusion and a call for standardisation. I should imagine Social Value UK and others will be at the forefront of this call – and possibly quite rightly.

On the other hand, there will be community based enterprises, operating at a small and local level who will look to report not only on the impact that they have but also on the type of organisation they are, their ethical credentials, and the way they deliver their impact.

This is where the Social Audit Network (SAN) comes in. SAN was set up to support organisations in the community sector. It was established to help organisations account for how they delivered change as well as the degree of change that happened as a result of what they did. In the past and currently there has been an emphasis on this two-fold approach.

In the next decade, I think there will be a shift to emphasise the auditing of social reports – and not so much on how social reporting can be done.

As the decade pans out, more and more people will realise that social reports can be written in many different ways while the developing standards should be around the audit process. You can evaluate enterprises that have a social purpose with



clever consultants going in and writing a report. This is not sustainable in the short term and actually disempowers the enterprise. Far better to get the organisation to take charge of its own monitoring and evaluation and then get it externally verified through a thorough and well-constructed audit.

SAN currently has a set procedure for the audit. A set of criteria has been developed based around the principles of social accounting and audit. All reports will be expected to include:

- What the organisation is all about (Vision, Mission, Values, Objectives, Activities, expected Outputs and outcomes) and who it works with and for (stakeholders)

- What the social report covers and what was done (Method, Scope, Omissions)
- A checklist on internal functions or key aspects (Human Resources, Governance, 'Asset Lock' Financial Sustainability, Environmental, Local Economic)
- Report on outputs and outcomes (usually relating to the Objectives and through them back to the overall purpose)
- Key findings, conclusions and future recommendations

Where does this leave us? I think the global outlook is pretty horrendous and capitalism continues to wreak havoc on communities, societies, cultures and the

environment. The glimmer of hope is through community action which will include community-owned enterprises and businesses. But they want to know they are making a positive difference. How do they do this? I would argue through adopting and gradually introducing a form of social accounting with an audit attached that provides external and peer review to help them regularly keep track of what they do and how they do it.

We shall not be able to eat an elephant with one gulp – instead it will have to be eaten in small bites... (I can avow it was certainly not the elephant that said this!)

—Alan Kay, Co-Founder, Social Audit Network, UK



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.

For more information, please visit our website www.csim.in

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INITIATIVE AND MANAGEMENT

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

Mr. **Sandeep Mehto**,
Head – Hosangabad,
@ 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

SEEKING OUT SUSTAINABILITY

When The Timbaktu Collective was merely an idea back in 1990, the aim of the organisation according to its founder CK Ganguly (Bablu), was “to understand the production process and the production relations”. He explains, “We wanted to start with farming as that is the most basic form of production”. The site for this quest was ‘Timbaktu’, a barren 32-acre plot “jointly purchased by my partner Mary, our close friend John and me”. “We began by planting saplings on the land and then went on to sow crop seeds on the land. Soon we realised that the soil was sick and the land needed healing. We also realised that good agriculture needs to have good forests around it. So we began to protect the treeless reserve forest around us from overgrazing and forest fires.”

It was after this that Bablu says the Collective began tackling the issue of sustainability on the needs front (ecological, social and economic). “We wanted to understand the difference between modern and traditional agriculture and those aspects of traditional agriculture that made it sustainable, with no high dependency on capital and inputs. That was the first notion of sustainability that we had.” By this time, the Timbaktu Collective was registered as a Not-for-Profit Organisation. “The women’s thrift and credit activities started in 1992/93. Mary started visiting the neighbouring villages and talking to women about their problems. They said that their biggest problem was the lack of cash.” The problem was simple to understand. Banks wouldn’t help in the absence of credit-worthiness and the money lenders charged exorbitant rates of interest. ‘Chit funds’ however, were popular. “But it was an usurious system where members in dire need had to pay interest rates of up to 50% because there was a system of auctioning the collected savings,” says Bablu. “The challenge was to find a system that allowed the women to take loans and not pay too much interest. In 1995, the Andhra Pradesh Mutually Aided Cooperative Societies (MACS) Act was passed, allowing for greater scope of independence. “We had already organised the women into sanghas. We federated these sanghas and registered the first women’s thrift cooperative in 1998” says Bablu. He continues, “the women began saving Rs. 10 per month

and pooled it together to give those in need loans at low rates of interest. All the members were from small holder farming, artisan, Dalit and OBC families.” The challenge was how do we make the cooperative and people’s institution self-sustaining, autonomous and financially independent?”

The other big challenge was the DWACRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) programme started by the State Government which brought in money from outside. “Our principle was that the people’s money should come from within and should be circulated within,” explains Bablu. “When the Govt started the DWACRA groups, they gave around Rs. 15,000 per group from which the women could take loans. They then started giving further

loans at ridiculous rates. Then there was the Microfinance boom and lots of MFIs started flooding the place with money from outside or connecting the women to banks, etc. This not only made the women significantly indebted it also sent much of the local money flow out in form of usurious interest rates while no women owned and managed institutions were formed.” He continues, “One of the most important points of sustainability is that we need local resources for local purposes. It is important the money remains within the local economy, as the presence of money can generate more money.” There were other issues too: like arid land, low or scanty rainfall, mono-cropping of the groundnut crop, lack of ground water, forest fires, overgrazing and poor soil health. The big challenge for The Timbaktu Collective was to turn this fragile ecology – with marginalised lands, forests, climate and people – sustainable.

As on date, The Timbaktu Collective has introduced six working models towards its work of sustainability, all of which have resulted in Cooperatives. “Our work with children, while slightly different, is just as important,” explains Bablu, narrating how providing an education and making a child aware of her/his ecological rights, is part of shaping the future.

Why has the Timbaktu Collective restricted itself to the Anantapur region, though? “Why not? This area needs to be sustained and that’s why we are here. Why do we go to a place which has everything? Our whole idea is to remain in a small area and work as intensely as possible in ensuring that we and the people have a good life,” says Bablu. Fair enough since one of the organisation’s principles states that whatever is done with the local population, in Bablu’s words, “we should have already done it ourselves”. Learning about it before proposing it to someone else is the guiding principle behind such undertakings. “The expansion of the cooperative model to other thematic areas was based on the experience of setting up women’s cooperatives,” says Bablu. “We started practicing organic farming in Timbaktu in 1997. It took us till 2005 before we had the courage to go and start promoting organic farming in the villages.”

What the Timbaktu Collective does not believe in, is replicability. “We had no blue

print when we started, we still don’t have one. Every place and people have different ways of doing things. There are geographical, cultural and economic differences,” explains Bablu. “There is no such thing as replicability. Our work can only inspire. Ofcourse, there are certain aspects of our work which are universal truths and can be followed: like how we talk with people and not to people.” Another concept Bablu says he isn’t a fan of is an “exit policy”. “There is no such thing as going to a place, working for some time, and then exiting. Development is a continuous process with no clear end,” he says.

Till date, the Timbaktu Collective is committed to working towards local dignity and local pride without parochialism, caste or gender divisions. Bablu explains, “The self-worth of a farmer or any other village resident is based on whether s/he can make her/his ends meet, whether one’s children can go to school, or whether one can receive proper medical care. The objective is dignity.”

So, with its task cut out, the focus now turns towards creating self-worth, a good life and continued sustainability. “While we are expanding our work on our thematic areas, we are not planning on moving to new geographical areas at the moment,” says Bablu.

“There are important challenges like sanitation and health care. These are things that we may get into, but that depends on our ability to take up the challenge, as also on the aspirations of the people, funding, and long term staff commitment.”



Timbaktu Collective is committed to working towards local dignity and local pride without parochialism, caste or gender divisions.

In his teacher's footsteps

A trip to Nepal makes such an impression on a teenager, he goes on to scale Everest and raise funds for the school he volunteered at.

I have met a man who has scaled Mount Everest. But I was awed by the man sitting next to him.

Don't get me wrong, it's not that Dr. Kumaran Rasappan isn't impressive. Mountaineer and medical doctor, he also raised money for charity through his climb and set up a clinic in one of the villages near Mount Everest.

It is the deference in Kumaran's voice and the respect in his eyes that tells me that the man seated next to him at the restaurant quietly eating some chicken, is really special.

Pillay Krishnan smiles and recounts anecdotes about Kumaran like a proud parent, and reminds him to tell specific parts of his story that he has left out.

As a young teacher, Krishnan had volunteered with the Singapore International Foundation to teach in Nepal for a year.

So fulfilling was his time at the Saraswati school in Gorkha, Nepal, that when he returned to Singapore, he inspired a group of 28 teachers and students from Raffles Institution to return with him to the school in 1999.

Making an impression

Staying with families who hosted them in the village of Aahale, they helped do up a library and paint the school building.

Kumaran was one of the 15-year-old boys who went on that trip.

"We were too young to appreciate it at that time," he says. "But now looking back, you know that these moments were very precious, very important moments in your life."

"That was the first experience in Nepal, of the mountains, and overseas community service. That trip had an impact for many years to come."

Thirteen years on, and Kumaran – then a medical student – was poised to climb the world's tallest peak and he remembered his teacher.

His sponsor, Cerebos, apart from supporting his attempt to climb Everest, also wanted to donate computers to a school in Nepal, and asked if he had any school in mind.

Kumaran knew exactly which one.

"How wonderful it will be to go back to chip in," he thought. "With Mr Krishnan along as well."

"I knew he was the man who had connections and I knew he was the man who knew the ground, so I tried to dig up his contact," he says.

The two men reconnected and Krishnan



was thrilled to join Kumaran for the project.

Immediately after Kumaran summited Everest and came down safely, the two men revisited the school and helped to organise a computer lab.

Something special

For Krishnan, the invitation to return to Saraswati with his former student was "really out of the blue and mind-blowing".

"He could have just embarked on this journey and enjoyed... but he thought about how it would be special for me too. And that was something very special for me," Krishnan says.

The deep respect and affection is clearly mutual. "You know, at that time, taking a year off work and going to Nepal to teach English was a big thing," Kumaran says of Krishnan's volunteering stint that triggered the 1999 school trip and inspired his own adventures in Nepal later.

"He paved the way for others to follow and that was a big courageous thing for him to have done... Every student wants to be inspired by his teacher and I'm glad I crossed paths with him," he says, adding that Krishnan had inspired him to "realise

my full potential".

"I can't believe that our work as SIF volunteers would have such ripple effects 20 years down the road," Krishnan says.

He also tells of seeing a picture on Facebook of schoolgirls in the computer lab that he and Kumaran helped set up.

"Such a different world this has become, because 20 years ago, the girls didn't even go to school... and then here, out of this opportunity, the girls now get to be included in the wider world. And the opportunities and their outlook change and people will look at them differently," he says.

As we conclude our time together, Kumaran asks his teacher and friend what's the most important lesson he's learnt in his life.

"Whatever you do, even if you do not see the returns immediately, as long as you are sincere and you want to help others, somehow the other people will find their way and maybe one day, will express their thanks," comes the reply from Krishnan.

"And even if they don't, if you know you have served them well, then you have done your part."

Postscript: Following the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal, Kumaran volunteered with Mercy Relief to treat orthopaedic trauma cases near Kathmandu. There, he met the former headmaster of Saraswati school, who described the destruction in the village where most of the students come from.

Once back in Singapore, Kumaran and his wife fundraised among family and friends. They passed the funds raised to Krishnan, who went to Nepal later in June and bought zinc roofs and helped in the initial re-construction of the village.

Kumaran, now a doctor, has gone on to emulate his teacher, using his story of Everest to spark students' imagination. He inspired another group of students to help set up a science lab at Saraswati school.

Krishnan, now vice-principal of a primary school, continues to inspire the young to scale their own mountains.

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

Understanding Common Needs

Community health initiatives are based primarily on and driven by people's participation. Overtly reliant on the local social dynamics, the reach they succeed to have at the village level is incredible. Acwerk Rural Development Foundation, founded by Dr T M Chinnaiyan, began as a community health initiative in Salem in 1999. Dr Chinnaiyan had always dreamt of building an institution that provided accessible health care to villages in rural Salem. A doctor by profession, he began his community service by addressing general health concerns of people in the rural pockets of Salem district. Soon, his efforts became focussed on treating early leprosy, tuberculosis and rehabilitation of the differently abled in appropriate institutions. Community drives for awareness, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation was coordinated efficiently with the local participation. Since the community involvement was strategized from the initial days, the health seeking behaviour of the local communities improved.

In such a favourable atmosphere, it was only relevant for Acwerk to integrate accessible health care in its main objectives. By 2009, leprosy was almost eradicated in the region and Acwerk began to assess other needs of the community. By 2012, both leprosy and tuberculosis were completely under control and Acwerk decided to focus on the educational needs of the underprivileged children in Mettur. "I stepped in as the Managing Trustee in 2012. Education was clearly the need of the hour as there were many villages that were simply cut off from opportunities in the urban areas. Our priority was to ensure good quality and age appropriate primary education so that children developed interest in going to school," says Ms Athiya Chinnaiyan.

The beginning was no doubt, daunting. The very concept of schooling was alien to some of the remote communities. With only a government day care available in Navapatti village panchayat, Athiya and team found it very difficult to introduce the idea of regular schooling to the villagers. "Children were usually taken along with their parents for work. Eventually, they also took to their parents' jobs. While poverty is the primary cause, lack of alternative options, i.e. access to opportunities that children from urban areas enjoyed,



forced them to remain within the vicious cycle of inter-generational deprivation," Athiya adds.

While Acwerk decided to provide similar opportunities through pre-schools and offered free primary education for children belonging to the age group 2 to 5 years, the team was fully aware that it was a challenge to make the community members accept this new development. "The communities were not suspicious, but apprehensive. They

did not have the knowledge to question or assess the service that our pre-school would provide. They took their time, but eventually began to enrol their children. Providing nutritious food for the children helped us to convince the community further," she explains. Aam pre-school was thus inaugurated in 2014 in Navapatti, as a regular school for children of farmers, daily labourers and industrial workers from the twelve villages in this panchayat.

With an intake of 35 to 40 children each year, Aam pre-school successfully stepped into its fourth year. The school follows a customised syllabus that has elements from Montessori, activity based learning and other models, emphasising on creative study. Simulations are used to expose children to different social situations and hone their response. Communication, confidence building and spatial learning are given special emphasis so that children do not become a closed group in the presence of volunteers from outside the village. Local women are trained and offered full-time employment to administer the school as well as train the children. This not only made it easier for children to open up in the classes, but also helped the management to understand their needs better.

Traditional and locally familiar games were used to facilitate the learning process. Athiya feels that such a familiarity is in itself an ice breaker—be it in the methods used to teach or the people who teach/take care of the children. This is an advantage urban children have always enjoyed and rural children were always deprived of.

Having been exposed to education systems in both rural and urban areas, Athiya was intrigued by the gap between them. While in cities, children were generally understood as capable individuals, not much is expected from the rural children as their future is often predicted in the lines of their parents' lives.

"People we met often questioned what more their children could do. Things are changing and the villagers are comfortable with the idea of schooling than before. Auto services to pick up and drop the children at Aam pre-school has also encouraged parents to look out for similar options so that children can continue their education in schools in the neighbouring villages."

"We all know that child labour is a social evil, but it has taught us that rural children's attitude is to be productive and that is really good. Only education can enhance this productivity, to drive them out of the cycle of deprivation and Aam pre school is a simple effort in that direction," says Athiya.

—Shanmuga Priya.T

Nruthya Bodhini – Musings of an Artiste

14 – The tough get going

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going” — Joseph Kennedy

When we choose a career or path in life, the usual idea is to have a life that is comfortable, happy and fulfilling. It may be comfortable, but all comfortable jobs are not happy and fulfilling. It may be happy, but it may not be comfortable and fulfilling. Most times it may be deeply fulfilling, but may be strewn with a lot of issues and experiences that are not necessarily happy and comfortable. How many of us think of the path down 20–30 years while choosing our careers. When they are seen as mere means of living or work to be done, no doubt they are not ridden with passion and involvement. This is exactly the place where a social entrepreneur differs. A social entrepreneur is mostly driven by the choice of fulfilment and has to willingly go through the uncomfortable path. The vision beckons and any hurdles on the path is a space to test one's tenacity and stamina to hold on.

Sadhana too moved with veracity to find places where art was appreciated. Be it a temple or gathering or a marriage hall or corporate event, solo or group, she performed in several places. It was not an income proposition at all but it was the way in which she could keep her faith in art and reach out through her art. There were opportunities that came for television shows and theatre too. New friends joined in and she was invited to be part of other groups. With her high competency for research, knowledge of the art and ability to articulate, write, and present her points, she was a naturally chosen one for being an emcee. She was used more than recognised by the groups. Some of her good friends warned her of not being given the due credit. But none of this deterred her in offering her best and doing her best.

Sadhana knew there is none who could help her unless she helped herself first. People invest not in the idea as much as they do in the person



and their conviction. So she moved on to be an advocate for the art, enthuse younger girls to learn dance and also write in magazines about the art. Yet, something inside her was not fulfilled. The search was on and she was seeing herself on an unending road.

There were offers to run workshops in dancing, summer camps for school children, annual day programmes in schools were the list of activities which Sadhana was breezing through like a busy bee. Her everlasting smile, bundle of energy, non-satiating enthusiasm to be around people made her have a magical connect to all that she set out to do.

Asha appeared at home one morning and asked “Hey, Sadhana, my aunt wants to know if you can help her and her friends learn dance for a competition. It is next month and I told them you are really a good dancer and can teach too. If this goes well they are looking for someone to help them in their mahila sangha (women forum) annual day too”. With eyes wide open in surprise, Sadhana asked Asha, “your aunt and her friends? Will they dance? They must be nearly 50 plus isn't it? Gosh, I have never handled that age people”. Asha quickly interjected, “Oh! Don't you worry about their age; they are a bunch of enthusiastic people and want to do a



lot of things they have not done before. If you agree, I will tell them we can begin this week itself. Will Monday afternoon work for you?” Thus began

new path for Sadhana... something that would soon be deeply fulfilling, satisfying and meaningful.

It was a large open hall and nearly 35 women talking in high pitched voices in groups and music playing in the background was the scene when Sadhana entered the dance hall. Ladies, anywhere between 45 and 75 years stood there watching Sadhana in amazement and eagerness when Asha's aunt introduced her as the new dance teacher. Sadhana was used to teaching dance through steps and songs. She realised very soon that there was high enthusiasm and a whole set of non-cooperating limbs and joints making even the simplest steps seem most complicated. In this scenario Sadhana estimated that their enthusiasm will not go beyond the first week. She had to do something very different. She came home to pen down her notes which read - *"Here are a bunch of people who have been long devoid of achievement doses in life. They need to do things that are seemingly impossible and get the adrenalin rush and a sense of achievement. They have break their own thresholds and move up. This moving will enable them to see life differently and find meaning to get up*

every day from their beds". So began the dance therapy where dancing became more a therapeutic and threshold crossing process than a performance event. The side effects were that teams started building, better interpersonal relationships, quarrels and squabbles reduced, lesser joint pains, larger smiles on faces, weight balancing, sugar levels came down... many more. Sadhana became the favourite of all ladies and she was given more and more opportunities and lovingly nick named 'Asthana Vidwan', meaning 'The Scholar of the Court', popular during the kingly times.

"Anything worthwhile in life requires team work, And you cannot manage, what you don't understand" – Martine Rothblatt

Nearly after 6 months, one afternoon Sadhana sat on the steps of the temple hall after the rehearsals, slowly walked Aunt Uma and touched Sadhana's shoulders *"I should thank you my dear, she said with tiny tear-pearls forming*

in her eyes. I had a major mishap in family, went into depression, fought cancer, and couldn't sleep without pain killers and sedatives. But, last three months, from the time I am part of this dancing group, I have stopped sedatives and halved the pain killers and I am sleeping peacefully through the night. I can't be more thankful to you and please continue to help more people". Sadhana with her eyes full immediately bowed down to God to give her the strength to do more. At that moment she knew she was searching at the wrong end.

She told herself that I have found the essence of my life – *"Put a smile on every face and help them see the meaning of life"*... A time will come all this will happen and much more". Lo! Somewhere a far the temple bell rang and the Universe had heard it!!

"Tough time never last, but tough people do"—Robert H. Schuller

A Social entrepreneur's journey begins with efforts to resolve issues, atrocities, injustice, ensure fair play,

innovate, create new pathways ... there is an essence to every activity they engage in. Finding vision is finding the direction and path; not a sequence of activities. The projects may end; activities may be blocked; yet, if the essence is recognised, the life moves on in the same direction. Be it a casual chat or a serious forum, the essence shines forth as the identification of the person. Social entrepreneurs may get caught in furthering the cause through activities alone and fall into distress if there is a block and even give up the journey itself. The journey is not started to be given up when difficulties arise. They have to realise that social entrepreneurship is also a journey to discover self. To find out their calling and dedicate the rest of their lives to the essence of the journey. It is not a set of targets and destination alone. It is to leave behind a legacy for oneself, make a difference to one person or the entire world and realise one's own potential without excuses to self and the universe.

To be continued....stay connected...

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath

Suspicion



A family of five was enjoying its day at the beach. The children were bathing in the ocean and making castles in the sand, when in the distance a little old lady appeared. Her grey hair was blowing in the wind and her clothes were dirty and ragged. She was muttering something to herself as she picked up things from the beach and put them into a bag.

The parents called the children to their side and told them to stay away from the old lady. As she passed by, bending down every now and then to pick things up, she smiled at the family. But her greeting wasn't returned.

Many weeks later, they learnt that the old lady had made it her lifelong crusade to pick up bits of glass from the beach so that children wouldn't cut their feet.



Explicit Learning

- A. It's unfair to suspect someone without any basis.
- B. We should learn to trust rather than to suspect.
- C. We tend to suspect others rather than believe in them.



Introspective Learning

- A. Why do I suspect others?
- B. What is the nature of 'Suspicion'?
- C. How do I deal with my suspicion?

“Although opportunities and choices are more, I find our students focused.”

Dr. Fatima Vasanth shares with Marie Banu the changes in the student community today.

Dr. Fatima Vasanth has a Post Graduate Degree in Social Work from Stella Maris College and M.Phil. and Ph.D. in Social Work from Madras School of Social Work, University of Madras. She worked at Madras School of Social Work as an Asst. Professor from 1984 and Principal from 2005, a post from which she retired in 2014. The same year, she joined as Principal of Patrician College of Arts and Science, and in June 2016 took over as Deputy Principal at Loyola College, Chennai.

She was a member of the Syndicate, Senate and Academic Council, University of Madras. She served as the Governor's Nominee at Mother Teresa University, Kodaikannal, Tamil Nadu Open University and Pondicherry Central University. She has undertaken several Professional assignments for Government, Corporate and other Professional bodies at International, National and Regional Level. She was a member of Pre-Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) of Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Chennai, member of NAAC peer review committee, member of National Committee for Transgender, New Delhi and Member - Advisory Committee for Central Board for workers, Government of Tamil Nadu.

In recognition for the contribution made towards Academic, Research and Training, the Government of Tamil Nadu awarded Dr. Fatima Vasanth the Best Educationist Award in August 2010.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Fatima Vasanth shares with Marie Banu the changes in the student community today.

How do you feel to be the first woman to head the head evening shift in Loyola College?

Loyola College is not new to me. I have been associated with the College for more than three decades in several capacities - as member of Board of Studies, Board of Examiner, as Chief Guest, and as an expert member of their Academic Audit.

Loyola College is run by Jesuit Priests and the top management positions are usually held by them. In fact, it was a radical decision made by the Jesuit Management to bring an outsider for this key position and that too for the first time a lady. I am sure that they have deliberated much to take this decision.

While I was already holding the position of Principal in a College, I had to make a critical decision to accept this



position. Given the reputation of the College, its rich heritage, the largeness and new opportunities and that a woman is going to head this position for the first time, I was thrilled! I consciously made the decision to come and try out new avenues, face new frontiers and new challenges.

When you see the College's response, it has been very positive. I feel that my presence has made a lot of difference by way of connecting, building ownership, affinity, and human relationships.

What do you think are the changes in the student community compared to what was a decade ago?

The context, culture, relationships were different a decade ago. We had accommodated and adjusted ourselves, and reciprocated or responded to the requirements then. Today, students are matching with the changes around them. Many have working parents, some have parents who are living abroad and family environments are different. The Students have access to varied sources of information yet they are still responding

positively to the changing times. I do not find any abnormality as is feared by adults.

We too do not continue the same practices as we were doing earlier - like visiting our relatives or meeting them on special occasions or spending time with them. Why should we blame the students who are being caught up in a different web? They have their own linkages and different ways and levels of keeping relationships.

Although opportunities and choices are more, I find our students focused. We did not have such choices in our times and even when we were kept in a closed environment, we struggled. But, students today are performing despite their wide choices which could get them astray if right choice is not made. I am truly appreciative of our students as they are able to focus in their academics as well as extra-curricular activities, gear up to the skills they would require, and face campus interviews successfully.

Of course, there might be a small group that might indulge in deviant behaviour, but this was so even in our times.

Is the curriculum design for the present generation of students in line with student and market expectations?

At the Under Graduation level, the student is still young and cannot decide on what he wants to be. For many, the choice of discipline has been made by their parents, and there is a mismatch in a few cases. Market keeps changing and there is no ever Green discipline for the student to make a firm decision on the demand course.

The UG level covers a broad spectrum of subject knowledge, the foundation courses and personality development programmes. The basic objective of UG curriculum is not to specialise in any subject, but is meant to orient the student to life and career. That is why we include courses on Human Excellence where the student understands himself and the society and is prepared to be a good human being with the necessary skill sets.

At the PG level, the student is old enough to understand and identify his interests and skill sets, and match them with the market demands.

Having pursued a Doctoral degree in Social Work, which of the social issues are your passionate about?

I have a passion to work for women and children related issues. I have been associated with several women initiatives both with NGOs as well as the Government & served as a member in several committees. I once undertook a Government assignment to conduct a study about 'Children in Moral Danger'. The research findings has brought in a lot of sensitisation on child abuse.

I have anchored training programmes on gender sensitisation and counselling at the Police Training College for Police Officials. I suggested counselling to resolve many domestic cases instead of filing FIR as this strains family relationship.

I was also a member of the LokAdalat and handled long pending disputes along with the Honourable Judges in the High Court. My approach was always through counselling, and have never given consent for divorce or separation easily.

I was a member of the core committee for drafting transgender policy which has now become an ACT. I have represented several international forums on status of women in India and was also a guest faculty for international universities where I lectured on women concerns and issues.