

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

The 'World Elders Day' is celebrated in India on 1st October every year. The day is observed to acknowledge the contributions and knowledge of the elderly and bring the needs and challenges faced by them to the notice of governments and societies.

Why do we need a special day to be reminded about elders? Shouldn't we be honouring our elders all through their lifetimes? Is it because we are too busy with our own lives that we do not have time for the elders in the family? This is the hard reality.

The growing number of old age homes seems to be a convenience factor for many families to send their elders away. The reasons are many: lack of tolerance and increasing impatience among young men and women; both husband and wife being employed and the fear of leaving the elderly at home alone, lack of space in the home with children requiring more space as they grow older, etc.

I would say that families who send their elders away are committing the heinous crime of forcing out someone who spent his/her entire lifetime caring for them.

Psychiatrists believe that fulfilling the physical, psychological and emotional needs of elders is the key to keep elders healthy and happy. Intentional or unintentional neglect, impudence and maltreatment inside the families and in the society often lead to high levels of stress among elders. This in turn could lead to various physical ailments, psychological and emotional disorders and even cause death, in some cases.

Elders need attention at homes and if we don't give it, they start demanding it. Attention to our elders does not mean providing only basic amenities like a place to stay, food to eat, some money and new clothes. It also means the quality time we spend with them.

It is time to reflect and correct our behaviour towards elders before we leave this as a trend for the coming generations to follow.

Here are a few tips: Do not take them for granted. Find out their interests, their requirements, and their concerns. Show respect to their feelings and consult them on important issues. Make them feel important.

As always said, everyone has to face aging. One day you will be an elder too and you wouldn't want your children to ignore you.

Let us work towards bringing the much needed change, right at our home, right now.

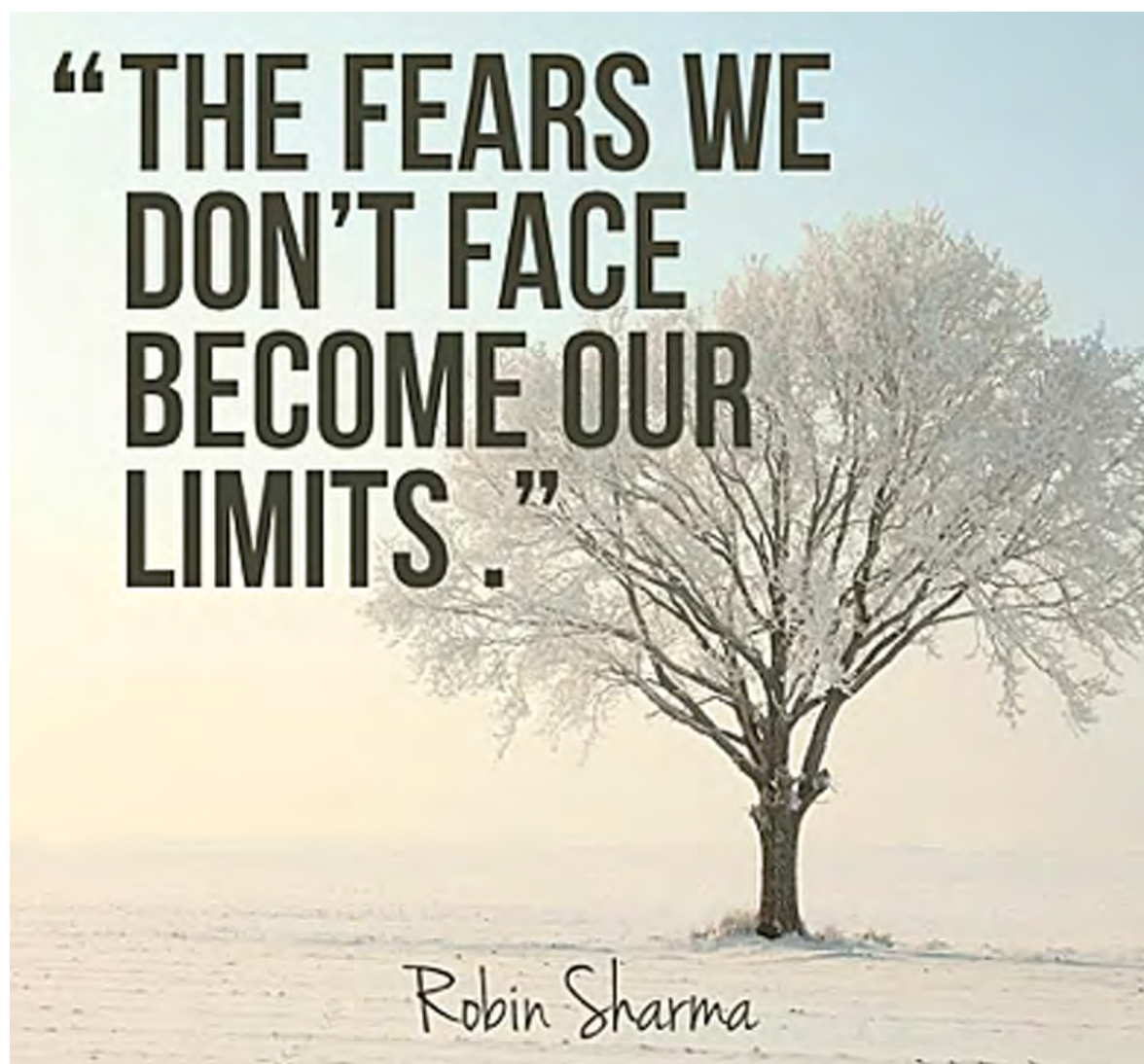
Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

Vulnerability & Failure

"Failure seldom stops you. What stops you is the fear of failure"—Jack Lemmon



Failure as an experience is not often discussed. The word failure evokes feelings of fear. The fear may come from the following:

- The challenge with handling the emotions that come with failing—embarrassment, shame
- Lack of self-confidence—"What will others think if I fail?" "How will I cope with my reputation being affected?"
- Dealing with the set back—"I put in so much effort and now it is all gone to waste"

Failure is something that's looked down upon—if I make a mistake or fail I'll be rejected and what makes me good enough or important is having people think well of me. Such limiting beliefs around failure hold us back from tapping into our creative energies, in pursuing possibilities, making us play small.

We are used to a narrative of negativity around failure and vulnerability. The vulnerable parts of oneself reveal itself when we don't get it right, when there is failure. Admitting failure allows us to embrace vulnerability. When we learn to be more vulnerable, we learn things much more quickly. We become less scared of getting hurt, so aren't avoiding failures all the time. We can choose to be honest with how we feel about failures, share our fears and express what we need.

There is infinite power in embracing vulnerability. It means letting go—letting go of failed relationships, failed projects and anything in the past that felt like a failure—and putting oneself out there in the now. When we don't cover up our mistakes, we reveal ourselves as human—we become people whom others can identify with.

Yours Energetically

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

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A better tomorrow for slum children



Regular motivation sessions to keep kids engaged and focussed, and various ideas on how to handle unexpected troubles and complications dealing with children from slums and downtrodden regions.

Significant proportion of children from the down-trodden segment of India who are enrolled in government schools fail to complete their school education. Dropping out of school is not a new challenge, but that has multiple underlying reasons behind it. Most common reasons being financial constraints, illiterate parents, puberty in girls, early marriage, distraction with peers, etc.

While many organisations aim to bring notable changes in this area, lack of experience on how to guide and motivate the children who drop out of school remains a challenge.

However, a few NGOs have skilfully handled this issue and have moved on to be role models for others. One such organisation is 'Turning Point Educational Trust' founded by Moraji Desai in 2008 that focuses on promotion of quality education among children in slums in Chennai.

When asked what motivated him to focus on this segment of the population, he says: "During 1995- 1998 I studied at Loyola College, Chennai, and enrolled in All India Catholic University Federation (AICUF). It was through AICUF that I started working part time in 'Nesakkaram', an organization which promoted education awareness in the slums in collaboration with the police. I also worked for a while with 'CHOLAI' an organization that worked with at-risk children in Thiruvanniyur. This, was the turning point in my life."

"I have a passion to work for the cause of children hence continued to work in the slum areas for a couple of



years until tsunami hit the sub-continent in 2004. As tsunami heightened the proliferation of slums and poverty, I began to grow increasingly concerned about the future of the children who dwelt in them," he adds.

In the earlier days, Moraji found it difficult to deal with children from different backgrounds and bring about positive changes in their lives. It was during that time he joined the four-month Certificate Course in Social Entrepreneurship at CSIM.

"Running an NGO comes with its own share of difficulties. Several issues arise during the functioning of the NGO, like providing training for children, handling the problems they face in their home front, motivating them to continue their school education, etc. Even though we try to fix most of it on our own, we need guidance for some to help solve them," he says.

"I have learnt some of the most

valuable lessons pertaining to running of an NGO from CSIM's course. I learnt the skills required to run an organisation in a successful and sustainable manner, and how to cater to the needs of children. CSIM also made me identify like-minded people in various institutions who work for the welfare of children and their education journey," says Moraji.

Turning Point Educational Trust conducted regular motivation sessions and kept children engaged and focussed. The team was capacitated in handling unexpected problems while dealing with slum children.

Currently, Turning Point Educational Trust works in five slums in Chennai and identifies children who need educational assistance. Regular activities – spoken English classes, healthcare tips to manage the COVID situation, painting, story-telling and personality development classes – are conducted to keep kids engaged throughout the week.

Many children lack motivation and interest to attend school regularly and study. Hence, extra attention is given to such children so that they remain focussed and do not drop-out of school.

Moraji says, "I attribute the success of my programmes and the change I was able to bring among the slum children to CSIM. Their experienced faculty, subject experts, and the exposure visits made me manage my NGO efficiently."

He adds saying, "Our team continues to face challenges in enrolling girl-children dropouts, counselling adolescent children, etc. Thankfully, the dropout rates have decreased to a large extent now. Further, with the help of Government officials and Police officers, especially Shri. V. Balakrishnan IPS, Joint Commissioner of Police, Chennai, we have enrolled 18 of our children in Colleges."

Currently, Turning Point has 20 staff members who are engaged in COVID relief work. They also conduct daily online classes on motivation, and skill development. "Most children are not interested in education, so we need to plan regular classes and interactive competitions to keep them engaged during the lockdown," says Moraji.

"Until date, we have managed to help 500 children. We work in 5 slums in Chennai, but there are many more children who need help and guidance to build a good life for themselves. Our dream is to continue helping children and reach out to more children living in other slums in Chennai," he signs off.

Aatika Kouser

CHANGING HUES: Awaken the Queen within

Toe the line or build the plank

It was a beautiful evening and the gate creaked open at 5 pm. Reena walked in with her usual gusto and bright smile. “Hi, Aunt! How are you?” There is always a surge of love and happiness in Padma’s heart when Reena walks in. “Hello, my dear. Come in. It’s been over two weeks since I saw you.” Reena apologetically said, “Sorry, aunt. My college work has been eating into all my evening time. I had a deadline to meet, and my coffee with you got sacrificed, hahaha.”

Padma knowingly gave a shout, “Manju, make two cups of coffee. Reena is also here. Also, bring those murukku (fried savoury) for her to eat with coffee. “Oh, wow, Aunt, your murukkus are always amazing. Did you get them from Anjali’s marriage you attended last week?” Padma smiled and nodded her head.

Sipping coffee, very thoughtfully Reena slowly shared her bit of gossip that she got from her mom. “I heard that everyone in the lane attended Anjali’s wedding except for Suguna Aunt. They say she never speaks to anyone and has isolated herself. She is not seen in our social club activities too. Uncle Ramu attends sometimes, but even he has gone quiet. Do you know why?”

Padma let out a sad sigh, adding, “Yes, I noticed that over the last two years. A lot has changed for them, and Suguna seems to be heading towards a depression. I met her last week and tried to speak to her. This is not something that has happened now. It has spread like slow poison over the last decade.”

Reena’s curiosity was kindled, and she was quick to grab the story time. “Aunt, what actually happened? I haven’t seen her son much too, and her daughter Sudha has been away for ages, isn’t it?”

Padma went into her reflective mood as she recollected and reconstructed the issues for Reena. “They had a good life of being financially well for a typical middle class. Sudha, as you know, is the eldest daughter. She was brilliant and good in her academics and school activities. She got an excellent score, completed her engineering in bioengineering, and earned high grades. She fulfilled her dream of going to the USA for her Masters degree by availing an educational loan and sought admission in one of the reputed universities. On completion of her degree, she got placed with a modest salary. By then, Uncle Ram lost his job, and the family fell into financial difficulties. The onus of clearing the educational loan fell on Sudha. She really had to work hard, live frugal to ensure the education loan was paid, and somehow the family stabilised. Her brother who was also good in



academics, chose an undergraduate course and worked alongside to meet the family expenses.”

Reena joined, “This is a typical middle class happening. But, what was the real issue for them to isolate themselves?” Padma lovingly patted Reena on the back and said, “Don’t jump the gun. Understand and empathize. Many things worm up in our environment in casual chit-chatting and leaves a deep scar in the heart. When Sudha left for the USA, the rest of the relatives discouraged them. They told Suguna that getting Sudha married was more important than her education and career in the US and told her to get her daughter married before she left for the States. The relatives even said that Suguna gave Sudha too much freedom and that she would regret it when she loses control over her life.

They said things like: We belong to the middle class. Having a daughter of marriageable age and a son who is still studying, it is not wise to avail

education loan for one’s daughter’s higher education. Instead, the loan amount could be used for the son’s education and daughter’s marriage. What if she doesn’t want to come back to India at all? What will you both do?”

Well, as expected, after four years in the USA, Suguna started marriage talks for Sudha. Initially, Sudha pushed it for three years with reasons and excuses and met a few proposed alliances in the USA, but it never worked out. No one was willing to go ahead with a girl who was meeting her family’s expenses and repaying loans. Meanwhile, the pressure mounted on Suguna and her husband. At any social event they attended, relatives and friends only asked about why Sudha was not married as yet and did not enquire about how well she was doing in her career.

Suguna’s sisters and brothers offered to search for alliances, advised several rituals to appease the Gods. Sudha, on the other hand, met some spiritually inclined friends, learned meditation,

enjoyed her solitude, and had formed a life that was meaningful to herself.

She had moved on from the idea of stereotype marriage, family, and children. None back home even attempted to know who she had really become.”

Reena interjected, “Unjust! Aunt, I never cease to understand how a man who takes to the spiritual path is glorified. Families pride to say he is moving above and beyond to reach God. But, if a woman proposes to have her own way, it’s not acceptable.”

Padma gave a pained smile and said: “True, Reena! Suguna and her husband, including her son, went through many jibes and blames from relatives and friends. People spoke behind their backs that there should be some issue, or love failure, or physical disabilities, or into a live-in relationship, and so on.

Eight years back, Sudha had visited India. She heard so many comments and faced humiliation that she has never come to India after that.

Suguna cried every time she received a wedding invite from her friends and relatives. She stopped attending any social events or meeting known people and isolated herself totally now. Her mental health was affected and she succumbed to diabetes and hypertension.”

“But Aunt, what happened to their son? He is handsome (even with the grey hair), earns well, still single, and doesn’t meet any of us eye to eye.”

“Reena, we all may get academic qualifications and become literate, but we are not necessarily educated. Suguna and her husband told him that until his elder sister Sudha gets married, it is not becoming for him to think of his own family life. He fell in love with a colleague but couldn’t commit to a marriage. Hence, the relationship ended badly. He did not interact much with the neighbours and sticks to his close friends. Both Suguna and Sudha are blamed for ruining his life too.

Suguna’s self-respect, self-esteem, and confidence in herself shattered. She thinks the entire world is pointing the finger at her and her daughter whenever she is in a social circle.”

Reena felt disgusted as she listened to the story. She reflectively added, “Aunt isn’t it ironic that we are willing to provide similar educational opportunities for the boy and the girl but are not willing to give them a similar extent of space to build their life and own it proudly? We are happy to make a girl feel guilty if she strays from the societal norm, even a wee bit. Even the parents feel shameful and try to justify, apologize to the entire world. I hate this! If the parents and family can support and be proud of what Sudha is doing and talk about her work and



contribution more than just her marriage, none would dare to make Suguna Aunty feel weaker.”

“Every society has its way of preserving itself through its norms. Anyone who is on edge and dares to question the existing norms are seen as an outlaw. Similarly, the belief that women need protection and marriage is the only way to fulfill life has been long-standing. It has gone away from the feeling of companionship and marriage being the only choice. It is less about marriage and more about how much freedom and space is given to the women to run their own life. Over the years, parents have pegged their status, image, respect, and acceptance of the society to their girl children. Their key life fulfillment is to ensure that the girl child adheres to the norms and is accepted by the society. Their own self-worth comes from that. This is the saddest part which makes them build a stronghold to keep their girls living within the acceptable norms.”

Reena gave a meek smile, “Yes, Aunty. I get agitated and angry at my parents when they try to bring me away from the edge. I’m becoming aware that we need to empower the parents and empathize with their own fears first.”

Padma gave an emphatic nod and hugged Reena. “Yes, Reena. I have been in that position, confronting my mom as early as 30 years ago. The realization that we, as women, have to take our life into our hands and own it with both the good and the bad that comes our way is important. It’s time the rest of the society moved, because we have found our voice and self-esteem to stand by ourselves.”

Reena suddenly cheered up and said, “Thank you, aunty. I will talk to Suguna Aunty like before and spend some quality time with her this weekend.

I love you for giving me this side of the story. Ok, I have to go now! See you next week...Bye.”

*Dr. Kalpana Sampath
Illustration by Ritu Rathore &
Pragathi Shankar*



Reflect:

- When we educate our girls and give them the mind to think on their own, don't we need to give them the freedom to build their life?
- How many times do I judge women and their families based on the stereotypes I hold within me?

Mask



A stubborn young donkey once prevailed upon his indulgent parents to obtain for him a lion's skin, in which to masquerade about. At great cost and inconvenience to themselves they provided him with the disguise he had begged for. Clothed in it, he strutted forth believing himself to be a lion, causing men to flee before him in terror.

But it chanced in the end that, partly by the length of his ears and partly by the discordance of his bray when he tried roaring, he was discovered by the lions with whom he had sought company. The herd fell upon him so mercilessly that he only saved himself by flight, leaving his brave coat behind him, while men on every side laughed and pelted him with stones as he flew to his native common.

Explicit Learning

- We are most of the time, moving around with masks.
- People in the long run can see through our masks.
- Very rarely do we expose our real selves.

Introspective Learning

- What is the nature of a 'Mask'?
- How do I respond to people who wear masks?
- Why do I wear masks?

THE NEW NORMAL IN MENSTRUAL HEALTH



One of the major challenges brought about by the COVID-19 lockdown, in its initial stages, was the breakdown in supply chains. As a result of this — despite several promises that supply of essential commodities would continue — several essentials failed to reach their destinations. Given the already abysmal awareness surrounding menstrual hygiene in rural pockets, the lockdown worsened the supply of sanitary pads and contraceptives suffered during the lockdown.

“In the initial phase (of the lockdown), there were critical issues around access to sanitary pads and contraceptives,” says Dilip Kumar Pattubala, co-founder of Sukhibava, “Even today, millions of

adolescent girls who were accessing sanitary pads at government schools do not have access. Coupled with the fear of going to hospitals to seek healthcare and clinics within communities staying shut owing to availability of doctors, women have not been able to access healthcare facilities.”

For six years now, Sukhibava has helped thousands of women gain access to healthcare and sanitary products. However, the pandemic has made its work a lot more challenging. “The impact of the global health crisis has been widespread and a recent UNICEF report¹ highlights the heightened adversity faced by women and girls during this time,” says Dilip, “Building on global research, our team conducted a remote

assessment to evaluate the impact COVID-19 has had on women and girls across urban poor communities in India. Our analysis identified key challenges specific to women’s health, in particular menstrual and sexual reproductive health.”

One of the major challenges was sexual reproductive health, which have worsened owing to clinical resources being diverted to treating COVID-19 and healthcare facilities limiting services or closing altogether. “To add to this, women are refraining from visiting health facilities due to fears about COVID-19 exposure or due to movement restrictions,” says Dilip, “For every three months that

restrictions continue, assuming high levels of disruption, up to two million additional women are at risk of developing sexual reproductive health issues.”

Then, there’s the issue of menstrual health and hygiene. “The report highlighted that disrupted access to menstrual hygiene materials has been a challenge, particularly disposable menstrual hygiene materials that require monthly replenishment,” says Dilip, “Limited access to critical information related to menstruation or women’s health due to disruption in routine health services and increased stigma around menstruation during limited space and movement for menstruating women were also apparent.”

One of the downsides to the lockdown and the stress on supply chains, Dilip says is simply the fact that a sizeable majority of women in far-flung villages switched to pieces of cloth as alternatives to sanitary pads. “However, most of these women are not aware on the right way to use a piece of cloth,” he says, “The consequences of this are increased RTIs and UTIs.”

The issue has assumed mammoth significance today since pre-COVID only a sparse 36 percent of women all over India had access to safe menstrual hygiene products. There is no data to indicate how much worse this statistic has got after the pandemic, owing to the interruption in supply chains.

However, to address the issue on a war-footing, the Sukhibava team resigned its existing grassroots intervention programme to address the requirements of women from a menstrual hygiene standpoint, in a post-COVID scenario. “We identified four key solutions and developed the emergency helpline ‘Hello Saheli’ to bring them together,” says Dilip.

The team designed an IVR-based menstrual and reproductive health education module which saw 24 contextualized audio clips that shares awareness surrounding MHH and SRH issues, health practices and conversations. “Through Hello Saheli, women can opt-in to receive a call each day or twice a week to hear all 24 clips over a number of weeks,” says Dilip. The module is accessible in two languages (Hindi & Kannada) via audio recordings in order to overcome literacy barriers.

The Sukhibava team also set up a menstrual and reproductive health helpline. “Contextual and credible information on understanding period irregularities, period pain management, nutrition, hygienic practices with available materials and more were available on the helpline which also doubled up as a safe space that could be accessed at the caller’s discretion where they can maintain anonymity,” says Dilip, “Our helpline assistants speak three local languages — Hindi, Tamil and Kannada.”

Through free tele-gynaecology services the helpline assistants from Sukhibava were able to connect callers to an accredited healthcare professional and facilitate a tele-health consultation to address key clinical concerns. This also helped encourage women and girls to prioritise their health in spite of COVID-19 constraints.

What the team knew all too well was that without awareness over positive gender roles, most of these initiatives would go to waste. “The key to promoting positive gender roles within an urban poor context is to understand how to share and manage stress,” says Dilip, “Our IVR audio clips are tailored towards men to acknowledge the stress and uncertainty they are experiencing during the COVID-19 crisis while raising awareness about the largely invisible stress that women and girls are experiencing.”

Today, in the words of Dilip, ‘Hello Saheli’ strives to create a space of “trust and confidentiality to encourage men to be vulnerable about stressors in their life.” The initiative

*Sukhibava
has helped
thousands of women
gain access to
healthcare and
sanitary products*



has also identified non-violent ways to resolve conflict and reflect on the relevance and importance of strong relationships during a pandemic. “It also helps as a great tool to provide gender counselling and support men and women in their journey to understanding how men can support women and girl’s health and wellbeing,” says Dilip.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sukhibava’s sole goal has been to ensure there are reduced consequences of COVID-19 has only goal is to only ensure there are reduced consequences of COVID on the lives of women and

girls in marginalised communities across India. “We are working towards reaching out to over a lakh women next year,” says Dilip.

Despite many significant steps towards better awareness surrounding reproductive health and menstrual hygiene, Dilip believes India still has a long way to go. “The momentum has picked up over the last five years we might need another 10 years of collective work to even introduce solutions that are sustainable yet impactful,” he signs off.

TRIBUTE



Mrs. Savithri Vaithi, who founded Vishranthi Old Age Home, passed away on October 10.

Hailing from a family of judges, Mrs. Savithri engaged in social work since the age of 16. She founded the Monday Charity Club in 1974 along with a group of women and subsequently the Vishranthi Old Age Home in 1978, as part of the Charity Club. The Home was made possible with an acre of land in Palavakkam donated by Shri. AV Meiappa Chettiyar and funds provided by HelpAge India.

She provided a safe haven for over 175 abandoned women through her Trust, which is based out of Chennai. The home, in addition to providing shelter to elderly women, takes care of their last rites. We learn that Mrs. Savithri used to perform them herself, as long as she was physically able to do so.

Savithri began social work in the slums of Choolai. As part of a social group called Barefoot Walkers, she would attend to basic health needs and education of the residents of the settlements.

The Monday Charity Club recently celebrated its golden jubilee this year and on the occasion, a postage stamp of its founder Savithri Vaithi was released by Minister for Tamil Official Language and Tamil Culture K Pandiarajan.

Mrs. Savithri Vaidhi was a philanthropist, an activist and a true social entrepreneur. She has been an inspiration to many and her passing away is a huge loss for mankind.

CSIM has been associated with Vishranthi since our inception. We extend our heartfelt condolences to her family and friends.

MEMORIES LIVE FOREVER

Mrs. Raji Gopalakrishnan (82), former Trustee of Vishranthi, has been associated with Mrs. Savithri Vaithi since 1978. She was one of the founding members of Monday Charity Club and has treaded the journey along with Mrs. Savithri in providing care for the elderly.

She shares a few moments with Mrs. Savithri which are close to her heart.

I have spent over 50 years with Mrs. Savithri in her journey as a social worker. *She used to say, "I am only the engine; Raji and the other members are my batteries which keeps the train moving."*

We were a group of 10 friends living in Mandaveli during the 70's. We realised that we could do something meaningful in our free time from 10am to 2pm. This led us to launch Monday Charity Club and thereafter established Vishranthi Old Age home. Our passion was to serve the un-served, especially the elderly. While we had many supporters, who contributed funds for our work, we engaged in physical work during the early days. This was the difficult part!

My husband allowed me to engage in social work. It is with the family's support that one can do selfless service. When I lived in Chengelpet for over five years, as my husband served as Dean at Chengelpet Medical College Hospital, I used to visit the Home everyday to oversee the activities.

Mrs. Savithri was open to learning, and a very humble person. We both pursued our Master's Degree together and she used to come to my home to learn from me.

We used to take our residents on tours once a year and I was given the responsibility of organising the trips and led the team. On such occasions, Mrs. Savithri used to spontaneously identify and talk to the elders in the tour spots, recognise those who have been abandoned, and bring them along



Raji Gopalakrishnan

with her to Vishranthi.

Vishranthi has been a home for elders belonging to all religions. Our first resident was Mrs. Martha, a Christian lady. Mrs. Savithri performed the funeral rites for her when she passed away and also for Sahiba, a Muslim woman.

About 20 years ago, when one of our residents passed away, the locals refused to carry the body nor allowed us to pass through their street. This was because the deceased woman belonged to a particular caste.

Mrs. Savithri spoke to the youth in the area and sought their support. When she shared this incident with Mrs. Sivasankari Chandrasekaran, she immediately sponsored a funeral cart and later a motorised funeral cart to overcome such situations in future.

Once, two sisters (one was bedridden), who were abandoned, were heading towards the Marina beach to commit suicide. A shop vendor in Kutcheri road spotted them around 9pm and informed Mrs. Savithri who then called and asked me to meet the two sisters. I lived in the same area, hence counselled them and took them to Vishranthi. While one of the sisters passed away the very next day, the other (one was bedridden) lived for a few more years.

Savithri has been a second mother for all the abandoned elders. She has added meaning to lives of many.

Her presence is missed and I pray that her *aatma* rests in peace.

Marie Banu



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

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

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

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

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Care for the Caretaker



Poverty and health expenditure have an intricate relationship where one impacts the other significantly. When poor take a call to get themselves treated for a disease, there are many things they forego. “It is a tough call for them. They must compromise on livelihood, taking care of other children or elders in the family. They are compelled to go through this and the ensuing disturbance in family’s economy. There is a lot they have to decide about,” says Mr Anil Nair, CEO of St. Jude India ChildCare Centres, Mumbai.

In case of a tertiary disease like cancer, where there is recurring expenditure for a few years, the family gives up on their right to a decent living. “Paediatric cancer is affecting the poorer families even more. While treatment in itself is a big burden for them, managing care takers’ stay and food during the treatment period is a challenge. Families that are unable to manage this, eventually give up. I am sure we have lost many children due to this socio-economic predicament,” laments Nair, who is unable to accept such compromises on children’s right to life.

The founders of St. Jude India ChildCare Centres, Mrs and Mr Kaviratne were moved by such scenes outside Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai and decided to help parents with comfortable stay during the course of their children’s treatment. “If safe and hygienic place of stay can ensure

completion of treatment why not provide it to them?,” say the founders who launched the initiative in 2006, in a small rented space to accommodate eight families. As oncologists noticed the difference this effort made on the children’s treatment, some doctors offered a building to the Centre to set up space to accommodate 41 families.

Driven by rigorous volunteer support and generous contributions, St Jude centres’ layouts made sure that families had their personal space too. However, all this did not come easily. Anil Nair recalls the effort that was needed to persuade families to live in their centres. “Families took time to understand that the centre was trying to provide them a home away from their homes. Doctors’ references were a big game changer and that helped counter all their qualms. Although free space and rations are offered, issues around toilet usage, kitchen routine, and restrictions on consumption of alcohol/cigarettes were a challenge,” he admits.

While all the standard operating procedures began to show a positive influence on children’s health, the team evaluated the genuine need for such an effort. Increasing incidence of cancer among children, specifically poor children, reiterated the relevance of this effort and need for expansion of centres in other cities too. An important reason for the success of this model is an open outlook where they chose to set up units in spaces offered and building capacities

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of other like-minded organisations to also engage in this activity. “This was, in every sense, a new strategy for us. As we replicate and expand, partnering with smaller organisations saves a lot of our time and ensures that the objective is never side-lined due to lopsided focus on space,” says Anil Nair.

As families came from different locations and backgrounds, the founders took a serious call on staff well-being too. “It could be emotionally draining for the staff to go through difficult conversations in every unit and get them used to the protocols here. Therefore, we made Counsellors available to support both staff as well as inmates. As recovering children also stay in these

protected units, it led to reduced vulnerability to other life-threatening infections which otherwise they were prone to while dwelling on the pavements,” he adds.

All these concerns are more valid in a pandemic situation where the centre left no stone unturned in ensuring safety of the children and their families. “We stocked up supplies to ensure steady availability, followed strict hygiene protocols, prohibited visitors and volunteers, and arranged transport facilities for essential staff and families who were returning home after treatment. We also dispatched medicines to families living in villages and suggested that they stayed indoors for the safety of their children.

All education activities and counselling sessions were delivered online to reduce all possible risks of succumbing to the virus. Every child’s life saved makes our effort worth,” says a contented Anil Nair.

The team has successfully established and replicated this model in nine cities, with a capacity to house 475 families across 38 centres. “Raising funds for our work is like running on a treadmill. We must keep going on because there is a growing need and it is bound to increase in the coming years. This is why working with smaller organisations with local reach seems a viable approach,” he says.

Shanmuga Priya. T

COVID-19 AFFECT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

Sustainable Development Goals

In the year 2000, leaders of 189 countries came together to solve the global issue of extreme poverty (population living below USD 1.25 per day) in all its form. It was then decided that till 2015 eight predetermined goals, named as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), will achieve targeted results. In 2015, United Nations reviewed MDGs and all stakeholders decided to take things forward in new and much detailed form. In 2015, Eight MDGs got extended to Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals in the year 2000 and then in 2015 were conceived and implemented to bring common focus for all development works around the globe, this step helped in channelizing financial and non-financial resources to specific geographies.

Learning's from MDGs helped in finalizing SDGs and brought in sustainability at the core of development agenda. Most development programs were found non-sustainable after funding for the same got stopped, also development agencies were not thinking coherently in terms of making the program sustainable after drying up of funding resources. SDGs certainly helped development ecosystem partners to focus deliberately on sustainability, monitoring, evaluation and impact of the programs to much larger extent than ever before. Development programs are designed keeping in mind certain risks and assumptions, but before the year 2020 no one thought about pandemic risk to this global extent. Covid-19 brought a crisis situation in development world, throwing us back in days similar to great depression and the two world wars in past.

Status of SDGs During COVID-19 Pandemic

The targets for SDGs were planned to be achieved in specified timeline i.e. 2030, and certainly after COVID-19 everyone is now susceptible about it. This pandemic affected development programs at local, national and global level. Development agencies have shifted their focus more on handling pandemic, leaving immediate development outputs on next priority. Governments and donor organizations have struggled hard to restructure their expense budgets, where COVID – 19 took a toll and received more than expected funds. Different countries and specified regions within legal boundaries have different development needs, pandemic exposed under-skin wounds and have shown the real pain points.

It has been observed that some SDGs have directly taken the maximum brunt of the situation, while some others are yet to see the after effect of this pandemic. For instance SDG-3, i.e.



“Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” got derailed in most of the countries due to excess pressure on health infrastructure and human resources on one hand and managing social distance on the other. In many countries, disruption in health services brought halt to programs related to mandatory vaccination, screening of critical diseases, family planning, eye care related programs, etc.; pushing all efforts back by almost a decade.

Estimates show that Covid-19 will pull in additional 710 crore individuals living under extreme poverty conditions (SDG-1), this could be the indirect result of global financial slowdown or may be recession, still the debate is on. Income inequality, i.e. SDG-10 is another area of concern for many, vulnerable section of society is now more vulnerable than pre-covid situation. Pandemic also effected supply chains, logistics and production of essential goods including agriculture; this effected SDG-2 (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture) and stakeholders in the overall value chains including producers, labours and transporters working in rural areas.

Adding to these pandemic related issues is political tensions among super powers, which may lead to less or interrupted cooperation of developed nations towards achieving pre-

determined SDGs by 2030. This also means that funding cooperation may see some criticality in coming days, or there may be a shift in geographies as per the funding priority on case to case or may be affinity basis. This also effects SDG-16 and SDG-17 which relates to “promote peace and safety” and “strengthening international partnerships” respectively. According to UN Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres, “Everything we do during and after this crisis must be with a strong focus on building more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate change, and the many other global challenges we face.”

Steps Taken During Pandemic

Report released by Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation titled “We’ve been set back about 25 years in about 25 weeks,” tells the macro and micro socio-economic growth stories around the world. Pandemic might have left some countries, but financial pandemic will surely reach all in coming months. This expected upcoming economic crisis will not leave any vulnerable section of society, with skewed positive correlation between vulnerability and pandemic’s ill effect.

Governments, civil society organizations and international development agencies have come together to fight this pandemic in most cohesive and coherent way.



Government and civil societies channelize funds and other resources for creating temporary health infrastructure, supply/distribution of essential goods, payments for labours and petty traders, income support to producers and farmers, increased moratorium period for small business owners (specially MFI clients) and private sector employees, this list is just indicative and have different face depending upon the socio-economic profile of country and its population.

International policy makers are taking these post-pandemic scenarios as testing ground for potentially larger issues related to climate change.

Environmental scientists and many others have shared their views on various global forums about this kind of pandemic due to unrestricted deforestation, wild life trade and diseases that can be communicated from animals to humans. The situation calls for a more focussed and action oriented efforts from international community.

Way Forward

Looking at the width and depth of this pandemic and its immediate to long term after effects, think tanks and policy makers are now paying more attention to data gathering, analysis and using the same for policy advocacy. Globally, economists and statisticians are working hard to set up convenient and user friendly systems of data collection, this is to ensure the operational continuity of ongoing programs and plan for the future policy initiatives. Pandemic has effected development programs in a hard way, more than that monitoring and evaluation of projects is now going to be nightmare, not only for next cycle of funding, but also to ensure that right amount of funds get allocated for hard pressing issues.

International community should come forward to invest in data collection systems, its analysis and using the same for designing better projects and optimizing resources to achieve equitable inclusive growth.

Dr. Agyea Trippathi

RIGHT TO HEALTH

Inequality in access to good quality health care is grave injustice, and those like Dr Aquinas Edassery Executive Director of Swasthya Swaraj in Odisha, find it extremely disturbing.

The place of birth and community discriminates a child in many ways in our country. Nobody can know this better than the tribal population living in remotest pockets of Odisha. Here, teenage mothers die during child birth, under nourished children lack healthcare and remain vulnerable to all diseases and every poor child falls prey to health issues. Most of the houses had a child suffering from Severe Acute Malnutrition, and women, who always feed on leftover food after men consume, are inevitably under nourished and therefore unable to breast feed their children.

“Poverty is a vicious cycle—that is what we all read and get to learn from others’ experience. But, living in poverty is a totally different game. Seeing how this cycle keeps poor from what they need the most, takes away a part of yourself that wants to feel blessed with what you have. Living with the tribal people here, I have learnt what helplessness can actually mean. Every day I wonder why it is difficult for us to recognise communities that need our services. For every patient I treated in the hospital I knew there were hundred or more who needed this attention. The more I thought about such needy people, the more determined I was to move to remote pockets. P.Sainath’s book ‘Everybody loves a good drought’ drove me to move to Kalahandi district in Odisha,” shares Aquinas.

Following her inner call, Dr. Aquinas moved to Odisha and what followed thereafter was a culmination of efforts that yearned to acknowledge the right to health of people. “It was 2014 and our vehicle was the first four-wheeler the community had ever seen. Despair and distrust—both were there. We had to make our way into the community and we are glad we did not give up,” she says, underlining the improvement in community’s general health and falling

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maternal and infant mortality rates.

From her experience in Rural Karnataka, Aquinas was clear that building hi-tech, well-equipped hospitals was not the answer to address tribals’ right to health. Rather, it creates dependency and people will always look up for external help. She therefore decided to think beyond establishment of health centres and empower communities to understand health holistically. This, she felt, was the best way forward.

After two years of exploring Kalahandi while working in JSS and Bilaspur in Chattisgarh, Aquinas founded Swasthya Swaraj Society in 2014. Two primary health care centres with facilities available round the clock and a well-equipped laboratory were established and the team ensured to adhere to an evidence based approach in order to study future needs for prompt action. “We put in all our efforts to build a strong team of resident doctors and quality facilities that could be accessed whenever needed. But, we knew this was not the end. Having known the terrain, literacy levels and lack of awareness among people, we did not wait for people to come to the hospital;

instead we went to them. We organised extension clinics in ten hard to reach locations where pregnant women and under-five children from 6-8 villages could come and get themselves treated. That is how we got an opportunity to understand the local population’s perception of good health, which primarily relied on their understanding of rural economy. For them, more children meant more hands at work. Hence, women and child health both needed immediate attention. Our visits were crucial as their hospital visits depended not on urgency, but solely on male members’ wage calendar,” explains Aquinas diligently.

Community Empowerment is an integral part of Swasthya Swaraj’s efforts. Swasthya Sathis are illiterate tribal women who are trained to observe health parameters and warning signs in a community. They not only detect, communicate and educate communities but also act as an interface between communities and government health assistants—ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activist) and Anganwadi workers. “Educated girls and boys were also trained in administering deliveries and organising medical camps in far-

stretched villages. As locals, they knew the place and people better and allowed the community to see the result of their involvement in such efforts. They learn to participate, irrespective of their literacy or income levels. They overcame the misconceptions they used to have about health workers and understood the importance to remain healthy as a community. With this mindset, hospitals become relevant for them,” she admits.

An important aspect of Swasthya Swaraj’s success is its team—more than 50 percent belong to the local PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group). This inspired adolescent girls and young parents who aspire to educate their children further. Further, the Health Promoting Schools programme that runs in 15 government schools is trying to bridge the disconnect between schools and parents. “With people recognising the value of hospitals and schools they began to access them. Such community endeavor is what we all dream to see everywhere,” smiles Aquinas.

Shanmuga Priya.T

“I consider social media as a very good medium not only for the public but also for the police officials.”

V. Balakrishnan IPS shares with Marie Banu his passion for issues affecting women & children

Shri. V. Balakrishnan IPS presently serves as Joint Commissioner of Police, North Zone, Greater Chennai City. He has over 17 years of experience in Law and Order and other subjects of policing. With the prestigious Chevening scholarship, he completed his Post Graduation Human Rights from University College of London and with ICAR fellowship he pursued MSc Agriculture from Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi.

During his stint as Deputy Commissioner of Police, Mylapore, he was the Chief Negotiating Officer in the Jallikattu protest movement in 2017. He also ensured rescue and rehabilitation of people from slum areas in Kotturpuram in Adyar river during the unprecedented flood in Chennai.

Balakrishnan's interest lies in fighting crime against women and children, rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents and cybercrimes.

In an exclusive interview, Shri V. Balakrishnan IPS shares with Marie Banu his passion for issues affecting women and children.

About the Police Boys Clubs and Policy Girls Clubs you launched in Trichy schools?

When I joined as DIG of Trichy, I had five districts under my command: Trichy, Pudukottai, Karur, Ariyalur and Perambalur. Although Trichy is a city, the rest of the delta region and the districts surrounding Trichy are essentially rural.

We analysed the problems in the area and identified issues related to women and children. One of the strategies we adopted to address these issues was to launch Police Boys Clubs and Police Girls clubs. In fact, it was conceived initially to have these Clubs at College level. We even conducted a meeting for the College Principals in all the five districts and started the Clubs in few colleges too.

The statistics and the analysis of ten years of crime data revealed that the focus should be on school-going children. The problem starts when the child is at the age of 13-14 and therefore there is no point in addressing the issue at the College level where their ideas are already crystallised. This led us to launch the Police Boys Clubs and Police Girls Clubs in schools.

For the Pilot project, we chose five schools in each district based on the under-age marriages that were reported. We initially called it child marriage, but it conveyed a different meaning. Basically, it is teenage marriage i.e.

before they attain the legal age for marriage. Our concern was not love marriage per se, but to tell the children to postpone their decision until they complete their Collegiate education.

We found that early exposure to social media was one of the reasons for under-age marriages. Through the Police Boys Clubs and Police Girls clubs we created awareness on cyber crimes and promoted safe usage of social media. Now, with the COVID scenario children have access to internet due to the online classes. When we look at it in hindsight, it was a good decision.

We selected five students from eighth, ninth, and tenth standard and these 15 students were trained by experts. We called them Ambassadors of Child Security; our messengers. When they observed signs of children getting into relationships, they counselled them, took up the issue with their teachers and parents, and ensured that stringent actions were not taken.

We took it up as a research project and are now coming up with a report to understand the effectiveness of the Clubs. The findings would lead to replication in other areas.

The impact of evidenced based policing with regard to crime against women?

Evidenced based policing is a popular concept world over. But this has not been used in cases on crime against women in our country. We analysed 75,000 cases [on crimes against women] that occurred over the last 10 years and plotted them on a GIS map to identify the hotspots in each area.

Under the current set up, the crime against women is dealt by the All Women Police Stations. For each DSP Sub Division there is an All Women Police Station and in Trichy we have five of them. In each of these jurisdictions, we found five hotspots, hence introduced a Special Police Beat. It was more focused on prevention rather than reaction because the damage is already done when an incident happens in cases related to crimes against women.

The women police officers visit the villages and identify factors which are conducive for crime against women. This was done after a lot of deliberations and field studies. I have personally interacted with the village women and discussed issues they faced at home and

outside. We were able to instill a sense of security in them.

We realised the need for improved follow up systems to be carried out for victims. Hence, we volunteered to conduct a 'Family day' at our Police Station every month. We invited families who had lodged complaints in the last six months to come and share their experiences so that other families can benefit. The intention was to ensure that they are living happy. We also invited Gynecologists on this occasion. This was because there were many cases of suicide among women being reported for the reason that they could not conceive and were harassed and stigmatised in their community.

Your effort to include Transgenders in Police Home guards in Madurai?

In 2014, before the Supreme Court pronounced that Transgenders should also be considered for Government jobs, we included them in the Police Home Guards. In fact, we were looking for solutions to find a legal source of income for them, especially for those who were involved in sexual crimes. This idea came up, as there was no bar on recruiting Home Guards in any service. It was basically a mindset, and we tried it out.

As it was a new initiative, I saw that the initial teething issues were sorted out. After I got transferred, it continued for a while and then died out. Fortunately, the Supreme Court Judgement now makes them eligible for recruitment in Government jobs.

Is the present media (including social media) a bane or boon for policing?

I was in Indian Information Service and worked for Press Information Bureau for a while. I had close interactions with the top journalists in Delhi and have maintained a friendly relationship with the media from the beginning. According to me, whenever there is a problem with the authorities and the media, it is due to the failure to understand each other's compulsions.

Media want to take the information to the public first while the authorities have a protocol to follow before they communicate to the public.

The problem with social media is that there is no time tag or credibility check attached. It is an extension of freedom of expression although there are constitutional limitations in certain areas. We cannot discredit the entire social media just because some people are misusing it. Social media gives lot of power to the common man and when one uses it liberally, we should try to inculcate a sense of responsibility in citizens. Curtailing the freedom in social media is not a solution.

Recently, there was a news item about Kasimedu fishing harbour, but the picture shown was a file photo—which was taken before the incident happened. Unwittingly, they ended up in sensationalising the entire issue. A sense of responsibility is therefore essential while reporting.

I consider social media as a very good medium not only for the public but also for the police officials. This is the fastest medium now, faster than 24x7 news channels. When news with videos are posted, the credibility increases. Sometimes, the videos are also edited and projected out of context. Readers should not be judgmental and jump to conclusions. They should verify the facts and the source of information.

As a police officer, social media has been extremely useful for me as I am able to communicate with the public. Also, the media persons take a cue from my posts and if it is a news of interest, they collect more details.

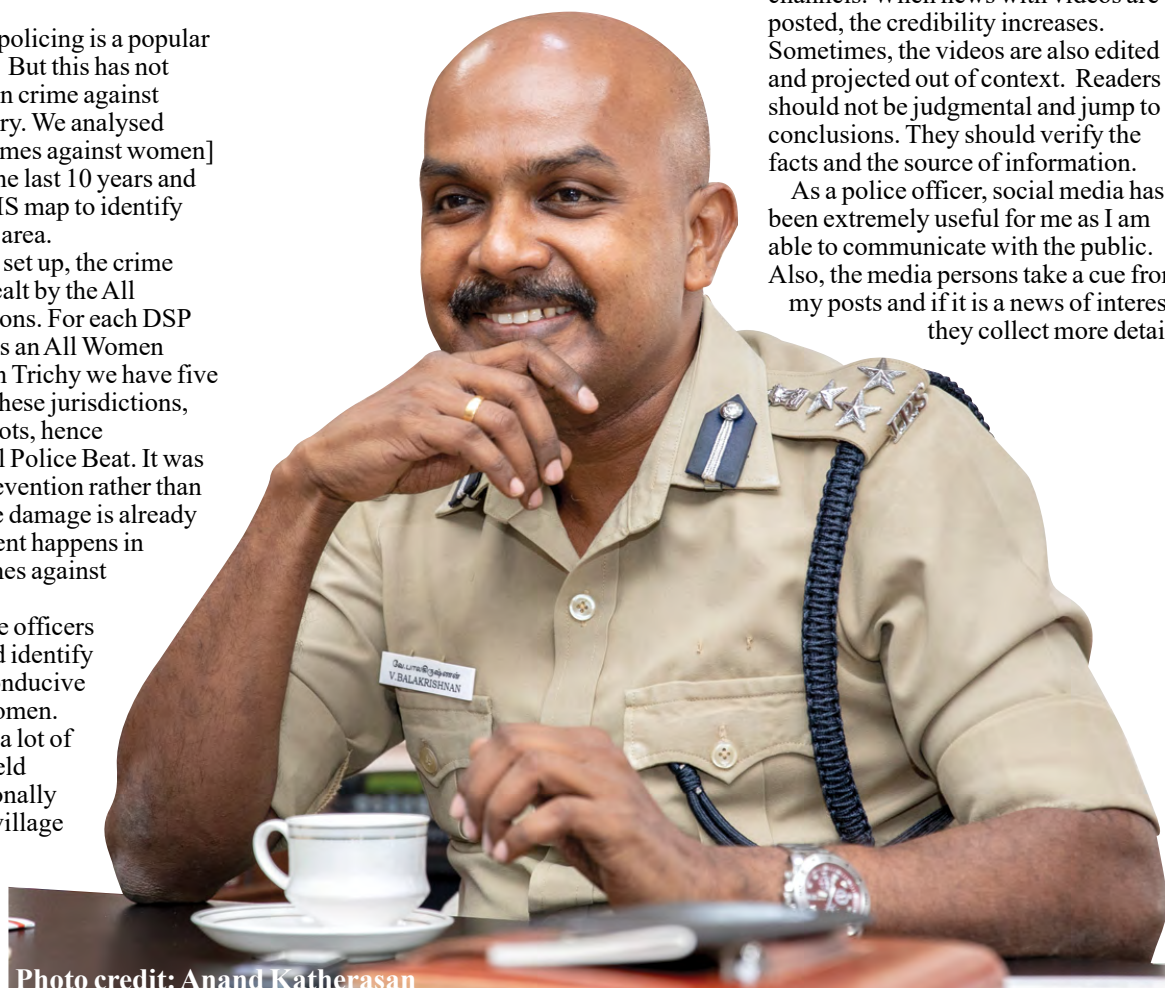


Photo credit: Anand Katherasan