

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 3 | Issue 9 | September 2015 | 12 Pages | For Free Circulation Only| www.msdsrtrust.org



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About Monegar Choultry, the oldest charitable establishment in Chennai



Published by P.N.Subramanian on behalf of
Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani,
391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar, Alapakkam,
Chennai - 600 116 and printed by him at
Express Press, Express Gardens, No.29, Second
Main Road, Ambattur Industrial Estate,
Chennai - 600 058.

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childhood that we should do
charity."**

An exclusive interview with
Shri S. Muthiah

From the Editor

Dear Friend,

Parents are a treasure that children should guard zealously. Admitting them into senior citizen homes must never be the first, but the last option always. We must treat our parents as assets and not liability. It is our duty to make them feel wanted and not a burden.

Growing old is a characteristic feature of all living creatures, but human beings stand out distinctly from others in thinking about it. Earlier, every person had a dream of living a long life. But, this is no more a dream as it has become possible due to the advancement of medical sciences.

Today's generation, especially the urbanites, find it convenient to put their parents in an old age home. The reasons they state are: relocating abroad, lack of space in the home, dispute amongst siblings in sharing responsibilities, and much more. There are also cases where parents fail to adjust with their children as they grow older and hence choose to move out of their home. Thus, the number of old age homes are on the rise. Is this a bane or a boon?

We have featured Monegar Choultry, Chennai's oldest senior citizen home in this issue. It talks about the organisation that was founded 200-years ago.

Let us pledge to love and care for our parents and make them feel socially, physically, mentally, and even economically strong. Love, and be loved!

—Marie Banu

SAY THANK YOU, INSTEAD OF SORRY



We often say, sorry to the person who has offered us a favour. A favour that has come-up unexpectedly.

For example, I made somebody wait because I was on the phone. Now, after my call is over, I immediately say "I'm sorry....." Instead, can I say "Thank you for waiting?"

The change in language provides ingredients to build a relationship with the other individual.

When we say Thank you, we register gratitude and responsibility. Whenever we experience gratitude as a choice, automatically responsibility towards the relationship gets triggered.

When we say I'm sorry we register guilt inside us and we also create a

power differential between us and other. It also burdens the other to reassure you.

We need to certainly apologize where the situation demands it. However, we often say sorry from an automatic response, failing to look at the graciousness of the other.

In acquaintances and in relationships, I find that when we genuinely say thank you, we keep the spirit and bridge of generosity alive. It leaves us with further opportunities to get back together.

I realized, when I say sorry for taking unexpected favors, I limit the number of times I can go back to the other person. Now having shifted to saying thank you, I know I have countless

opportunities to be in communication with the other person.

As Buddha teaches: A Generous Heart Is The Source of Happiness. It tears down walls. It connects you to others.

"There is a story about a scorpion and a frog. One day, the scorpion needed to cross a pond. So, the scorpion tells the frog, "Frog, my friend, would you please take me across the pond?" The frog replies, "Well, I want to be helpful to you, but what if you sting me midway? I will die."

The scorpion says, "Why would I do that? If I sting you, you'll die and I'll die too." The frog feels reassured, so it says, "Okay, that is reasonable. I do not mind carrying you across the pond. You can jump up."

The scorpion jumps on the back of the frog, and the frog gets into the water and begins to swim. Everything is going well until, halfway across the pond, the scorpion stings the frog. The frog is in deep pain, and as it is drowning, it cries out to the scorpion, "Why did you sting me? Now I'll die, and you are going to die, too." The scorpion replies, "I know that, but I cannot help myself. It is my scorpion nature."

Like the scorpion, we do say sorry from our habit energy, in place of thank you.

It is time we transform our habit energy to usher "Thank you" in our relationships in return for unexpected grace.

Yours Energetically

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

Editorial

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INITIATIVE AND MANAGEMENT



Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani. It is a learning centre that promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship. **CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non-profits – to facilitate**

them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives. CSIM operates in Chennai, Coimbatore, Hyderabad and Bangalore.

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CSIM also facilitates Social Audit for social enterprises through Social Audit Network, UK and SAN, India.

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Helping the Alcoholics

Substance abuse is certainly a disease. The more a person thinks he can control his instincts to use the substance again, the more frequently he tries to test this control.



Observations during our regular work can lead us to take significant decisions in our lives, and can even change the course of our work. Purushothaman, Managing Director of Paasam Foundation, Sipcot, Ranipet, also did. With a Bachelor's Degree in Optometry, Purushothaman worked as an optometrist in a hospital at Vellore for 19 years. He was also required to visit the communities, and while doing so realised that 80 percent of the families either had an alcoholic or a substance addict. "I was shocked to see the varied implications of this situation," exclaims Purushothaman who was able to gauge the consequences on the addict's family members.

Substance abuse is certainly a disease. The more a person thinks he can control his instincts to use the substance again, the more frequently he tries to test this control. Once addicted, there is no way that a person can get out of it, without professional help. Purushothaman was worried about the social stigma the family gets to face and the likely ostracisation this led to in some socio-economically backward communities. "I was also an alcoholic once and am sober for the last ten years. Thanks to professional help and support rendered by different groups," he recalls.

While the addict's nervous system and circulatory system suffered damage, the families underwent a traumatic period not knowing how to help the addict out of this habit. "Wives are mentally disturbed,

children cannot concentrate on their studies and remain unstable because of the situation at home. Elders are often helpless. I had seen all this in my family too," he shares.

Helped by timely treatment, cared by family members, support from friends who recovered, and a globally renowned fellowship programme for alcoholics, Purushothaman was able to return to normal life.

Two years ago, Purushothaman resigned his job at the hospital and decided to start a rehabilitation centre called 'Paasam Foundation' to help alcoholics recover and extend support to their families in order to cope with the recovered patient in such a way that relapse can be avoided.

Paasam Foundation is equipped with its own team of psychiatrists, nurses, general physicians, counsellors, wardens and cooks. The centre has the capacity to attend to 25 patients at a time. The alcoholics are admitted for a period of three months for an all-round treatment that also encompasses family counselling.

In the first month, all physical problems are attended to through diagnostics and detoxification. Physicians treat the effects of alcohol on the patient's nervous and circulatory system. The second month focuses on the mental and emotional wellbeing, allowing the patient to relook into his own anger, frustration and hatred towards various matters. During the third month, Paasam Foundation's team

members inculcate positive values and life skills through art of living sessions and discussions.

Sharing personal struggles has helped our patients learn from each other. Alongside values, they also learn how to stay away from relapse

"Sharing personal struggles has helped our patients learn from each other. Alongside values, they also learn how to stay away from relapse. When they see someone recover and live happily with their family, they get motivated and their interest in the treatment increases. This positivity further helps in speeding the recovery process," explains Purushothaman. In the last year and a half, Paasam

Foundation has treated 120 patients and 80 percent of them are now living happily with their families, and more appreciably many are showing a renewed interest in their vocations. Unfortunately, 20 percent of the patients have relapsed and are going through the entire treatment cycle yet again.

"This is inevitable! The desire for a little alcohol is always there. While they feel that alcohol gives confidence, the truth is that it destabilises them from even performing the very basic tasks," says Purushothaman.

Purushothaman came to know about the CSIM SEOP programme through a colleague who also runs a similar centre in Chennai. "We had also referred some patients to their centre at Valasaravakkam in Chennai," he adds. The CSIM course, according to Purushothaman, was more than useful. "I did the special SEOP programme (Addiction and Counselling Techniques). It gave me a push to perform more efficiently. We sustained ourselves through the nominal fee charged from the patients. The course exposed me to the whole gamut of fundraising and resource management, which taught me that I could handle more patients with the same resources I had. More importantly, the course taught me to move out to the communities. It made me feel good about my work," he shares.

—Shanmuga Priya. T

If you wish to know more about Paasam Foundation, visit www.paasam.org.

Rajkumar - Zeal for timely and pure blood for needy by creating a network

When you consider the number of accidents and the proliferation of diseases and other medical emergencies requiring surgical interventions that happen around us daily, you may well wonder how one would ensure adequate supply of blood merely through voluntary donations! We all know blood is the most vital fluid in the human body. It is perishable, and stocks of blood cannot be stored for long. Most of us know that the average human body needs five to six liters of blood for healthy survival. Blood is composed of plasma and several kinds of cells. The average common man seldom understands the importance of blood transfusion and blood bank service until he himself faces a medical emergency that necessitates blood for someone near and dear. While many of us appreciate that blood is an essential medical inventory, we are happy to leave the responsibility for making blood available when needed to hospitals.

I must admit my own inability for a long time to understand the realities of medical blood requirements. I always wondered about the great service rendered by international organizations like the Red Cross, by blood banks and by hospitals. I felt that donating blood was the work of a few souls bent upon benevolence to society. It was foolhardy to relate blood donations to largeness of heart without understanding that there is an ongoing, imperative need for blood, and that systematic work, often in terms of compelling surgical interventions, is required to ensure the survival of people involved in critical accidents. The most unfortunate are those who suffer from blood-related disease like thalassemia. It is worth noting that even in the most advanced countries, only about 5% of the people donate blood; their repeat donations enable the demand for blood to be met.

It was in this context, given the high importance of voluntary blood donations and the role of organizations, that I came across Rajkumar, who had been performing this service with passion and commitment.

Rajkumar first donated blood when he was part of the National Social Services organization at his college. It so happened that the college requested more volunteers to donate blood because it was short by six students to top the list of Madurai colleges donating blood. This motivated Rajkumar to come forward to donate himself and also canvass his fellow students successfully to donate, steering his college to the top position among its peers. He got another 21 students to donate. According to Rajkumar, "NSS was a great motivator for me to align myself in service, especially in the area of blood donations".

Other factors also that drove him to this



level of service. One was the upbringing he had received in his family. His parents had encouraged him from childhood to serve the community and be associated with good work for common causes. He used to listen to a number of motivating incidents when his parents and relatives had been involved in social activities, and he imbibed the spirit himself.

Another trigger to serve with distinction was his association with Shanthi Ranganathan, the founding Director and Honorary Secretary of the Chennai-based T.T. Krishnamachari Clinical Research Foundation (T.T.K. Hospital). He enjoyed the privilege of associating with her in his early days of work, and her relentless work on social issues motivated him. He keenly observed her planning, time management and commitment to excellence in her services to society, and he internalized these qualities.

Even when he was young, Rajkumar believed that to save lives you need not need a medical degree, though having one is, of course, an asset. One can save lives through activities such as blood and organ donation. The proper orientation toward timely critical support in saving a life is what is more important!

According to Rajkumar, the top management where he worked played a critical role in shaping his personality and service orientation. After completing his post-graduation in commerce in the late 1970s, Rajkumar joined the Indian Bank. He has worked there for three decades, primarily based in Chennai. It would have a normal approach for someone from the middle class to pursue a banking career, work on the challenges of moving up the hierarchy and retiring from a senior position.

Rajkumar pursued a different ambition while at the bank. He heard a call of conscience to serve society by creating a network for voluntary blood donation. He joined the bank at a time when of mass

recruitments to the bank and thus, had a large peer group. Being charismatic, Rajkumar was able to establish quick personal links with people. In 1979, he started actively pursuing his prime interest in promoting blood donation, at his place of work. He emerged as a leader, and was influential among the youth in the bank, who happily came forward to donate blood. It is of interesting to note here that he has organized about 1,055 blood donation events, 51% in coordination with his employer, Indian Bank, and the remaining 49% through other partnerships. This required phenomenal effort and drive! The number of donors he has arranged is about 105,000, of which 17,000 were on emergency calls. If one assumes one emergency call a day, the total runs to 46 man-years of blood donating effort! That is a tall order to achieve, indeed!

The functioning links between donation camps and emergencies are quite interesting. As blood cannot be stocked for long periods, there must be good estimation of requirements, coordination and management of donors. The capacities of recipient stock centers and utilization are critical. Ranking above everything else in importance is the need to attend to emergency calls for blood. Managing a blood supply network with efficiency requires a high level of understanding of donors and their situations. It was not through any scheduling program or sophisticated modeling that Rajkumar managed his efforts. Sheer dedication, commitment and charisma, along with the largesse of donors, helped him achieve this.

A normal, healthy human can give blood once in two months. To be a leader, action is more important rather than strategizing and making promises! It is essential for a leader to lead by example, by donating blood himself in voluntary groups and so drive others to emulate him. Rajkumar has donated blood more than 60 times, in spite of his busy schedules and his commitment to building up this voluntary movement. He has demonstrated the highest quality of leadership, and set an example for others to follow.

NACO (National Aids Control Organisation), of which Rajkumar is a member, states that at any time, demand for blood in terms of number of units is equivalent to 1.1% of the population in any urban agglomeration or in any other place in India. By these statistics, demand in India would be around 1.3 crore units, whereas less than one crore units are donated voluntarily. The rest of the requirement is left to 2,700 blood banks, both in the government and NGO sectors, to meet. According to one statistic, there are 67 countries where demand for blood is met a hundred percent by voluntary

donations. It is important that people understand the importance of voluntary donations and measure up to the demand. According to Rajkumar, "Blood cells die every 120 days and are replaced by new cells. The physiology of the human body is supportive of blood donations, but people seldom realize this".

It is worth noting Rajkumar's special interest in thalassaemic children. He is the founder of the Thalassaemic Society of Tamil Nadu. Thalassaemia is an inherited hematological disorder caused by defects in the synthesis of one or more of the hemoglobin (Hb) chains. Hb is the protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen. Hence, thalassaemia patients suffer from anemia and iron deficiency. Thalassaemia can cause significant complications, including pneumonia, iron overload, bone deformities and cardiovascular illness. One of the treatments is frequent blood transfusions. The Association of Voluntary Blood Donors founded by Rajkumar donates blood from 50,000 donors every year. At present, his organization is supporting 208 children to get free blood transfusion every month. These are all tall achievements by a person who has a modest approach to service.

It must be noted that thalassaemia is more prevalent in certain regions of India, especially among low-income groups. It is a hereditary condition, and the corrective process is difficult and expensive. Management of the condition through blood transfusions is an important element of treatment. Rajkumar was ahead of his times in pursuing the goal of assisting thalassaemia patients by supporting availability of blood through his network. It took phenomenal initiative to be a pioneer and a founder of a society for helping affected children! To understand this better, one must observe the pains that a family with a thalassaemic member undergoes as they swing between hope and despair. Every transfusion of blood is a harbinger of hope for survival. Rajkumar fully understands the pain felt by victims and their families, and provides support to enable affected children to live a little more in a better frame of mind and spirit. While the common man may see this as the "hand of God" or as a "matter of luck", Rajkumar sees things through a different window! Committing to even the remotest chances of success may not always be prudent in life, but that assurance is what a person looks forward to when fighting against severe odds! We all realize this truth only when something adverse happens to our own kin. The visionary Rajkumar saw this as a social problem and mustered support to fight it. He demonstrates his sincerity in action. He has adopted seven children afflicted with thalassaemia! This is selflessness of the highest order, requiring humongous

courage to act when there are so many other commitments in life. That is the quality social leadership calls for!

Behind this successful man there are a few support systems. I need to mention for the benefit of those who may want to emulate him. His immediate family perfectly understands his aspirations and drive, and acknowledges the happiness it feels because of his service to society. He gives his family whatever time is left over after he meets his priorities and commitments to blood donations and other social activities. He gets equally strong support from his employer, Indian Bank. While Rajkumar work hard at his official duties, and enjoys excellent relations with the customers of the bank, he has become the ambassador of the bank in many senses. The bank and its employees stand firm with him in fulfilling his call of conscience to serve the needy the best way he can. A third factor is his network of friends, who see Rajkumar as an embodiment of love for fellow humans. They consider him a perfect person in fulfilling commitments based on trust and

faith. The strength of this network can be realized by studying a recent incident when there was an SOS call to him from a patient in New Thippasumudra, Bangalore, who was about to undergo an emergency operation. Rajkumar connected with someone at Bangalore and the demand for blood was fulfilled in 30 minutes. Such is the power of networking, where a couple of phone calls and the glad support of well-intended people saved a life.

It is amazing that Rajkumar has sustained his initiative for three decades!

It seems that Rajkumar is a compulsive, aggressive communicator capable of encouraging friends and colleagues to support his mission by using his oratory skills. He has presented papers in over 65 national and international forums and has given a number of radio talks. He has been involved in different levels of voluntary service, and has been a member of notable institutions such as the Red Cross and the State Blood Transfusion council. Incidentally, leadership in social activities is recognized and motivated through

awards! He has received about 119 awards, some of them the most prestigious recognition for organizing the highest number of blood donors in the state by the Government of Tamil Nadu. Such motivation leads to larger initiatives! He proposes to set up a model blood bank exclusively run by voluntary blood donors in association with an NGO, aiming to provide blood to all needy patients at all times. Further, he intends to open a dementia and Alzheimer care center to help people affected with these diseases.

We can conclude that for someone to carry on the task of organizing donations blood consistently over three decades, thereby serving the truly needy, requires a strong will, commitment, energy and the ability to keep one's head in the right place without bias and without getting tempted by the materialistic aspects of life. Remember that in Rajkumar's case all this was done while he was working full time with a leading bank and leading a normal family life. Rajkumar makes me feel that champions are driven by altruistic goals and excellent operational capabilities, and

thereby, make a difference to society. For such people, awards, recognition and market valuations are incidentals and not the driving goals of life.

Rajkumar's life ambitions are to ensure that no one dies for want of blood and that Tamilnadu is free of thalassemia within a decade. Well, for many this ambition it is quixotic! To me, it sounds bold and courageous! When Dr. V. Kurien thought India should lead in dairy production and launched the white revolution with the support of The World Bank, it would have sounded like an over-ambitious dream to most people. One must consider the vision of Rajkumar, which he has passionately built up over three decades! This must be encouraged and supported by all, especially by youth. If all of us identify the problems of society and are willing to act on eradicating them with commitment, like Rajkumar, we would take the world infinitely far!

— This is part of the book *"Incredible Champions"* authored by N. Chandrasekaran and published by Partridge Publishers 2014.

Inspiring Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

A European lady, Mrs. Gasque, gave a slip of paper on which was written: We are thankful to Nature and the Infinite Intelligence for your Presence among us. We appreciate that your Wisdom is founded upon pure Truth and the basic principle of Life and Eternity. We are happy that you remind us to "Be still and Know THAT". What do you consider the future of this Earth?

Answer: The answer to this question is contained in the other sheet. Be still and know that I AM GOD. "Stillness" here means "Being free from thoughts".

D.: This does not answer the question. The planet has a future - what is it to be?

M.: Time and space are functions of thoughts. If thoughts do not arise there will be no future or the Earth.

D.: Time and space will remain even if we do not think of them.

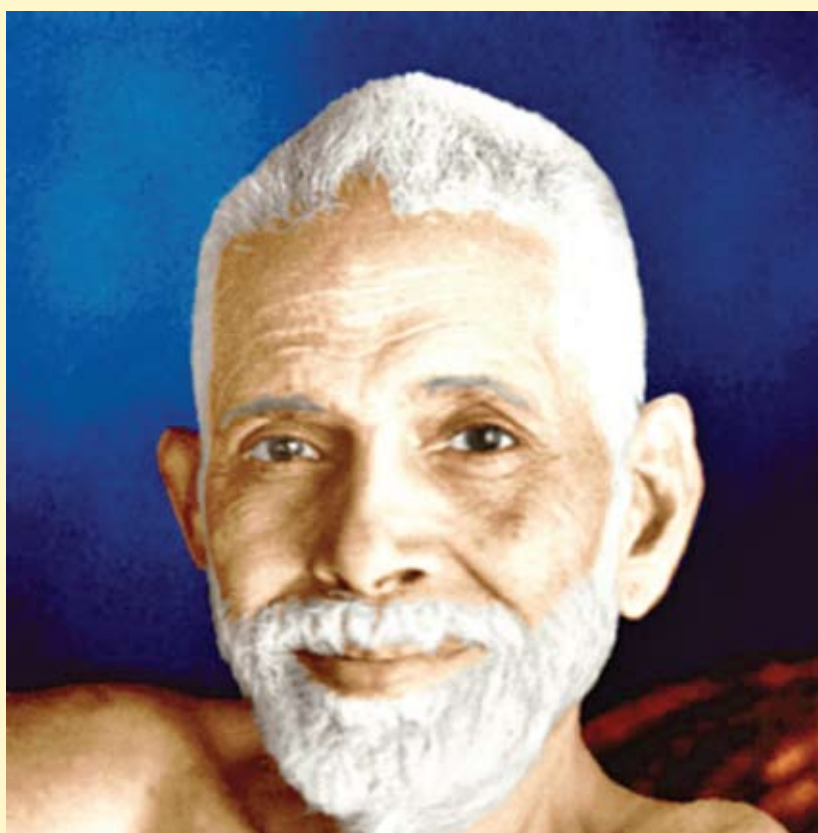
M.: Do they come and tell you that they are? Do you feel them in your sleep?

D.: I was not conscious in my sleep.

M.: And yet you were existing in your sleep.

D.: I was not in my body. I had gone out somewhere and jumped in here just before waking up.

M.: Your having been away in sleep and jumping in now are mere ideas. Where were you in sleep? You were only what you are, but with this



difference that you were free from thoughts in sleep.

D.: Wars are going on in the world. If we do not think, do the wars cease?

M.: Can you stop the wars? He who made the world will take care of it.

D.: God made the world and He is

not responsible for the present condition of the world. It is we who are responsible for the present state.

M.: Can you stop the wars or reform the world?

D.: No.

M.: Then why do you worry yourself about what is not possible for you? Take care of yourself and the

world will take care of itself.

D.: We are pacifists. We want to bring about Peace.

M.: Peace is always present. Get rid of the disturbances to Peace. This Peace is the Self. The thoughts are the disturbances. When free from them, you are Infinite Intelligence, i.e., the Self. There is Perfection and Peace.

D.: The world must have a future.

M.: Do you know what it is in the present? The world and all together are the same, now as well as in the future.

D.: The world was made by the operation of Intelligence on ether and atoms.

M.: All of them are reduced to Isvara and Sakti. You are not now apart from Them. They and you are one and the same Intelligence.

After a few minutes one lady asked: "Do you ever intend to go to America?"

M.: America is just where India is (i.e., in the plane of thought). Another (Spanish) lady: They say that there is a shrine in the Himalayas entering which one gets some strange vibrations which heal all diseases. Is it possible?

M.: They speak of some shrine in Nepal and also in other parts of the Himalayas where the people are said to become unconscious on entering them.

—Excerpted from talks with Shri Ramana Maharishi

A 200-YEAR-OLD LEGACY OF HOPE

In Chennai, heritage walks often take place along the Northern parts of the city, and why not? Most of the city's rich culture and glorious history can often be found carved into North Chennai's walls. From the harbour and Fort St George, to the famed Madras High Court or Higginbotham's bookstore, it's the Indo-Saracenic architecture of the region that usually becomes the true champion of its back-story. It's no wonder then that the city's first charitable organisation should lie in the same geographical vicinity. In fact, it's a rather well-known fact that Monegar Choultry near Chennai's Stanley Medical College and Hospital, where it where it first started back in 1781.

Newspapers and historians testify that it all began during a severe famine in erstwhile Madras, one that lasted for three years, up to 1784. The years preceding the famine were ones of war between the British and the Nawabs of Mysore. The ensuing political instability led to the famine. But in the midst of the commotion and trouble, a choultry was started by a village headman (or a Maniakarar; and hence the name Monegar) who would serve a humble meal of Kanji to people who came to seek refuge from the scourge of famine. Over time, the choultry became shelter for the aged, who came to live out the twilight of their lives under its shelter. When the Stanley Medical College was established in 1799, the choultry moved locations but still remained in the vicinity. It shifted to the choultry of Raja Venkatagiri, nearby.

Two centuries have ensured that Monegar Choultry is well and truly the oldest charitable establishment in Chennai. Such was its significance even back in the day, that during the war with Hyder Ali in 1782, establishments surrounding the choultry were ordered to be destroyed, while the choultry itself, was spared of the order. As word of its significance and work spread far and wide, the Nawab of Arcot came forward with a sizeable donation. From its early years, till date, some things have never changed about the choultry itself. Like its wooden columns and towering arches, reflective of the architecture of the 18th century: designs that stand the test of time, a reminder of its past. Even today, one look at the place is a reminder of Chennai's colonial past.

Back in the days, the choultry served those people who were abandoned by

their families. The aged were taken in, treated, provided with palliative care if needed, and their needs were taken care of until they breathed their last. In most cases, the choultry even oversaw their final rites. From its humble beginnings, the choultry has today, come a long way. The number of its inmates has increased, its operations have assumed more competence, and donations have also flown in. Food and clothes make the majority of donations that the choultry receives. Today, a steady stream of supplies has also made it to the choultry. From newspapers and magazines, to television sets for each block, the choultry has done rather well for itself. A number of the inmates pray at a temple nearby, and those who run the choultry have begun celebrating festivals with its inmates. The objective, it seems, is to create an environment of family and belonging for those living within the choultry's

The choultry's oldest hand, Bhavani, lives just across the road. For 33 years, Bhavani has tended to the needs of the choultry's inmates and is quite literally a shout away. Over the three decades that she's been around, the choultry has witnessed winds of change: from the arrangement of the beds and blocks, to the food that it serves, 33 years have seen it come a long way. "There are many old age homes in Chennai. But, the reason people prefer to live here is because they get new clothes and their own plates. I was a geriatric assistant when I joined Monegar. I was trained by Red Cross and also studied typewriting," says Bhavani.

The administration of Monegar Choultry falls on the shoulders of the Collector of Madras even till date. "There are 55 people living here now. We only enrol people who are orphaned, over 65 years of age, and are certified by the government health

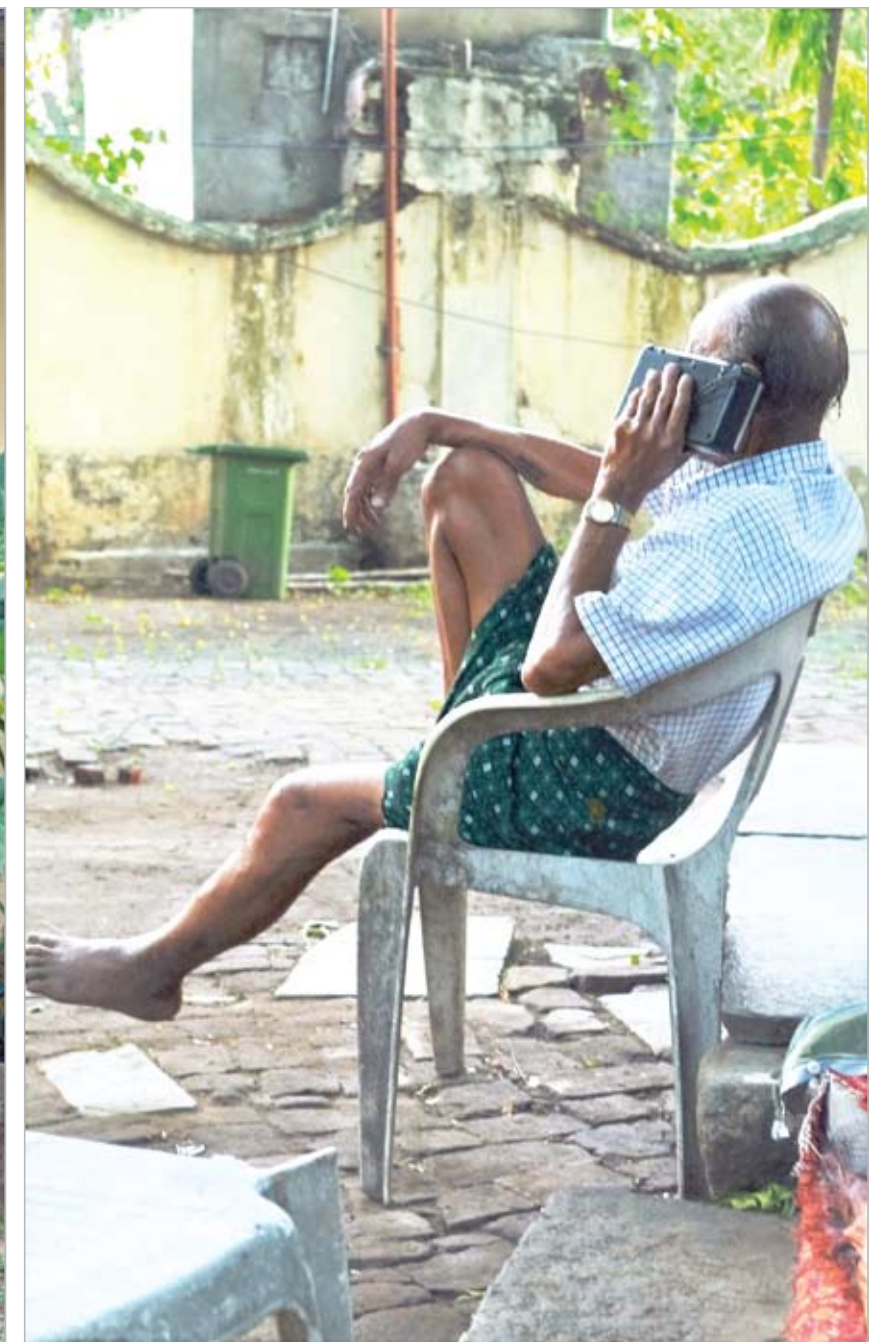


walls. The home is also well-staffed with a cook to provide meals for its inhabitants — breakfast, lunch, dinner, tea and snacks. The women help in the kitchen, and the men at the choultry help out with the gardening.

officer. We ensure that the inmates are capable of taking care of themselves as it is a challenge to source caretakers."

The only rule that the choultry operates on, is simply the fact that on demise of its inmates, the mortal

remains of the latter need to be sent to the Stanley Medical College to serve academic purposes. "I get full satisfaction working here and I want to end my life living here," she signs off.



The only rule that the choultry operates on, is simply the fact that on demise of its inmates, the mortal remains of the latter need to be sent to the Stanley Medical College to serve academic purposes.

Forgot your child's vaccination date? vRemind is here to help

Nagesh decided to use technology to help solve this issue by founding vRemind, a social not-for-profit organization, which is committed to reduce child mortality by offering a simple and handy solution to the mobile driven community.



Pic Courtesy: vRemind

Nagesh Chukka, Assistant Vice President from Wells Fargo in Hyderabad, was shocked when he realized he had forgotten about the vaccination appointment of his child. On checking with his friends, he was told that this was a prevalent problem, as there was no good way of tracking vaccination schedules. According to WHO, in India alone, every year, 100,000 kids (aged under five) are losing their lives to vaccine preventable diseases. Even though the government, under Universal Immunization Program (UIP) provides free vaccination, the reach and coverage of this program is very low.

Nagesh decided to use technology to help solve this issue by founding vRemind, a social not-for-profit organization, which is committed to reduce child mortality by offering a simple and handy solution to the mobile driven community. "vRemind was started based on the personal pain I dealt with after I missed the vaccine appointment for my child," says Nagesh. He and his colleague Srinivas Alluri got together to find a solution for an issue that is wide spread amongst the urban and rural population.

vRemind is a mobile-based health app that gives timely vaccination reminders to parents with children up to the age of five years by sending out one reminder seven days before the appointment, and one more, a day before the scheduled

vaccination date. To increase the reach of this solution and not limiting it to just smart phones, the reminders are sent out as an SMS.

Nagesh and Srinivas are leveraging the low-cost tools of the digital revolution to provide simplified solutions that make an impact on the healthcare sector by hopefully saving the lives of thousands of kids in India.

Currently vRemind has more than 10,000 plus subscribers (parents/caregivers) and close to 31,000 SMS reminders have been sent out till date. Since its launch, the app has been enhanced to include multiple channels of registration (along-side the already existing SMS program) like partner networks (hospitals and other birth places) and through website registrations. Nagesh claims that parents using this service are very pleased with the service and that most of them are now relying on this to be alerted in vaccination schedules. Currently the organization is tied up with LifeSpring Hospitals, a chain of twelve branches in Hyderabad, providing low-cost maternal care for the urban poor. They are also in discussions with three more low cost maternity/pediatric clinics.

A similar service in India is currently being provided by IAP-Immunizeindia. When parents opt-in to the service by sending a text message to the national shortcode 566778 from any mobile phone

in India, they receive text message reminders for the next twelve years with the vaccination schedules for the child.

The founders point out that their major challenge is frequent SIM changes and penetration of mobile phone usage in the rural areas. To handle the diverse population in the country, many among whom are uneducated, there is also a need of a multi-language support, and an IVR. vRemind wants to address the

accessibility issue by tying up with other health networks like ASHA (Accredited social health activists) and Anganwadi who currently have a good reach in the rural sectors.

vRemind is currently self-funded and is looking to work with hospitals to provide subscription models and white labeled solutions to generate revenue and sustain the operations, however, SMS reminders would continue to remain free for all the parents registered with the app directly.

Along with establishing partnerships with local communities/NGOs and low cost clinics, vRemind is looking to partner with government organizations and international NGOs like UNICEF and the WHO. The vision of vRemind for the next few years is to be the go-to mHealth providers in prenatal and postnatal care for the mother and child, which would also include their nutritional requirements. With the data they collect from their subscribers, there is also a plan to provide effective insights, and analytics to improve the supply chain management of vaccines. As the solution is scalable, it has potential to expand globally, to all the countries with mobile penetration.

—Dipti Chavali

*This article was first published in
www.billionbulbs.com*

vRemind is a mobile-based health app that gives timely vaccination reminders to parents with children up to the age of five years by sending out one reminder seven days before the appointment, and one more, a day before the scheduled vaccination date

Bringing people closer to environment

Environmental studies is a subject that has garnered so much attention in the last four decades, thanks to the discovery of disturbing trends like the global warming, depletion of ozone layer, extinction of species, loss of biodiversity, etc. The hard truth is that every such isolated event is connected to a larger picture that scares the very existence of mother earth. Every individual needs to therefore play a role to reverse these effects to the possible limits. Alongside, we should also know that people must be aware of all these phenomena and relate them to their everyday lives, so that they can find ways of mitigating these effects at their own levels.

In Tamil Nadu, the efforts to educate the general public on environment and its pertinent literature, recognised the need to develop the subject's vocabulary in the local language, Tamil. Thanks to Poovulagin Nanbargal meaning Friends of Environment, a large section of the society has now been educated on environment through simple literature.

Poovulagin Nanbargal was established 30 years ago by a group of friends — Nedunjeliyan, a bank employee turned environmental activist; and Purushothaman. Since then, the organisation evolved every decade, becoming more active and articulate.

In the first decade, a lot of time was spent in introducing the vocabulary and books related to the subject were translated, published and circulated among the public. International research on environmental studies was simultaneously made available in Tamil and the readership kept growing.

"We introduced Tamil literature on global warming 25 years ago. Discussion of the subject and its current developments in different gatherings and events became a regular aspect of our work," says Devaneyyan, presently a member of the core group.

The organisation's ideology is that environmental action needs to be politicised for critical thinking to be inculcated. "We want to influence people to question why their village has no water or electricity; why it is drought ridden while other villages in similar demographics have surplus production of crops. Globalisation, industrialisation and the corporate culture has spelled doom to so many villages, who now pay the price for comforts like electricity and water supply in the cities," he laments.

The second decade saw outreach programmes to spread this kind of awareness and interest in the discourse. In the third decade, members came together to revive the organisation so that the impact of their work was sustainable. "We want people from all classes to learn the effects of environmental changes and



categorically see how their lifestyle has contributed to it. Writing in magazines, newspapers, speaking at public events and participating in debates/ declamations became more regular and organised. Our team had members from varied backgrounds, and therefore it was possible for us to strengthen every effort," he says.

Poovulagin Nanbargal is therefore a collective action group that has no specific hierarchy. Members at Poovulagin Nanbargal are allowed to contribute in their own ways. Some write books and articles for popular magazines like the Ananda Vikatan while some lawyer members help fight law suits. The group also has members from the software industry who manage the website and email communication. "We are all not environmental activists. We are teachers, doctors, government employees, bankers, engineers, journalists, lawyers, writers, film makers, etc who have come together for the sake of our environment. Interestingly, none of us are paid for our

work. We all spend our time and strengths and sustain ourselves from revenue raised from the sale of our books, subscription costs, donations and fundraising events like the millet festival. We also receive support from our awareness programme participants. As a policy, we do not accept contributions from corporates, nor do we approach them," says Devaneyyan categorically.

A magazine dedicated to environmental issues called the 'Poovulagu' was introduced in 2009. It was received very well and the increasing readership made Poovulagin Nanbargal realise that children must also have something to read about environment. Soon, they introduced an exclusive magazine on environment for children, called 'Minmini', the first of its kind. Real life stories that children and adults can relate to has helped create a healthy discourse on the subject. As the reach widened, the group began to move out to schools and colleges and conducted awareness workshops and

seminars. With the increasing subscription of the magazines, the group was able to make new inroads in reaching out to new communities.

Poovulagin Nanbargal has led active campaigns against the introduction Bt Brinjal, Bt Cotton. "We have 45 varieties of brinjals, all local, healthy, unpolluted, tasty varieties. Why do we need Bt Brinjal at all?," he asks.

The ground work done by Poovulagin Nanbargal group in Thanjavur and

Thiruvavur on the 'methane project' has raised wide awareness and

farmers are now questioning the rationale behind this project, that is likely to wipe off so many acres of fertile agricultural land.

Kudankulam atomic power plant, according to Poovulagin

Nanbargal does not have all the safety

measures installed. "Atomic energy is expensive and highly unsafe. We have other alternate sources of energy. The same investment could be used to strengthen efforts towards solar energy, tidal energy, wind energy, hydro power and others. There is no macro perspective while deciding on these matters. Such issues disturb us," he says.

Devaneyyan feels that investment in creating more power is not the only solution. In fact, it is only one part of the story. It is time that we also concentrated on other issues in the chain like the problems in distribution, losses due to transmission and others. There is technology available to improve these fronts, and the government has to show inclination to try out these low cost solutions too.

Poovulagin Nanbargal has been fighting cases against sand mining, GM food, Elephant Corridor project and others at the High Court and Supreme Courts. Devaneyyan is so disturbed about the lack of environmental friendly policies and guidelines that must decide the approval of any project, be it construction of a dam or a highway.

Poovulagin Nanbargal dreams of seeing an environmental friendly policy in place that proves the country's ability to choose what is suitable and sustainable for us, acknowledging our sovereignty in protecting our environment and biodiversity. To anybody who knows these friends, it has become their dream too!

—Shanmuga Priya. T

We introduced Tamil literature on global warming 25 years ago. Discussion of the subject and its current developments in different gatherings and events became a regular aspect of our work

Quality – A Way of Life (Part-1)

The most important aspect that needs focus irrespective of size, duration, number of people or context is an attention to Quality. Quality is a way of life and an attitude. It is not just a dimension that adds to the project. Quality is an amazing amalgamation of cost, time and delivery all driving towards satisfaction of stakeholders. This can be seen as the definition of quality. Dr. Edward Deming defined quality as “Quality is defined from the customer’s point of view as anything that enhances their satisfaction”. Philip Crosby simply put it as “conformance to requirement”. Juran’s key words were “fitness for use” and “Freedom from deficiencies”. Broh said quality is “the degree of excellence”. All these definitions from the Gurus of Quality indicates that Quality is just not for product but also for services as a way of life.

Since it was much easier to institute the concept of quality in manufacturing units for products, it took some time to apply it to the services industry. It took longer for the concept to move from industries to institutions and then to the social organizations. Today, with the penetration of technology, media and accessibility of information, the demand for quality from the stake holders has risen manifold. This makes the social organizations to deeply question the standard at which each of their processes and services are being delivered to the end user.

The social organizations have been largely caught up with several beliefs with regard to focus on quality.

Some of them are –

1. When the services are offered free to the end user, they cannot demand quality
2. Quality is a costly affair
3. Quality is time consuming and projects don’t have that luxury of time
4. Quality is a fault finding mechanism without ability to make the changes
5. With limited funding ensuring the service is reached is much more important than working on bettering quality
6. The minimum acceptable level of quality is all that is needed when you are an NGO. The rest are luxury and bonus which can come only if all other requirements are met
7. Achieving highest quality is a long drawn process and it will take time
8. Improvements on quality is a specialist job and social organizations cannot afford too many specialists

9. The quality tools, methodologies and processes are from the manufacturing and corporate sector which cannot be applied in social organizations which is a service sector.

These beliefs have kept quality tools and processes far away from entering into the core functions of the project management. Mediocrity has entered over a period of time as an acceptable feature in the functioning of the organization and every decision that is taken. The certification processes are seen with skepticism and disinterest. But with the advent of corporates connecting to social organizations through CSR and increase in International Bank funding, the use of quality tools and certifications are becoming mandatory. The unpreparedness has caused the social organizations to sometimes adopt wrong tools or struggle

with poor customisation while adopting quality as a way of life. It is no new news when the certifications and usage of tools become just an exercise to be completed to get the funding. This defeats the very objective of instituting quality as a way of life.

Quality brings a number of benefits –

- Quality supports dependability
- Dependability supports speed
- Speed supports flexibility and
- Flexibility supports cost

The above said chain supports the definition of quality would drive any leader to get the best, dependable, fast, flexible and most optimal cost in all services and processes.

Some of the most popular quotes about quality throws light on the change in beliefs that social organizations need to have :

- “It is easier to do a job right than to

explain why you didn’t.”

- “The quality of an organization can never exceed the quality of the minds that make it up.”
- “Quality means doing it right when no one is looking.”
- “Quality is the result of a carefully constructed cultural environment. It has to be the fabric of the organization, not part of the fabric.”
- “Quality is not an act, it is a habit.”

In order to make quality a habit there has to be a paradigm shift where the social organizations change the way they see, they think and they need to question the basics and start working on improving each of the processes that exist in the organization. When quality has to become a way of life it is not enough if the focus is on the obvious aspects like reducing defects, errors, reworks and issues of dissatisfaction. The focus has to be on the beliefs and orientation of the people towards excellence, perfection, service, stretch, commitment and so on. The organization will have to work on changing the mindset along with improving processes and introducing checks and compliances.

One of the most commonly know model the ice-berg model gives a very interesting connect to the fundamentals of understanding quality.

The figure shows that 80% of effort remains to be done with the attitudes of the people who work in the organizations. The important actions that social organizations need to take are –

- To tap the beliefs of the people towards quality
- Make quality as a core value and work on integrating it into every walk of life within the organization
- Understand and draw out the processes in the organization clearly
- Understand and select the appropriate quality tools, measures and certifications that will enable quality improvements in all functions of the organization
- Make appropriate changes wherever necessary and integrate the new processes with the vision and values of the organization
- Make the evaluations a periodical regular process and a way of life

The next article will elaborate on the various quality tools and techniques along with certifications that will enable the social organization to move towards excellence.

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath and Prathaap B



Charities in Chennai That Was Madras



Rev. Fr. G. Joseph Antony Samy delivering the keynote address



NGO representatives with CSIM and CIOSA members

The city witnessed its oldest NGOs being brought into limelight at the event titled 'Charities in Chennai that was Madras' organized by CSIM in association with LIVE – Loyola and CIOSA on 25th August 2015.

Presentations were made by LIVE-CSIM students on the oldest social organisations who have been rendering services for more than 50 years in the city, namely Andhra Mahila Sabha, Avvai Home, Guild of Service, Madras Seva Sadan, Indian Council Children Welfare, Mercy Homes, Bala mandir, Monegar Choultry, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals and Voluntary Health Services.

Close to 300 people representing NGOs, social workers and students were present during the event. 6 out of 10 oldest NGOs who were present were presented with souvenirs.

The Chief Guest for the event was Rev Fr Dr. G. Joseph Antony Samy, SJ, Principal of Loyola College, Chennai. He spoke about the very origin of Madras by referring to the most ancient tribal group called 'Kurumban' who belonged to the Pallio lithic age. His speech was not only informative but also interesting as he shared about how the Portuguese named 'Santhome', and 'Luz'. He also mentioned about how the name of Chennai was derived and drew reference to the most beautiful work authored by Late Sarojini Varadappan on 'Neighbourhood'.

He appealed to the NGOs to address the most challenging issues that are being faced by us - eradication of mosquitoes and free access to portable.

Mr P.N. Subramanian, Managing Trustee of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (CSIM's parent body) highlighted the significance of the Madras Day Celebrations in terms of various activities that are being initiated, sponsored and conducted by several organizations in the city.

Speaking on the occasion Ms. Marie Banu, Director of CSIM said: "This is a unique event that traces the work of oldest charities in Chennai. This time, we have meticulously chosen the 10 organisations who have serving selflessly in our city for over 50 years. This is just a beginning! We plan to organise this event every year during the Madras Week."

Mr Prasanna – Programme Director, CIOSA spoke about how the concept of the event triggered in him. He quoted a book called 'Vella Yanai' written by Jaya Mohan which had recorded otherwise the sense of apathy and failure on the part of the very society when it did not care to render help and support to the poor and the deprived lot against the acute drought that happened in the year 1886. He appealed to NGOs and the youth to have the collective responsibility to protect humanity during distress.



Sudha Yegnanarayanan



Pradeep Kumar



Chitra Ragulan



Pauline Violet

“Charity needs to be more broad-based.”

Shri S. Muthiah tells **Marie Banu** about his childhood, writings, and much more.

Subbiah Muthiah, writer, journalist, cartographer, amateur historian and heritage activist, is known for his writings on the history of Chennai.

He is the founder of the fortnightly Madras Musings, one of the principal coordinators of the annual Madras Day celebrations, and helped found the Madras Book Club.

Muthiah is a regular columnist for The Hindu, writing on Madras past and present.

It 2002, Muthiah was awarded the MBE by the Queen of England for his work on heritage and environmental conservation.

In an exclusive interview, Shri Muthiah tells Marie Banu about his childhood, writings, and much more.

About your childhood and education?

I lived half my life in Ceylon. Those were the days when ethnicity was not an issue, all of us were Ceylonese.

I went to St. Thomas' Preparatory School started by an Englishman, W.T. Keble. I was there from third standard to the sixth. Keble has been the single most important influence in my life. He encouraged us to read, write, and take an interest in all that was going on around us. By the time I was 8 years old, I was reading, writing and hooked on history as Keble told it. I learnt my Ceylon history from the stories Keble related, not from text books. It made me a storyteller and a chronicler, not a historian.

I then did my Senior Cambridge at Montfort, Yercaud, and Inter at Lawrence in Murree in pre-partition Punjab (now in Pakistan). When I was 16 I left for the US, did a degree in Engineering, learnt nothing. But 40 percent of the subjects were Humanities. That was great! With those credits, I switched to International Affairs, did my BA and MA, thinking that I would join the Foreign Service. I had left both countries before they were independent, but on return to Colombo in 1951 faced a citizenship problem.

Can you share your experience working with The Times of Ceylon?

With the Foreign Service out of reach, I joined The Times of Ceylon, having in the US been involved with campus journalism and 'stringing' for the local daily as Campus Correspondent. I was the first Asian to be elected to Pi Delta Epsilon, the American honour society for campus journalism. I was with the Times till 1968. I was the first graduate to join the paper.

Those days, the Senior Cambridge and London Matriculation standards were much higher than today's Indian BA's. My boss had only done his Senior Cambridge, his boss only his Inter. They were far more aware about what was happening in the

world than me, were more widely read and wrote better, although I had three degrees to my name, I learnt a lot from them!

I started as Foreign News Editor, became Features Editor, then Editor of the Sunday Times, The Times Annual and the Group's magazine publications. I developed a wide range of interests – from politics and international affairs to women's fashion, the arts and sport. I wrote a sports column for 15 years as well as various political columns.

I also 'stringed' for leading British newspapers – the News Chronicle, Daily Mail, and The Sunday Observer and its Foreign News Service – and The Mail, Madras. As well as for three international feature services.

From working for a newspaper in Ceylon to writing History of Madras. Can you share your journey?

In 1968 I had to make a decision – India or Ceylon. I was due to become Editor of The Times, but it was insisted I be a citizen. By that time that was out of the question. For Indian citizenship I had better qualifications – so there I was, coming to Madras. There was an opening at TTK's, who had just set up a printing and publishing unit for maps, atlases and tourist guides. While in Ceylon, I had done a lot of work for their Tourism Department. And doing The Times Annual and magazines, I would go down to the press to see them printed the way I wanted. I got interested in printing.

While at MAPS, my first output was a map and guide to Madras. I did not know about Madras history then, though I knew where the Chepauk Stadium, the cinema theatres and the Racecourse were. For that first production, I read whatever I could on Madras. I discovered that many people who went on to fame, fortune, and notoriety began their lives here – Robert Clive, Warren Hastings, Thomas Pitt, Elihu Yale. This got me interested, not in Madras, but these people.

I joined MAPS for editorial work, but the German in-charge (it was an Indo-German company) left after three months. I was asked to take over and run it. And there I stayed till 1990. Then I became head of Corporate Communications at TTK's till 2010.

Your first book and your passion for writing?

Around 1972, Abraham Eraly, a History Lecturer at MCC, and who became a well-known author later, was feeling bored with teaching. He decided to moonlight producing house magazines. He printed these journals at MAPS. One day I told him



that I had helped with a magazine in Ceylon which looked at Colombo only. He picked up the idea and decided to bring out a magazine on Madras, Aside, the first city magazine in India. It was an excellent magazine and I began to write for it on the historical aspects of Madras and on sport.

When my wife was cleaning house one Saraswati Pooja, she asked me to clear the piles of notes on Madras I had accumulated or do something with them. It was then that I wrote Madras Discovered. The first edition was 160 pages, it is more than three times bigger today.

At the time, N S Ramaswami, very knowledgeable about History, was with the Indian Express. He was asked by Parry & Co to write its history. He began researching on it, but in a few months he passed away. Parry's then asked me to complete the work. Once the book came out, it was much appreciated. The rest, now 35 books later, is history!

From Madras to Chennai – your views on the change?

Madras to Chennai has not been a major change. It is still pretty much a conservative city. There is a story I narrate to anybody who asks me the question. One day at a party, there came this statuesque girl who was striking looking, wore a figure-hugging dress with the skirt four inches above the knee, and was well made up. Everybody thought she was a film star.

Later in the party, I was discussing Madras heritage with a man whom I vaguely knew. When this girl came towards us and spoke in absolute Brahminical Tamil, I was floored! He introduced me to her as his wife.

About a month later, at a wedding, I saw a tall girl in a nine-yard saree wearing flowers and jewellery. Up closer, I found it was the same girl. To me, that is Madras! You can switch from a past to modern and modern to past without losing anything of your own identity. We still draw kolams and we have more temples, churches, and mosques probably than any other city in India. We are a conservative city, but comfortable with the modern.

About charities and the mindsets of Madrasis?

A good deal of support today is given only to the religious. But more needs to be done for education, healthcare, the aged and the poor. I would like more support for heritage in all its forms and the environment. Organisations do help here and there, but it's not enough. 25 companies support Madras Musings, which is welcome. But so many other causes are crying for greater help. Charity needs to be more broad-based, and seen not as charity but as social responsibility. CSR may change the outlook at one level, but how about individuals who could help?