

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

"We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give."

— *Winston S. Churchill.*

It is the season for giving: the festive time of year for all of us, and a crucial time for the non-profit sector. That is why fundraising is at its peak during the months of October to January each year. We have over 3.3 million NGOs in our country and the need for funds to coordinate their programmes are on the rise. Foreign donations are not as much as it was before and the NGOs are now gearing up to match the CSR needs.

The joy of giving is indescribable because it takes courage to give something to others – whether it is food, cash, clothes, etc. The best part is the feeling we experience after we have engaged in this act. It gives us immense satisfaction and also influences others to give.

The need of the hour is "Individual social responsibility" where each of us should realise our role in making the development sector in our country self-reliant. For this, we should engage in the "Act of Giving".

Giving need not necessarily be only in terms of money or wealth. Giving our time to listen to others and sharing our skills and resources does make a huge difference.

Conversations Today salutes every person/ NGO who have gone an extra mile to make a difference in the lives of others.

The 'Joy of Giving' Lasts Longer Than the 'Joy of Getting'. The more you give, the more you Receive! If you have the heart to do something good for others without expecting anything in return – then do it now!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

KIDS VS GADGETS - FINDING A BALANCE

In today's technology driven world, we see that our entire life is ruled by gadgets. A gadget for walking, a gadget for reading, a gadget for even monitoring how our heart is beating when we are walking. Today's kids are growing up with gadgets. A 5-year-old knows to operate a mobile better than a 50–60-year-old. Many parents are in a major dilemma if that is something to be proud of or worry about.

Kids are attracted to these gadgets more quickly than even toys. But why and how does it all start? Typically, it is the parent or primary care giver who introduces these gadgets to kids. This generation's parents are occupied with a lot of responsibilities and tasks. It requires a village to raise a child they say. However, most families today are in a nuclear set up and find it difficult to manage kids and career especially when both parents are working and the children are cared by the grandparents or nannies. Most of us parents are also constantly using one device or the other through the day. Children imbibe what they see.

Because of lack of time, pressure from work and other activities which need time and attention parents resort to easy ways to manage kids. Feeding the kids becomes a huge task. Calming kids when they throw a tantrum is a much more arduous task. It all starts with let me make it a bit easy to feed the kid by showing them a cartoon. Kids have no idea what is going into their mouth as they are engrossed in the cartoon wonder world. It becomes an easy and time saving task for parents to make the kids occupied with cartoon and get their jobs done in parallel. Cartoons penetrate children, they even dream of these, some have imaginary friends that they see in cartoons. Slowly cartoons become a way to control kids' behaviour. Parents tend to negotiate with cartoons.

It is difficult to take cartoons away from children. There will also be peer pressure of not knowing about some cartoons which their friends are talking about in school. Parents do not have any control over the people their kids interact with outside the house; they cannot be monitoring every conversation the kid has. They pick up words and language easily from television, school and especially the friends they play with. YouTube is flooded with content for kids. From rhymes to stories to toy reviews, you name it you find it. Today anything and everything is a vlog. There are gamers who record their game with commentary and upload it on YouTube for kids to watch. Kids feel as though they are playing this game through them. This can be very addictive for kids, adding no value to them. Watching some shows where parents are constantly playing with kids, doing experiments etc makes the kid feel that it is the norm and why aren't my parents doing that. They think through what they watch but they cannot analyse or would not understand that these YouTube videos are money making tricks and it is hard to explain.

Now looking back to our times in the 90s, what did we grow up with? Did our parents stress so much about what we watched? Are we stressing so much? Well, the answer is yes and that is because the exposure and ease of access is also more now. We are conscious about the consequences of the content that gets into these tiny brains. When we grew up many of us saw some cartoons for a while because we had only 1 television to be shared with grandparents, parents and us. Each one had their slot. We grew up listening to tele series, music, movies and drama. There were power cuts that forced us to play and embrace boredom. Pandemic has changed the world and us in



many ways we never imagined. Not just world history but even our lives can be divided into pre pandemic and post pandemic times. Today especially because of this and having to engage kids 24 x 7 we find it easier to allow access to gadgets.

Many parents fear tantrums that kids throw once they take away their access to television or mobile where they watch videos or play. But aren't tantrums a normal way to express a child's disappointment, it helps them relieve their stress and disappointment. Kids move on quite easily, it is us who need to learn to manage their emotions healthily by understanding that they are helpless and calming them down. Many cartoons teach good habits, concepts, numbers, alphabets even good touch and bad touch in an engaging fun way. This helps children learn and adapt faster. It's the role of parents to make them understand the difference between information, knowledge and wisdom. If a kid is watching a cartoon related to gardening, try to plant a seed and watch it grow together at home. This way the child's information is converted to knowledge and thereby wisdom. Imposing parental controls, engaging them in other activities like physical play, art forms, reading books, swimming or cycling helps channel energy in positive ways can help in optimal usage of gadgets. Children love adulting, hence involving them in chores empowers them and builds self-esteem. We cannot be with the children 24x7, however we can make the maximum out of the time we spend with them.

Boredom isn't bad, in fact it helps them think what else they could do. It builds creativity and self-awareness. Surprisingly kids move on very easily, they could play with a twig for hours. Sometimes parents want to do everything for the children, find solutions for them even before they understand the problem. Failure is messy but it makes them strong and independent. There is no one right way to parent, after all each child is so different and so are we. It's all about finding that balance.

It is important to allow them to be with themselves to find themselves. Why steal it from children when we want pretty much the same at this age?

Shreyaa Nirmal Kumar
Source: <https://tellmystory.in/>

MOVING THE BLOCKS

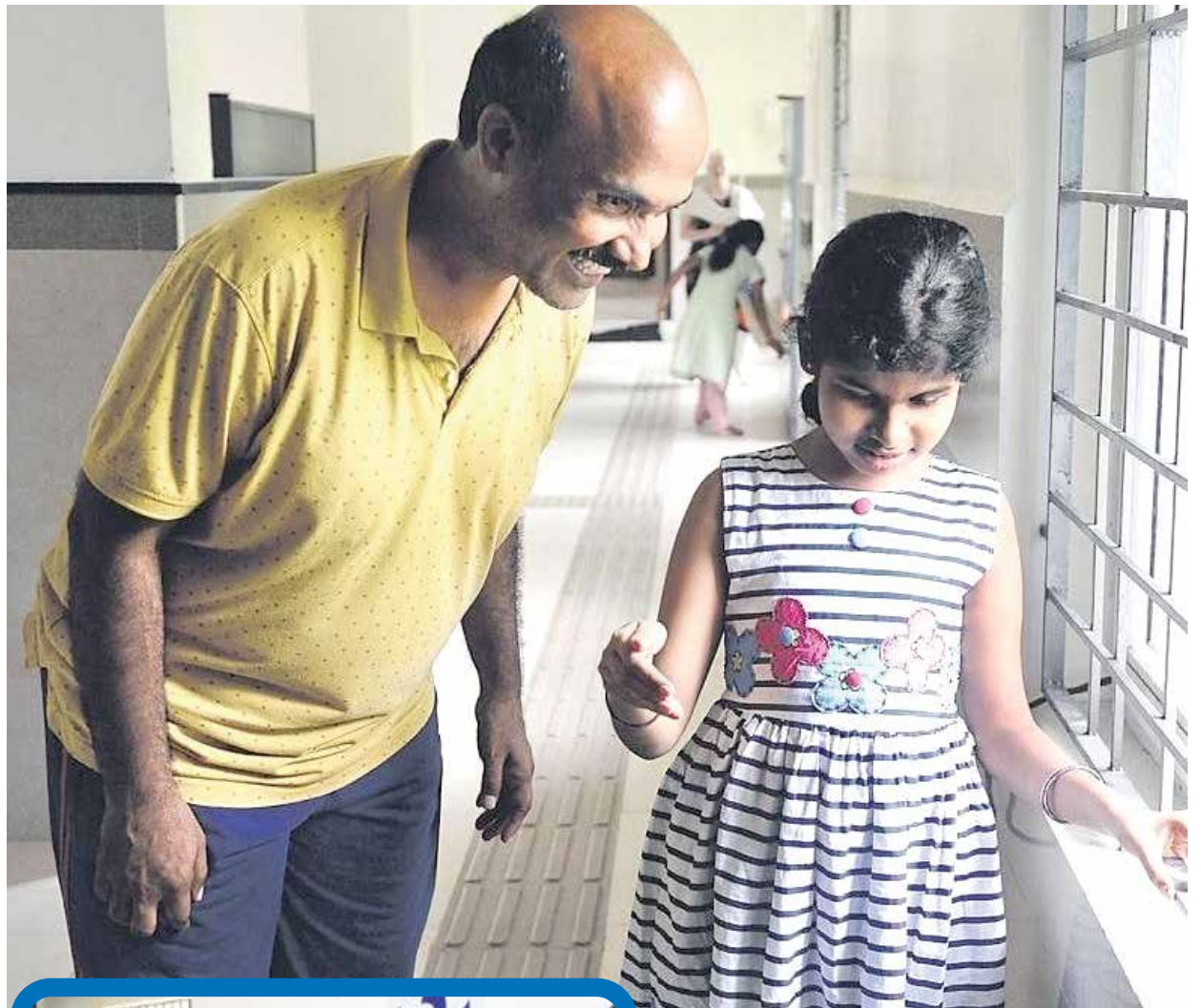
Parenting is a learning process and the decisions parents make in this journey have significant long term consequences in their children. Whether it is about confidence or helplessness, children learn both from their parents. “In case of differently-abled children, this is even more blatant. When parents are hopeful of improvement or recovery the children are hopeful too; but when they feel low or dejected, the children feel guilt, hurt, disappointment and many a times, give up. This is a loop where both ends feed each other. Me and my parents also experienced this cycle,” recalls Mr C. Govindakrishnan, Founder of Nethrodaya in Chennai.

Gopi's parents, although well-educated and employed, could not accept the fact that their son has visual impairment. They tried every possible treatment to help restore his vision. “Their love and commitment were inspiring. They constantly looked out for a remedy and spent over 15 lakh rupees. The sad part is that nobody told them that there are 148 eye related diseases that cannot be treated and my condition does not have a cure. The fact about eye donation, the other usual recommendation, is misunderstood. What can be donated is cornea, and that can be taken up only by those who have corneal blindness. Even I can donate my cornea. Desperate and uninformed, parents have nobody to lead them,” laments Gopi.

Experiences led Gopi to understand that visually challenged persons needed rehabilitation and real time academic support. Busy with his treatment endeavour in hospitals, Gopi had no time to sit inside classrooms. He kept moving from one school to another, seeking better support. “I shuttled between six schools because special school was not an option for my parents due to the stigma associated with it. When I failed in my public exams, it hit them really hard. I then joined a tutorial,” he says.

Gopi graduated in English Literature but confesses that he learnt many things as a student, outside the classroom, in the company of visually challenged persons like him. Those were the days he realised the activist in him and wanted to do something for his community. “Protests, agitations, movements, I was there. I was jailed 16 times,” says Gopi proudly, recalling the sense of victory he and his team felt when the State Government of Tamil Nadu reinstated the free bus pass scheme that was cancelled earlier. All his work brought him closer to Banyan NGO and soon after completing his post-graduation, he joined as a telephone operator at Banyan. Known for his dedication, diligence and sense of care, he was soon put in charge of Adaikalam, Banyan's rehabilitation centre for women, where over 122 mentally challenged, destitute women across the country were rehabilitated. “The initial six years were not easy. Everybody questioned my abilities. They only noted my impaired vision. But, Ms. Vandana's trust in me and my abilities helped me go ahead. I strongly believed in comprehending the needs of every section of our society,” he says.

Learning about CSIM, Gopi realised that professionalism may convince people to value him for what he is. Little did he know that his true self will be respected right from day one. “The best thing about CSIM is above what you actually learn or acquire during the course. It is the respect they show for every student and their capacity to be an instrument of change. No matter where we come from, what we have studied or how direction-less we feel, the interactions at CSIM lead you to somewhere meaningful. I found my direction there when Mrs. Latha Suresh told me to start my own organisation as I could comprehend the community's needs from a rational, functional and long-term perspective. Thus, the registration and



resource mobilization for Nethrodaya happened in full swing while I was still a student at CSIM,” he shares.

Nethrodaya was established in 2002 with a free residential hostel for visually challenged college students hailing from rural districts of Tamil Nadu. Blind schools had residential facilities but there were no blind colleges. Hence, Gopi decided to remove this obstacle so that pursuing education was possible for the visually impaired youth. Within a span of four years, his work earned accolades and Government of Tamil Nadu donated him land in Mogappair to build Nethrodaya's residential hostel. With a capacity to house over 40 students, this facility is today a popular landmark in the locality.

Gopi believed that special schools need to grow in number and enhance its visibility to ensure its access.

“The more you see the more you realise that these schools are effective for special children and this helps fight the age-old stigma attached to it,” he adds. In 2011, Nethrodaya launched the free residential special school for visually as well as physically challenged children.

By 2015, Nethrodaya college of education for the underprivileged was also fully functional. Many schemes were also launched to benefit visually and physically challenged persons. Distribution of audio study materials, according to Gopi, was an incredible success that splurged the move from voluminous, extensive Braille materials to user friendly, convenient, and easily accessible audio books. “This was an important landmark for Nethrodaya as independent learning process became faster. Better the resources, better is the impact,” says Gopi.

A recipient of Best Institution Award and Best Social Worker Award from the Government of Tamil Nadu, Gopi iterates that there is much more to do. Training for competitive exams is still not considered as a viable option for the differently-abled. “This is a key intervention that could help fill in the job positions reserved for the them. It is high time we thought out of the box because the traditional ABC model (Agarbathi making, Basket weaving, Candle making) of vocational training is now out-dated and no longer relevant. We need innovative interventions that can help differently abled integrate with society, at ease. Equal opportunity is still a distant dream and Nethrodaya is determined to walk this road to testify that this is possible,” he assures.

Shanmuga Priya.T

WOES TO WOWS: IN LOVE AND FULFILMENT

“Love is an endless mystery because there is no reasonable cause that could explain it.” — Rabindranath Tagore



It is 8 am on a Saturday. Vrinda woke to the unpleasant thought of having to spend a lonely weekend in the studio apartment she had rented. It was hardly three weeks since she had stepped onto American soil. She had planned to be outdoors this weekend, exploring the land, people, and places. But the Pandemic lockdown put her on house arrest. She got up, made a steaming coffee, and walked towards the balcony, which was the only way to connect to nature. The park overlooking the apartment wore a deserted look, and trees were blissfully showing off the changing colors, unaware of the pandemic situation.

Vrinda is an analyst and management person from Chennai. She accepted the overseas project as it was only for a few months. The previous three days had gone into settling down to work from home, figuring out groceries and supplies for a week. She constantly chatted with her mother and her friend Indu back home to come to terms with the situation and the precautions they would take to manage themselves. Vrinda was confused about how to handle and respond to the situation. She often thought of little Peda, the pet dog she left behind with her mother.

Vrinda leaned on the railing and sipped her coffee, glad her mother had kept filter coffee powder and percolator in her suitcase. Her eyes suddenly noticed a person on the adjacent balcony in an upside-down yoga posture with his legs leaning against the wall. She kept staring at the figure, and her heart jumped when she realized he was also looking at her. The quick locking of their eyes did not unnerve the yogi. Very gradually, taking his sweet time, he lowered his body to his usual position, stood up, and smiled. An Indian! This was the first thought that hit Vrinda. She instantly gave a thumbs up to him, appreciating his yoga feat.

A small smile curved, and he waved back. The workout regime was loudly visible as he stood with his towel hung loosely around his neck.

Vrinda forcefully turned to look at the park again, taking one more sip of her coffee. Her thoughts raced. Would he be around 30-plus years of age? The next second, her eyes went back again to his balcony. This time, he showed a sign C and asked if she was having coffee. She smiled and nodded, silently mouthing her filter coffee! There was now a grin on his face, and he waved and walked into his living room. Vrinda's smile remained for a few more seconds after he was gone, and she felt a mood shift. Most things in life start small, and so did this incident.

The same day she was tempted to go to the balcony many times and chose to sit there on the pretext of reading a book so that she could get a glimpse of him again. Within one and a half days, by Sunday evening, she learned his name was Mohan and that he was a techie from Bangalore. The two shared their mobile numbers and connected.

Time never goes slow when we are in the discovery phase. In the days that followed, every little aspect became interesting to know, explore and understand. The fact that the lockdown got extended to the apartments on each floor where people tested positive did not bother Mohan and Vrinda much. Their life revolved around communicating in sign language, WhatsApp chats, emojis, and voice messages. Searching for songs on YouTube and trying out varied chefs' favorite dishes, taking pictures and sending them, sharing perspectives on various dimensions of life, and personal life stories, and trying to know more about each other through social media postings, did not give them time to even relax during weekends.

“Hey, aren't you in bed yet? I see you typing online!” Messaged Indu. Indu was Vrinda's best friend. “How are you? And hope you are maintaining sanity being all by yourself!” she asked.

Vrinda had a big grin while replying to Indu. “Haha, I see that you are watching over I am never alone with working from home options and social media connections. I need some ‘me’ time! It's actually overwhelming! Hey, shall I call you now? Do you have time to talk?” she replied.

After almost half an hour of non-stop story sessions between Indu and Vrinda, Indu asked: “Vrinda, are you in love? Do you know where you are headed? What is he thinking? You have spoken about Mohan for nearly 20 minutes in the last 30 minutes! Whew, that's a lot for just a friend tag! Amma also noticed this and asked me what I knew about Mohan. You are saying he is 34, and you are 45! Solid 11 years apart; so where is this going, my dear?” Silence ensued for a few seconds. Vrinda recovered soon.

With slight annoyance, Vrinda replied, “Indu, why am I sharing all this with you? You are the only one who knows me the most. And you are asking me this question? You know, my concept of love is not about mere relationships, marriage, children, etc. For me, love is divine. It is about two souls who find meaning and evolution in being with each other. I don't want to give any tag or role to this relationship. Right now, we

haven't even met each other in person. I haven't felt the need too. Every relationship doesn't need to have a conclusion. I don't want you to imagine too much.”

Indu sensed the annoyance and decided to give a gap of a few days before checking on Vrinda again. True to her name ‘Vrinda’, which signified a freedom-loving, free-spirited, energetic, outgoing individual, fewer things were conventional about her. She was a change and adventure-sensitive individual and looked at every challenging situation as an opportunity to innovate and learn.

The thought that Indu left in Vrinda's mind was making her uncomfortable. She raged a battle in her mind with all possible actions of not going to the balcony, acting busy, and reducing her texts to monosyllables but, she didn't find it justifiable. She wondered why loving a soul was so challenging. Why should she find out what Mohan meant to her or what she meant to him? Isn't it enough that they have myriad interesting topics to explore, talk and share perspectives? Should the joys in their hearts, the twinkle in their eyes when they see each other on the balcony, be justified and compartmentalized into a man-woman relationship?

The next few months were filled with pure happiness. Vrinda and Mohan had gotten into a nice routine, and she felt she had many perspectives to offer him about life and relationships. He was constantly giving her some new learning about technology, teamwork, and market scenario. The work from home had also settled comfortably though the long hours were strenuous during the weekdays. The weekends were now something they both looked forward to, and they set up times to watch movies together in their respective apartments. They both felt they had moved to their college days. It was interesting how Mohan, who claimed to be an introvert, turned to become the most expressive and interactive person in this relationship; and how the usually buoyant and gregarious Vrinda was becoming quieter and learning about the finer nuances of her feelings and emotions. Vrinda felt lighter at heart, and some doors that were locked inside her were slowly beginning to open up. They had created their own beautiful miniature world where only they existed, and the earth just went around them.

“Amma, what are you probing me for? Yes, in this situation, Mohan supports me emotionally, and I feel a lot safer. Of course, my colleagues are there too, but we don't meet at all! We are just screen friends here,



remember? I know it's been over five months now, and I will be able to come back home soon...

"Vrinda tried her best to keep calm in this conversation. "Amma, I can't understand why you are thinking like this. You believe Radha loved Krishna, and it was a divine relationship. Did they bother about age and other things? But you can't accept my love for Mohan without giving it a name? I have no plans for any future, Amma. Nothing has changed. Don't imagine too much and overthink, please. Mohan has a life for himself to lead, and we should not forget that. Yes, we are in love with what we give each other, and I feel I have traveled with him in several births, and it is just a continuum. That's all!"

Every time this kind of conversation happened, it left Vrinda with a feeling more and more that it was better to vanish from the earth. She felt suffocated by the concern both Indu and Amma expressed for her. Their love for

her dissuaded Vrinda from ignoring them too. A corner of her heart was afraid and unsure if she was lying to herself. Did she want more from this relationship? If not for the Pandemic, would she have even noticed and gotten connected with Mohan? What will happen after the lockdown and she returns to India? There were more questions that she could not answer herself. If she occasionally mindfully brought out a sentence or two about what they meant to each other, Mohan would laugh it off and ask her to enjoy and be in the present moment.

The situation gradually improved, and the COVID

protocols relaxed a wee bit. One day, Mohan suddenly texted her that his organization wanted him back in India, and the next day he managed a ticket on a special bubble flight to Bangalore. Vrinda decided to pack an Indian breakfast for him from the reserves she had. She couldn't sleep that night. When he was going to the airport, it would be the first time they would really meet each other! But the thought felt strange since she always felt she had been with him.

Mohan made a quick visit on the way to the airport and picked up the breakfast pack. Their eyes spoke more than words. Vrinda thought he was indeed more handsome and warm in person. Her eyes had brightened up her face immensely, and a tiny tear at the end of her eyes threatening to fall made a pretty scene. He reminded Vrinda that they would be connected over the phone anyway. The brief hug left Vrinda with the feeling of having arrived! There was a completion of the soul finding itself. The wave finally touched the sand! There was no looking back after that!

Time never stops, and life moves ahead with several unanswered questions. Some questions indeed have no answers too! And many answers were there before the questions were asked, waiting to be unearthed and heard unbiasedly with mindful consciousness.

A year after the Pandemic, the 16th floor of a large apartment in Bangalore had two people on their apartment balcony with a cup of steaming filter coffee, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the comfort of togetherness in their own miniature world. The completion within had opened up spaces in their heart to the world around them.

Vrinda had moved on to be a freelancer supporting NGOs' Social Audits and capacity building. She was gradually nurturing her team, which could serve all management and HR-related needs for NGOs. Mohan had found his passion. He was penetrating technological solutions to issues faced by society in multiple spheres. He was now traveling with a larger purpose to identify, converge, and integrate global findings for the benefit of the world and our country. When the purpose is larger, all roads converge at a place wherever they twist and turn.

Dr. Kalpana Sampath



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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MISSION EMPOWERMENT

Vonisha began as a social services outfit — the brainchild of R Venkateswari, Founder and Managing Director, and Dr A Nagasubramaniam (Wing Commander), Co-founder and Director. Being a doctor-teacher couple, Venkateswari and Dr Nagasubramaniam had a natural proclivity to help people in need, in their immediate vicinity. “We noticed that there always was a critical gap between planning and implementation of social service programs. “It is usually cosmetic and superficial, and there is no long-term impact because last-mile connectivity and follow up is missing,” says Venkateswari.

However, the idea of creating Vonisha came when Venkateswari and her fellow director Dr. Nagasubramaniam attended a graduation ceremony for underprivileged children on a Bangalore afternoon in 2016. “That was when we decided that we need to get into the field in a structured way to create a long-term impact and help the underprivileged to come out of the orbit of ignorance and poverty. Once that calling came to us, there was no looking back. We had clarity and knew what to do and how to do it,” she says.

The priorities were simple: provide sustained last-mile connectivity and robust follow-up. “We wanted to be accountable and transparent. We wanted to leave behind a legacy. Incidentally, the word Vonisha means ‘Unique thinkers and excellent workers with spiritual outlook’”, explains Venkateswari, adding: “this defines us.”

When Vonisha began, the duo was mentored and supported by organizations like BEET Force, Samridhhi Trust, LDSG and Alphabet Club. “We learnt then that what works is a collaborative approach that requires support and nurture, especially given that we are working at the grassroots level. Our gratitude to all the mentors and well wishers which enabled us to work in this tough field with our head held high,” she says.

The objectives of Vonisha are simple: empower lives of underprivileged children through education, health, sports, skill development and environment. “We started our work in bridging the gap of education of the underprivileged from slums in South Bangalore whose parents were rag pickers, construction labourers. Education for their children were not at all a priority for them, hence we focused on motivating them to send their kids to our Bridge Programme. Some were alright as long as they didn’t incur a cost. Some weren’t cooperative,” she says.

COVID-19 was a game-changer to the NGO which was still in its infancy. “We realised that there was a need to continue our support through supporting families who belonged to the lowest rung of society. With the help of individual and organisational donors we provided dry rations to the families of children who were in our bridge program and then to others in that community. We could help the slum dwellers with ration for two years which amounted to 30 lakhs rupees. We educated them on COVID-appropriate behaviour and importance of adhering to basic health norms,” she says.

During the pandemic, Vonisha also organised online trainings and workshops for facilitators to enhance teaching skills. This saw the introduction of learning material, charts, and flash cards, not to



mention the masks they stitched and donated. “We started our on-site teaching program where our volunteers went to slums and provided 3 to 4 hours of basic education during uncertain times. We also provided group health insurance for families of our associate workers.”

As the pandemic receded, Vonisha received “overwhelming” support from parents residing in slums who were sending their children for education. “Word of mouth from each slum ensured that children from distant slums join our education program which included Bridge program, Mainstreaming program, and the After-school program,” she says.

By this time, Vonisha began seeing the need for women empowerment among daily-wage workers and semi-skilled workers. “We launched a free three-month tailoring program to help underprivileged mothers get employed, and have three centres functioning now.”

Vonisha has also partnered with the Government school in Tamil Nadu to spread the message of biodiversity among rural children. The group has planted 500 trees to create Miyawaki here. “It is heartening to see the growth of the greenery with diverse plants that attract birds,” she says.

Vonisha’s approach has always been to first understand the basic needs of its adopted community. It then begins to serve it by designing an appropriate program, dovetailing and delivering the program as per their needs through field visits, need-assessments, providing counseling and guidance. “We initiate the programs in a systematic manner through various activities such as education, life skills support, women empowerment, community development programs, and health camps. We aim on long-term impact through effective Cradle to Career approach, solution-oriented and collaborative approach. The aim of our approach is to bring out holistic

development in these communities and we are happy that it works wonders,” she says.

Some of the NGO’s most successful programs today include the Bridge Education program, Mainstreaming program, Back to School program, After School Program, Life skills to Livelihood program, Take-Off from School project and the women empowerment initiative. Along the way, some key statistics have made Vonisha’s journey worth the effort. There has been a decrease in drop-out rates, and the organization has scaled up its projects. Other initiatives like the English enrichment program have also worked wonders, as have the take-off from school project and skill development and job placement support.

“Our health and hygiene program are to create model slums where the basic tenets of healthy living with additional focus on public health, cleanliness and education will be taught. We will provide bio-toilets and sanitary napkin vending

machines, to focus on basic cleanliness,” she says.

“We want to leave behind a legacy of impactful social service by focusing on the needs and empowering the underprivileged community which will help them to integrate smoothly into the society and contribute to the building of a self-reliant nation through self-esteem,” she says.

Vonisha plans on collaborations in order to further its last-mile connectivity mission for nation-building. “As our foundation with its core values of Integrity, Compassion, Excellence, Accountability and Transparency is strong enough, we are in the process of scaling up,” she says, “Time will tell how successful we are. Until then efforts will be on to source the necessary resources. We started with five dedicated associates and now we have 20.”



BREAKING THE POVERTY CYCLE ONE SCHOLARSHIP AT A TIME

Bong Sen helps women and girls in rural Vietnam break the cycle of poverty.



In Vietnam's Mekong Delta region, traditional patriarchal attitudes towards girls and women still prevail — amongst which is the question of who gets to stay in school.

With education compulsory only for primary school levels, many children in the region stop studying after the age of 11. Poverty, as well as the transport challenges posed by the Mekong River cutting across the land, make it hard for children in the region to get to school. And girls face greater challenges due to their gender — they are expected to stay home and do household chores, care for their parents and siblings, and eventually marry to fulfil their roles as a wife and mother, with no livelihood prospects and financial independence.

“Due to sexism, parents think that when they are getting old, they will rely on boys. Therefore, parents will invest more in the education of boys than girls,” shares Huỳnh Hoàng Tổ Trinh, who grew up with similar experiences in South-Central Vietnam.

In 2016, Trinh, who had experience in the development sector, started Bong



Sen, a non-profit organisation that offers education and economic opportunities to women in the region. Through scholarships and microfinancing loans, Bong Sen (which means “lotus” in English) empowers girls and women to break the cycle of poverty. Besides providing economic support, Bong Sen deploys volunteers and community officers on regular home visits to the girls in their education programme, to ensure that their well-being is looked

after, and their parents support them in staying in school.

Nguyễn Thị Yến Nhi, a 12-year-old living in Hau Giang province, is one of the 150 beneficiaries that Bong Sen has supported every year. Her parents work in the construction industry, and even at a young age, Nhi recognises that it has not been easy for her parents to send her to school, and their wages combined would not be enough to support her

through high school or college.

With Bong Sen's support, she aspires to keep studying so that she can find jobs that provide a better future for her family, and contribute to her province of Hau Giang. Nhi recently received a certificate of merit for excellence in her studies.

“Education can help me and others to discover the world around us, to create new breakthroughs for women not just in our region but also other places,” says Nhi. “We should put effort into our studies so we are able to build our own dreams.”

ABOUT BONG SEN

Bong Sen is a non-profit organisation working in Vietnam's Mekong Delta region to offer women and girls access to basic education and economic opportunities. Their girls' education programme empowers girls with scholarships to learn, and practice a range of life skills.

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

Transforming Rural India

SD Baligar's life has always been full of challenges. Hailing from an extremely poor economic background, he could barely make his ends meet and started working at a very young age to support his family. After getting a vast experience of working for 20 years in social sector Baligar decided to start something of his own, an organization that could create impact in the lives of marginalised and give them opportunities which he himself didn't get.

I still get tears in my eyes when I think about old days. I come from a very backward community. I would stay hungry entire day coz I didn't have money to buy food, I didn't even have foot wears. My parents packed my bags and sent me out to work when I was 16, I have been working in various organisations since then and finally got enough courage to start something of my own," says Baligar.

Holistic development of the rural community

That is when Vanasiri Rural Development Society (VRDS) came into picture with an objective to protect natural resources and spread awareness about environment conservation. With time, VRDS's activities expanded to other areas as well including women environment and livelihood. But it was the decision to convert VRDS from an NGO to a co-operative society in 2011 that changed thousands of lives. Started with a share capital of Rs. 2.5 lakhs raised with the help of around 700 SHG members, VRDS Co-op society now has share capital of over Rs. 5.5 crores with 2,000 members in just five years.

VRDS today works with over 10,000 families in 100 villages of Haveri district with its head office in a small town Ranibennur. Coming this far was not easy but VRDS utilized its seven years of trust and experience they had with the local community. They provided financial services which included micro loans for farming, art, livestock, etc. They also gave micro insurance for livestock. Apart from this the interest rate on their loans is also less as compared to mainstream money lenders. While market interest rate is 28 percent, VRDS charges only 15 percent interest. "We encouraged them to open accounts with cooperative and then grow their investments through our deposits and insurance policies that we offer. We were also supported by Microgram who agreed to directly fund our cooperative rather than the NGO which really helped us to scale up rapidly," says Baligar.

Nagamma is one such lady who has immensely benefitted from VRDS' services. The 40 year old sole earning member worked day and night to support her two daughters and a nephew. Tired of facing the poverty for several years, she took a loan of Rs. 50,000 from VRDS and started her flour mill. Now every day after she comes back from her regular job of a cook at a government school, she manages her small enterprises which earns him a profit of over Rs. 6,000 per month. And Nagamma is just one example of VRDS' intervention. Just like Nagamma, Malleshappa too had spent his entire life in poverty but a small help of two goats from VRDS helped him come out of the poor condition. He has expanded his activity and has over 20 goats now. Not only this, his kids who had earlier dropped out of school due to lack of financial resources are back in the school. I have seen extreme poverty and worked on the field for over 20 years. That is how I know what kind of intervention is required," he says.



Engaging the rural youth

In addition to providing financial support, VRDS also focuses on providing sustainable livelihood to the community. That is when he came up with the idea of training para-vets as the livestock often fell sick and there was no medical aid to treat them in the village.

"There were many nursing homes and hospitals to treat people but not a single clinic for livestock. There was just veterinarian who worked in 50 villages and since people were not aware of vaccination process or other health related issues, they livestock would die soon and had poor health," says Baligar.

The idea not only helped in improving the health of livestock but also provided employment to the rural youth. VRDS started training youth who had completed their high school to become para- vets. Along with the interesting idea of training para-vets, VRDS also enables women to be micro entrepreneurs through their "Udyogini" model. They train SHG women to provide them training in maintaining accounting books for the co-operative and earn some extra income. The act as a channel between co-operative and the community. The Udyoginis are also responsible for efficient distribution of medicines in the village for livestock.

VRDS' Udyoginis are capable and efficient village women picked from active members in the SHGs and trained to provide para-vet services to their community. Besides animal health services, Udyoginis are also trained to maintain accounting books for the co-operative and earn some extra income which keeps them well connected with the co-operative's activities and plans.

"The idea behind these services is to stop migration of the women and youth. Also, these villages are male dominating, our aim is to provide equal respect to the

women as well. Now when they become self reliant, they have better status in the family and the community as some of them are even earning more than their husbands," says Baligar.

The innovative idea of a labour bank

In Haveri district, VRDS has come up with a unique idea of creating Labour Banks to address labour scarcity in 40 villages of the districts. The labour bank works on skill training, mobilising labour, and creating awareness about it. There are over 4,000 members in this bank who get regular job opportunities. The registered labour is also working with MNREGA. Baligar said that this idea has significantly helped in reducing the migration of labour to the cities. As the labour is getting significant jobs, health benefits, and even pensions from VRDS, they are content in their villages.

Having come this far, they don't want to just stop at this but create larger impact in the lives of underprivileged. "We are also planning to provide credit facilities to farmers for effective agriculture and help them achieve good return on agriculture," he says. In addition to this, VRDS will also be encouraging farmers to go for organic farming and will be doing bore well recharges too. "I want to work in just one district right now but I would encourage people to take our methodology and replicate it in other cities," says Baligar. From environment conservation to women empowerment and sustainable livelihood, VRDS has covered many grounds in Haveri district. Having created amazing impact, team sometimes still struggles with financial resources and looking forward to get support with help of donations.

Shreya Pareek

**VRDS
Co-op society
now has share
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five years**

THE EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF WORKING WOMEN

Most of us have fond memories of being supported by our mothers from the time we are infants - with food, comfort, a shoulder to cry on and everything else in between. She is the central figure that helps form the adults we are and continues to play this role, even as we grow, nurturing and teaching skills that contribute to a healthy life.

Resilience, the ability to successfully navigate the vicissitudes of life, is closely linked to having a good relationship with the primary caregiver of early childhood. The mother assumes the role of developing and maintaining a loving, consistent and responsive relationship with her children. For her, to continue this support and sustain her family on an ongoing basis, her own psychological health is critically important.

The Covid period has been extra hard on working women, who mostly say they have borne the brunt of additional workload that came from the family members who worked from home and the outside help being limited or absent.

With World Mental Health Day being marked on the 10th of October, I took the opportunity to explore the subject of mental and emotional well-being in working women. The outcome of conversations with women from different backgrounds and research was disturbing. According to WHO, an alarmingly large proportion of women, at least one-fourth of the population, are in a psychologically distressed state. In most cases, they do not disclose this to anyone and therefore receive no help.

Women are half the world's population; half the workforce. Through their role as primary caregivers, they have a deep lasting impact in shaping our society. It is therefore imperative that their mental well-being remain a matter of concern and priority, with society supporting them towards a much-needed balance.

What are the causes?

Nature makes women into caregivers, both physiologically and emotionally, and nurture, in the form of family, community and self-image, reinforces it. In these days of reducing gender-role distinctions, fathers do take on an increasing responsibility for their children and home. However, mothers continue to shoulder the greater part of the tasks within the home, thereby extending their hours of work a great deal.

This is not just the case for mothers. Despite contributing to the family income and financial stability, women in general are found to have put in a much higher level of effort for the family. An April 2020 UN Policy Brief states that women, on an average, spend 4.1 hours a day on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to an average of 1.7 hours a days spent by men.

Higher levels of education, media influence and the availability of jobs contribute to an awareness and desire to earn outside one's home. Girls are brought up with a mindset to study well and also look after family duties. Aspirations are increasing, as are prices and uncertainty of what the future may bring. Parents feel the need to invest more in their child's education, anticipating a world where jobs are scarce and applicants are many. Women are therefore increasingly seeking as well as being encouraged by their families to seek paid employment.

Once women enter the workplace, the environment plays an important role in impacting their mental health. Apart from softer issues such as having sympathetic colleagues, there are hard facts like women being paid lower than men or being more likely to be made redundant, in case that eventuality comes

up. This disparity is not just in India, the UN Women's website says the global average for the pay gap is as high as 20%. Discrimination in salary and job choices, women allocated gender-based roles, verbal abuse under the guise of making a conversation are other stressful factors that women say they have to deal with, and which lead to drop in their self-esteem and confidence.



Many women say their instinctive reaction is to try and prove their worth constantly, both to themselves and to the people around. Pushing themselves in all directions results in a feeling of conflict between family and work, and with the sense that one is not doing full justice to either of these roles. There is no time to relax, to indulge in health building activities. But giving up employment is not an answer, for any of these women.

The tension that comes from overload, feeling undervalued or other pressures is difficult to express and even more difficult to get rid of. There is a sense of stigma attached to being depressed, and a sense of shame at the inability to cope. A study conducted on over 200 younger working women in Bhubhaneswar, India, indicated that only a fraction of the approximately 70 women who were in a continual state of distress had sought medical help.

On the other hand, the women in the study who reported a normal state of emotional health had certain factors in common. These include attitude of colleagues, sharing their problems with their spouse, and spending time for yoga, meditation or exercise. A qualitative study of low-income workers in Bangalore had similar findings. The aspects that pointed towards reduced anxiety and depression were social support from family, friends and colleagues and fulfilment from work.

Shifting the paradigm

The conversations and studies on working women's

mental health, while comparatively few in number, indicate a way forward. In addition to the support from family and friends, leaders at organisations can make a big difference towards improving the happiness of their female colleagues.

Action is already being taken by some organisations, such as reservations for certain senior and mid-level positions to be held only by women, mother-friendly policies and spreading awareness through media and talks. The good news for the companies is that these programs bring their own benefits even in financial terms. Many studies have shown the high co-relation between employee engagement and productivity as well as profitability.

Considering the way society is evolving, my submission is that we could take this a step further by adopting wage practices that recognise the value of the work women do outside the workplace. This appreciation of the extensive role they play in building a healthy community would be a great sign of positive support from society. Paying women the same salary for lower work hours or, as one could put it, "Higher wages for equal work."

The UN policy brief mentioned earlier summarises it well. "The unpaid care and domestic work performed by women is critical for sustaining societies, has immense economic value, and needs to be supported through adequate policies."

In an example of workplace support, a medical facility in America allocated an hour a week for their nurse leaders to be part of a mutual support group run by a non-profit, AC Groups. They found the results highly favourable, both to the participants as well as the organisation. At the end of the 12-week intervention, the women felt they had benefited by a definite reduction in stress, an increased sense of inspiration and empowerment, better work/home balance and a healthier lifestyle.

Traditionally women have sought out friends and associates to talk and vent in person, such as neighbours meeting up in a park on a sunny afternoon. Time constraints due to the demands of work and home life have made it more challenging to find this kind of effortless outlet.

In this fast-paced world, with stress levels increasing rather than reducing, it is important that women intentionally look to develop and maintain their own mechanisms to address feelings of internal conflict, discontent and anxiety that may come up in their lives.

The women in the research studies mentioned earlier said that healthful practices like yoga, exercise or meditation, devoting time for a favourite hobby, having a support network of family and friends were valuable aids. If appropriate to one's situation, joining professionally run online support groups could be added to this list. Sharing experiences in a well-intentioned forum helps gain self-awareness and brings with it a sense of inclusion and community, a strong basis for good health.

The mental health of women is the foundation of well-being in a community and its effective functioning, as much as that of the person herself. As individuals, social groups and corporates, we build our own societies. Communities that help women to enhance their happiness and contentment, in the workplace and out of it, are sure to reap the largest and most long-standing rewards.

Karuna Luthar

BATTLE OF THE BUFFET 2022



The 'Battle of The Buffet' is an annual fundraiser organised to support NGOs based out of Tamil Nadu that works towards addressing several social issues. It is celebrated as part of Daan Utsav and celebrates the value of giving. This year, the event was organized by Chennai Mission in association with Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhini (MSDS) and Aram Porul. The event was held on 1st of October 2022 at Mutha Venkatasubba Rao Concert Hall in Chennai.

BoB is the coming together of like-minded people – all for a social cause! It is a zero-cost fundraiser curated for the NGOs where the cost of the event is underwritten completely by the organizers and the funds raised from the event is invested in socially-impactful projects undertaken by participating NGOs. Since its inception in 2009, this mega fundraising event has raised close to Rs.33.89 crores, benefiting hundreds of NGOs.

The theme for this year's event was "FUN Dine" – an evening of entertainment by IndoSoul and high tea provided by Chennai's finest hotels. 58 NGOs had registered for the event

1200 donor passes worth Rs.7,500/- were presented to donors by the participating NGOs who supported their cause. NGOs also raised money online through the portal www.battleofthebuffet.org.

In total, NGOs mobilised Rs. 9,000,000 through online donations and Rs. 37,14,011 through Cheques and DDs.

The organizers hope to raise around 80 lakhs to make the total tally to 2 crore+ rupees this year.

As part of this fundraiser, NGOs submit proposals for a specific project for a budget around 3 lakhs. These are compiled and shared with Corporates and Individual donors to solicit their support. Over the years BoB has supported around 175 NGO projects.



“Apart from PND’s technical knowledge, what impressed me most was his kindness and helpful nature.”

Shri. R. Narasimhan shares with Marie Banu his experiences with Shri. P N Devarajan

Shri. R. Narasimhan, is the Promoter and Director of Protech Consultants, a project engineering consultancy company based in Chennai that mainly involves in implementing Green Field Projects in the area of Chemicals and Plastics and also in Expansion and Diversification.

Narasimhan pursued his Chemical Engineering Degree at Annamalai University in 1962 and is a Life Member of Indian Institute of Chemical Engineers and Indian Institute of Engineers. He is also a Fellow of Institute of Valuers (India).

He began his Career with DCW Limited, Sahupuram in their Caustic-Chlorine Plant and has worked as General Manager with a Pesticide Project of Mico Farm Chemicals Ltd in Mettur Dam from its inception and implemented several Projects for the group. He was also involved in the Identification and Implementation of first Red mud based PVC Roofing Sheet Project in India.

Narasimhan is actively involved in several Rotary Club activities that focused on WatSan, Health, and livelihoods.

In an exclusive interview, Shri. R. Narasimhan shares with Marie Banu his experiences with Shri. P N Devarajan.

Your initial days with Sri P N Devarajan?

I met Sri P N Devarajan (PND) in 1956 when I was studying in college. He was a Trainee at Mettur Chemicals where my father was working. He moved on and took up several assignments in Mumbai, Pune, and Delhi. He returned to Mettur and joined Chemplast Sanmar Ltd in 1967. Here, we met again as I was on an assignment at Mettur.

PND had a successful career in several large establishments in Public Sector and also Group Companies like Reliance. After his retirement, he took up active interest in social service and founded Siva Sakthi Kakkum Karangal in Alapakkam, Chennai for providing shelter to mentally challenged children; and Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS) to train NGOS in Social Entrepreneurship so that they can sustain their work. He also launched the DOS scheme which encouraged individual households to donate one kilo of Dal, Oil and Sugar every month.

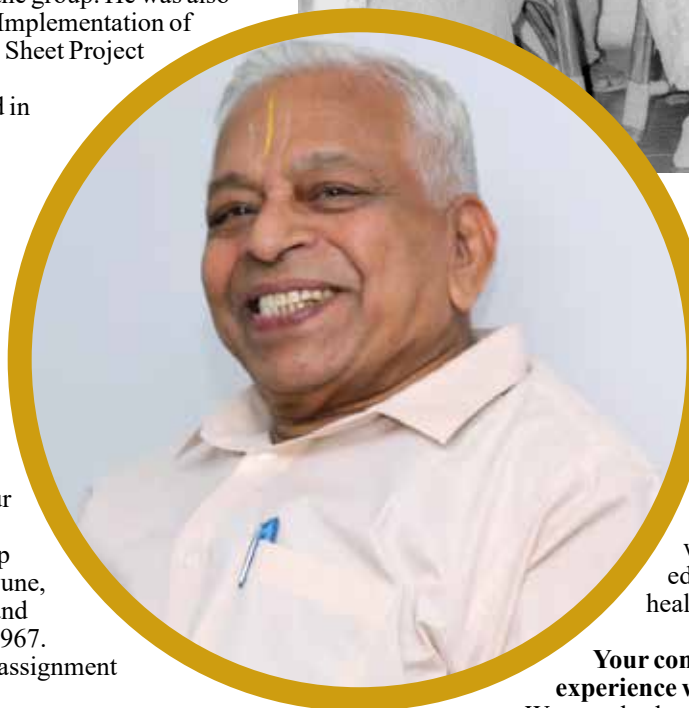
PND also co-founded Confederation of Indian Organisations for Service and Advocacy (CIOSA) - a platform for NGOS to network and engage in service and advocacy.

Since then and until his demise, we were in touch. We were the best of friends!

What are the traits in PND that you admire most?

PND’s knowledge of science, particularly chemistry, impressed me very much. In fact, it was PND who persuaded my father to enrol me in Chemical Engineering. He enthused me of the manufacturing process for production of essential chemicals and with salient aspects of Chemical Engineering, particularly unit operations and processes.

He was always a source of guidance to me. Apart from PND’s technical knowledge, what impressed me most



was his kindness and helpful nature. He has helped several people in gaining employment and advancement in their career. He has mentored several NGOs who focused on education and health.

Your community service experience with PND?

We were both members of the Rotary Club of Mettur and were involved in many Community Service projects in villages around the Mettur Dam area. In this connection, I would like to mention a significant project that we undertook as a Rotary Club Project.

There was an overhead water tank in the nearby village that remained idle due to lack of water pipelines and motor pump facility. The villagers were facing severe hardships to fetch water and the Assistant Collector suggested that we take it up as a Rotary International project to bridge the gap.

We mobilised funds from Rotary members and installed water pipelines and connected it to a motor. The water was then supplied to villagers living at a distance of 3 kms.

After retirement, PND had a desire to start a Hospice in Thiruvannamalai for terminally ill patients. He encouraged me to source funds for this project from Rotary Clubs worldwide. We visited several hospices in Bangalore, Chennai, and Coimbatore. to learn about the infrastructure and facilities. As we could not mobilise sufficient resources, we could not proceed with the project.

Any specific charitable activity that you and PND engaged in?

PND introduced me to Mr.S.Chezhiyan, a blind

person from Kadaladi Village located near Thiruvannamalai. Chezhiyan had completed his Master’s degree and joined CSIM’s one-year course in Social Initiative and Management in Chennai. Impressed with his commitment towards social causes, PND helped him launch a training programme in tailoring for rural women.

Later, with Rotary Club of Chennai KK Nagar’s support, Chezhiyan launched a computer training centre for youth. Recently, we donated five laptops to this centre. Chezhiyan also started a weaving unit where he engaged in production of sarees and simultaneously trained rural women in this skill.

Chezhiyan’s sincerity in empowering rural youth and women is commendable. I helped him set up a powerloom with the support of Rotary Club and also sourced donations from friends in US and India. We purchased six weaving machines and I personally went to Sholapur to place the order. Chezhiyan could convince the villagers to allow him run the weaving unit in a shed owned by the village temple and is running it successfully for the last five years. On learning the progress, the Rotary Club came forward to provide him with additional weaving machinery.

Please tell us about PND Annual Endowment lecture series.

We have created a corpus fund sourced out of the donations received from our well-wishers and friends of PND. Through the Indian Institute of Chemical Engineers (IICChE), Chennai Regional Centre, we conduct annual endowment lectures in memory of PND each year.

The first endowment lecture was organised on 30th of November 2019. The lecture was delivered by Thiru K. Pandiarajan, former Hon’ble Minister for Tamil Official Language, Tamil Culture and Archaeology, Government of Tamil Nadu, a good friend of PND. Several members of Anna University and Faculty, particularly belonging to Chemical Engineering, attended the programme.

In view of the COVID, the second endowment lecture was conducted online in December, 2021 where the office bearers of IICChE attended.

We are now planning for the December 2022 endowment lecture.