

# Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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About Smile Foundation and its activities



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Principal, Stella Maris College



# From the Editor

Dear Reader,

Teachers are the backbone of the Indian education system. Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Former President of India, was an ideal teacher and a staunch believer of education. As a professor, he taught in many universities in India as well as abroad. He loved the teaching profession and the teacher's community. It is in his honour that Teachers' Day is celebrated in India on the 5th of September each year.

Dr. Radhakrishnan believed that the teachers are the real makers of the future citizens of India. He said: True teachers are those who help us think for ourselves.

Teachers have played a very important role since ancient India. They are like real potters who give our life a shape and enlighten us with the light of knowledge. We should realise their value not only on the occasion of Teachers' Day, but throughout.

Nothing pleases a teacher as much as 'Respect and Gratitude'. The present generation should value the contribution of their teachers and it is our responsibility to instil this value in them.

Conversations Today salutes the teaching community for their commendable service to our society.

—Marie Banu

**Editorial**  
**Latha Suresh**  
**Marie Banu**

# Rivers are our energy

*"The care of rivers is not a question of rivers, but of the human heart." —Tanaka Shozo, 1910*



**R**iver as life. River as energy. Both these aspects about rivers and water has made me respond to the rally for rivers. It struck me that we are so ignorant of the five elements that sustain us. We are composed of 60% water and this is nurtured by the water in nature. Yet, we take the water in rivers for granted.

When I think of rivers and my childhood, I fondly remember the river patalganga. My house was located on the banks of Patalganga, in Maharashtra. I used to spend my evenings on the river side, watching the river flow. The serenity of being

in touch with the river's energy is so alive in me, even now. Just watching a river flow, creates an inner energy beyond words.

Currently I am volunteering for Rally for Rivers. An initiative which is promoting awareness to revitalize our rivers. An important element of the rally is to promote government action to protect the river beds by planting trees on either side of the river bank. An elegant solution which enables the soil hold more water during rains. As our rivers are rainfed, the trees help in increasing precipitation and in also retaining rainwater. For this solution to be

implemented along with development and growth, we need government resolve and people's resolve too.

You can read about the rally at [www.rallyforrivers.org](http://www.rallyforrivers.org). To begin with, please give a missed call to 8000980009 to show your support. Share with more people too.

Revitalising our rivers is revitalising ourselves. This is our chance to open our hearts and connect with nature. Let us not be transactional, atleast with nature!

Everyone who consumes water must rally for rivers. Isn't that a no brainer?

## 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](mailto:bhuvaneshwari@teamthink.co.in) for arranging Positive Energy training and Coaching sessions.



# Empowering livelihoods

Globalisation and liberalisation ushered in a new era of development, and also affected the course of traditional livelihoods. While this also had an impact on occupational diversity, rendering some of them redundant exacerbated the divide between haves and have-nots. Growing aspirations, emerging opportunities in dominant sectors, new patterns of migration in both rural and urban areas continue to question the relevance of some traditional livelihoods even today. “Allowing our people to give up on traditional forms of livelihood for new vocations in demand is a dangerous predicament. Livelihoods patterns must evolve over a continuum. If not revive, it will be wiser to explore new applications of traditional knowledge; else we stand to lose a complete generation of knowledge and skills,” warns Mr.A.Arulkumar, founder of Shine India Educational Trust in Tindivanam, Tamil Nadu.

A native of this district, Arulkumar completed his schooling in Chennai. After graduating in Mechanical Engineering and Business Administration, he decided to establish his own business venture in order to plan his time between career, social activities, and personal life. “I always had my priorities set. Empowering the downtrodden was a moral responsibility that I felt since my school days. I owe it to my school that imbibed these values in me. I still examine every issue based on these values,” he says, emphasising the need for every individual to relate themselves to social issues and rationalise their actions. That does sound ideal and utopian, but according to Arulkumar it is this relatability that can inculcate values of social responsibility.

Content with the performance of his hardware and electronics business, he also spent significant time in volunteering for local NGOs. Every time he volunteered for an organisation, he got to examine a new dimension of poverty that was invariably a function of sustainable livelihood. With every new organisation he worked for, he made new friends and attended different training programmes. “I got a sense of the interventions being done in Tindivanam district and the graph of social inequity bemused me. While some programmes seemed to work with a long-term vision, others seemed to be pocketed due to spatial and project biases,” he says. Determined to improve the lives of the marginalised population from his perspective, he founded Shine India Educational Trust in 2015. The Trust began operations by



organising simple health camps and the community interactions alongside these camps helped him study the communities from the lens of an insider.

Entry into the communities exposed him to those dimensions of poverty which were only observations until now. He was disappointed to learn that the linkage between formal education and revival of local economy was absolutely missing. “The more evident this became, I wanted to explore the potential education per se could have in building new livelihoods. But, where does the cycle of impact start? This is when my friends and I realised the power of social entrepreneurship,” explains Arulkumar.

CSIM’s Post Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management

encouraged Arulkumar to explore social entrepreneurship within the context of his work. “I was surprised to learn that goal setting was a skill in itself. The journey from vision to issue based intervention then followed, requiring you to exhaustively analyse all dimensions of the issue concerned in order to identify the suitable path for change. I felt reassured,” smiles Arulkumar.

The art of pottery was losing its relevance and the local potters’ community led a miserable life. Having dismissed the scope for revival of pottery, he set on to match the skill base with new opportunities. This is when CSIM enabled a collaboration with IIT Madras. Students from IIT Jodhpur and traditional potters had developed an indigenous water filter called the G-Filter that can provide clean drinking water to rural households at a low cost. The prototype was a success and was capable of providing one litre of clean drinking water at a cost of 50 rupees, thereby making it affordable and accessible. Produced by baked clay technology it was also an opportunity for the potters to upgrade their skills.

Shine India Educational Trust has so far

trained 40 potters from four villages in Tindivanam district to manufacture these G-Filters for IIT Madras. “Potters were introduced to a new form of livelihood. As information travelled, local demand for these filters also grew. G-Filters emerged to be a low cost solution besides providing a local skilling opportunity with numerous benefits,” says Arulkumar, overwhelmed by the role of technology in establishing social equity. “I initially thought they were two ends of a spectrum but now, I have learnt that the onus is on us to bring them together with a vision,” he says.

With the G-Filters keeping the potters occupied, the Trust has embarked on a new mission to establish a website that can promote online sale of products manufactured by the social enterprises and non-profit organisations in the State of Tamil Nadu. “No matter how good a product is, unless it reaches the end consumer all its social and economic values will stand annulled. As the Trust intends to build new livelihoods, it is only necessary that we establish a platform such as this to route sustainable revenue to the trust,” he asserts.

—Shanmuga Priya.T



# Focusing On A Strong Vision

*Affordable eye care player, Specsmakers, aims to set up 500 stores by the year 2020 by going deeper into the current market and entering new markets such as Hyderabad and Pune. It also plans to raise US \$10 million to fuel its expansion plans.*

**P**ratik Shah's entrepreneurial quest began after he graduated with a degree in business management from the U.S. After a year-long stint as an analyst in New York, he returned to India in 2004 with an idea of fulfilling his desire to become a business owner. "Coming from a family of entrepreneurs, I was keen on setting up something of my own," says Shah. While he weighed the pros and cons of entering the financial or dotcom business, he decided to build on something that his family was familiar with - the optical business. "My father used to be a supplier of lenses and used to run a wholesale unit. He understood that the opportunity is in the retail business but was not keen on expanding," recalls Shah. The junior Shah instead took the retail route and opened his first store, Venkateshwara Optics, in 2005.

Aside from the familiarity aspect, Shah also understood the huge growth potential of operating in a Rs. 2,000 crore market in 2005, of which only one per cent comprised organized players. His work experience in the U.S. further exposed him to the nitty-gritties of international optical chains, thus helping him realize the gaps in the Indian market. "There were very few trusted opticians offering good quality, value for money products and services. Moreover, people had to commute long distances to buy the products that they wanted" says he, adding, "I decided that if I wanted to create a chain of stores, I needed to create a brand. I wanted to connect to the masses." He wanted to break the myth that if something is cheap, the quality is bad. Instead he decided to deliver affordable eye care with great service. Thus was founded Specsmakers in 2007. The company opened its first store in Chennai, with a strong focus on quality, service, warranty and affordability. Within two years, with the inauguration of its tenth store, it shifted from a multi-brand outlet to a single brand outlet, and also began retailing its own brand of lenses and frames.

## Taking Baby Steps

In the early days, Shah's regular travels to countries like China gave him

exposure to better pricing and quality of eye care products. In fact, one of the strategies he and his team had adopted; that of opening smaller stores in Chennai, soon helped them crack the model of being an affordable optician. "Today, there are four reasons why people come to us: reasonable price, value for money, unconditional warranty and service," he adds. Once the company was confident that it understood the model well, it decided to enter Madurai but soon understood that it couldn't open beyond two to three stores there. "Our key sales come because of advertisements. So, more the number of stores in a city, the lower the advertisement cost per store," says Shah. Hence, it altered its market entry strategy to focus on those cities which allowed it to open around 50 to 100 stores. With this policy, its next destination was Bengaluru, which it entered in January 2016. By December the same year, the number of outlets rose to 30 in Bengaluru. "On the whole, we have 91 stores now in the three cities; Chennai, Bengaluru and Madurai," shares its founder. The company plans to hit the 100 milestone shortly.

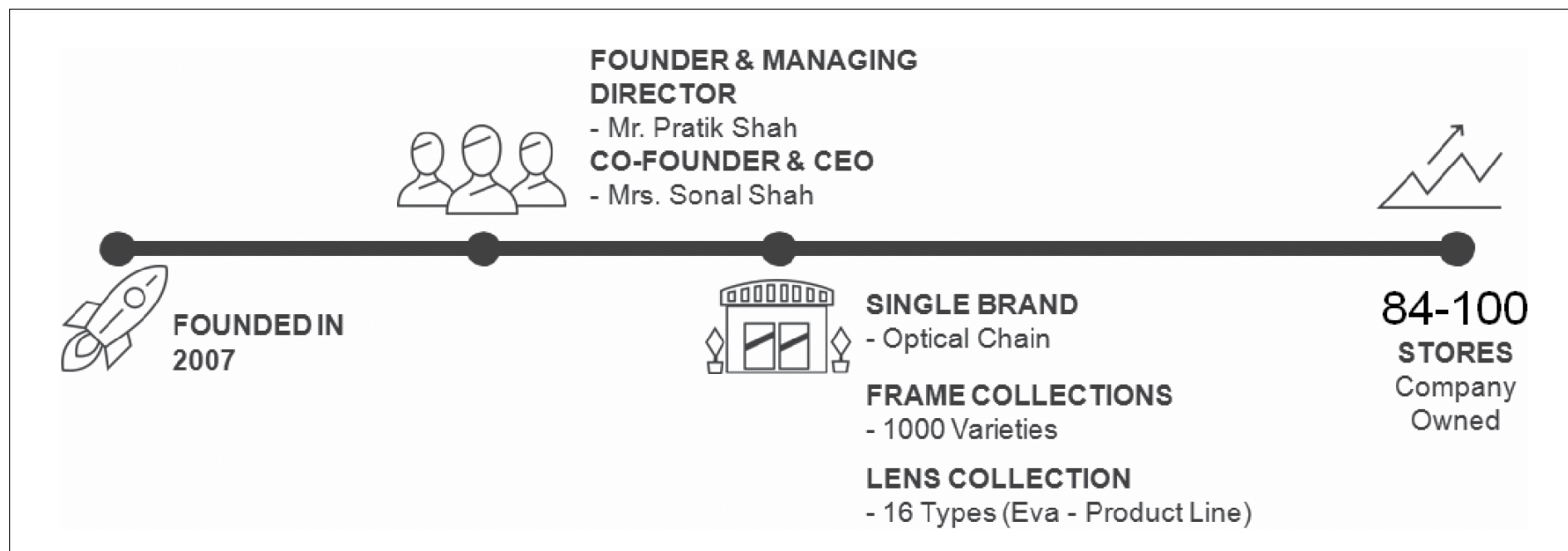
## A Test of Growth

When the company was incorporated, the main challenge it faced was in making people understand that eye care is important and not something they should consider on a need-basis. Moreover, the presence of many smaller stores led to customers facing a dilemma in deciding among brands and outlets. "These apart, educating the market still remains a challenge. There are not many eye care colleges or sales training institutes here," voices Shah. For example, it's not easy to find a qualified optometrist because there are not many training institutes in the city. More importantly, there is a scarcity of English training optometry schools. "There are a lot of schools but the communication skills are poor and this is a vacuum. We are trying to create an academy where people with optometry qualification can get trained," says Shah.

While the company faces stiff competition from online and offline



*Specsmakers doesn't believe in sporadic expansion; it prefers to open multiple outlets in each city in a shorter span of time. And, to compliment this pace of growth, it hires 20 per cent in excess, typically, 10 hires in advance before entering a new city.*



channels, Shah believe that they have carved a niche for the brand by specifically targeting the middle and upper middle class markets, where affordability is a key criterion. That being said, Shah is also quick to add that, “A lot of premium customers have started coming to us because they also want value for money.”

With a keen eye on marketing, the company spends around 10 percent of its revenue on advertisements and plans to increase this to 15 per cent to 18 per cent by 2017. Its activities include press, television, digital marketing and BTL activities around the store. “Our sales have grown substantially in 2017 owing to our aggressive advertising campaigns,” says he.

#### The Design Aspect

While Shah, on one hand, travels extensively to industry events to understand design and engineering of

lenses and frames, his in-house design team in China and Hong Kong, on the other hand, stays on its toes to create relevant styles for its customers. “In this aspect, this industry is quite simple. You can look at what brands are creating and create the same moulds in your design. Anything that moves fast gets accepted in India,” says he. However, design trends are more local according to the personality of the demographics of the region. With respect to lens manufacturing, the company has outsourced this process to three laboratories in India. The company also plans to start its own facility shortly for edging in cooperation with an international laboratory. The company sources around 15,000 pairs every month. The frames, on the other hand, are imported from China where it has a tie up with seven factories.

**Where to from here?**

Specsmakers’ expansion strategy is to get anywhere where there is a combination of a residential and commercial population. “We have understood that we need to be present every three kms,” says Shah. The company doesn’t believe in sporadic expansion; it prefers to open multiple outlets and deep dive into each city in shorter spans of time. In fact, by year end, it aims to increase the number of stores to 100 in Chennai and 100 in Bengaluru, taking the total number of outlets to 200 by the year end. All of Specsmakers outlets are company owned and they are now exploring the franchisee route for expanding in the Tier 2 and Tier 3 markets.

With such an aggressive expansion strategy in place, it seems to have planned its manpower requirements wisely as well; it hires 20 per cent in excess to compliment its growth. Says Shah, “If we

are looking at entering a new city, 10 people are hired in advanced.” The company currently has a staff strength of 370, which consists typically of salesmen, store managers and optometrists.

Going forward, Specsmakers has set clear targets for itself; to open 200 stores in 2017, 300 by 2018 and 500 by 2020. And, to execute this, it plans to enter two more cities: Hyderabad and Pune. “We are also planning to raise US \$10 million by July and create a core management team, make the middle management stronger, train second line of people and recruit good talent,” shares Shah, on a concluding note.

— Poornima Kavlekar  
This article was first published in  
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([www.thesmartceo.in](http://www.thesmartceo.in))



## CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INITIATIVE AND MANAGEMENT

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

CSIM offers **training and consultancy to social enterprises** – for-profits and non-profits – to facilitate them to apply

successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives.

For more information, please visit our website [www.csim.in](http://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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# REASONS TO SMILE



*Children are the future of a nation. For an emerging country like India, the education of its underprivileged children holds the key to progress.*



With the firm belief that education is both an end and a means to a better life, The Smile Foundation began its journey in 2002. "Ever since, it's the need to keep working for the children that has been our prime objective," says Santanu Mishra, Co-Founder and Executive Trustee, Smile Foundation. "Children are the future of a nation. For an emerging country like India, the education of its underprivileged children holds the key to progress. However, the caveat is that education for children cannot be achieved without ensuring the welfare of the family." It was with this understanding that the NGO has prioritized the well-being of a child's family as much as the child itself. "A child can go to school regularly only when the family, particularly the mother is healthy and empowered, says Santanu. "It's important that the family has a decent livelihood and a steady income."

Smile Foundation began by adopting what it calls a "lifecycle approach" with programmes focused on family health, livelihood and women empowerment, all of which help children, their families and the community as a whole. "Thus on a broader perspective, Smile Foundation focuses on education for children, healthcare to the families, livelihood for the youth and empowerment for women," says Santanu. "Currently, we are reaching out to more than 400,000 underprivileged children, youth and women directly every year through 250 welfare projects circumventing education, healthcare, livelihood, and women empowerment, across 25 States." In the development sector, there is a notion that the potential for change is so large that whatever is done, seems just about insufficient. "The requirements are just so vast," says Santanu. "So we acknowledge the fact that we at Smile Foundation have a long way to go and expand by way of involving civil society as a partner of change and to reach out to as many deserving children, their families and communities as we possibly can."

One fact is amply clear. The NGO says it measures its parameter of success by gauging its efforts towards providing universal education. "This in turn creates the process required to streamline the underprivileged children into the mainstream schools in a more sustained manner," says Santanu. "By extension of



this, we create a pool of young and independent people from the marginalized section, through skill enhancement in tandem with market requirements and create employability for them." As a means of reaching out to more people, Smile's mobile hospital Smile on Wheels, is taking curative, preventive and promotive healthcare to the doorsteps of urban poor and underserved villagers. But there's more when it comes to gauging parameters of success. "Empowering the girl child and women who are denied even their basic rights like health, education, employment and a respectable status in society, is one," says Santanu. "Transforming lives of underprivileged and disadvantaged people is never easy, particularly in the complex socio-cultural and geographic context of India, where the sheer numbers are awe inspiring, is another." She continues, "In such scenarios, whenever I come across a success story, every story inspires me and they are extremely close to my heart. These are stories of grit, inspiration, and those that come out from the vicious cycle of poverty."

Needless to say, when The Smile Foundation began in 2002, there were initial challenges. This included identifying a working model to ensure good governance and a sustainable mechanism to achieve the developmental results. "The absence of a dependable financial mechanism for the development sector was scary," says Santanu. Taking a cue from the business model of venture capital, an innovative model called Social Venture Philanthropy was evolved as a means of powering genuine grass-root initiatives. Over time, Smile Foundation also developed an understanding of how the corporate sector functioned. "Over the years, a bridge was established – linking the needs of development initiatives with the business needs of corporate entities," says Santanu.

The next few years will see Smile continue to endeavour towards empowering children, youth and women. This, it hopes to achieve through education, healthcare and market-focused livelihood programmes. "We

want to focus on developing and deploying the best possible methodology and technology for achieving ideal SROI (social return on investment), promoting our practice of good governance more widely, linking business competitiveness of the corporate with social development initiatives and sensitizing privileged children, youth and citizens in general to promote civic-driven change," says Santanu. Smile has said it's reaching out with its programmes to geographies with the most requirements.

"Continuous need assessment across India is an ongoing process of Smile Foundation," explains Santanu. "We are reaching out to more than 400,000 underprivileged children, youth and women directly every year through more than 250 welfare projects in 25 states and would like to spread across villages, the remotest pockets and urban areas of India."

While NGOs work towards making a difference, Santanu is quick to admit that this process cannot succeed in isolation. "Not unless civil society comes forward to support the initiative," he says. "To keep the good work going, funds are extremely crucial." Smile follows a dual approach for fund-raising: corporate fundraising and individual fundraising. "The major challenge the development sector is struggling with for a long time is trust deficit," says Santanu. "People are still apprehended about sharing their wealth whereas transparency and credibility remains the criteria for corporate partnership."

When Smile began, things were far from easy. But through determination, commitment and hard work, the NGO has begun seeing the fruit of its work. "We started raw with only a vision to do something for society development with no definite goal or big plans," says Santanu. "During this journey we had our learning's by facing rejections, challenges and today when I look back from where we started and where we have reached now, I feel contained. I guess the major goal that I have set for myself and for Smile Foundation is to reach out to as many deserving children, their families and communities as we can."



# THE ART OF MAKING SOCIAL IMPACT INTERESTING...

**L**ots of people have heard of 'social accounting and audit' but they are not sure what it actually is and what it entails. Rumour often has it that it is complicated and involved. However, I would argue that it actually is quite simple...

...you re-assert what you, as an organisation, aims to do and how whilst at the same time identifying who you are working with and for;

...you collect information – both quantitative and qualitative – to see if you are meeting your overall purpose;

...you bring all that information together, usually (but not always), into a report; and then...

...you get it independently checked to provide the report with integrity.

Thus, four easy and simple steps with the last one being the 'audit'.

I believe that there is no getting away from having to apply the first three steps. In the last few years there are an increasing number of people and institutions reformulating these steps in different ways – adding to what seems like a confusing plethora of different approaches. The contrary is the case – they are all very similar and all maintain the three steps albeit dressed up in slightly different packages.

In introducing some form of social impact assessment into your organisation, be conscious of where it is 'located' within



your organisation requires a bit of thought and planning but it means that the process of collecting data becomes part of what you do and not seen as an 'extra' to what you do. In many ways this relates to the way we learn which is epitomised by the Kolb Cycle (see diagram below) where we bring forward a concept, test it out, experience the change, then reflect on that experience and this leads back into new

aspires to achieve, are difficult – if not nearly impossible to measure.

So should we be trying to measure them at all? For the purposes of assessing the social impact you are making, is it not sufficient to assess as fairly as possible whether or not you are making a difference and to what degree?

Back in the 1970s I remember reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Many people had it stuffed in their corduroy jacket pockets to take it out to impress people on trains and such like. Despite using it as an accessory, it is an amazing book and much of it is about how we understand quality. This is not an easy thing to do and the book illustrates how we seem to understand quality without being able to measure it – just like many things in life that we truly value. An illustrative quote typical to the book is...

Quality... you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that is self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is... it all goes poof!

So this leads us on to reporting your social impact – not only on the quantitative data which is relatively easy to understand – but also how to consider the qualitative data. In the social accounting and audit process there is a recommendation to collect qualitative opinion and views from several different stakeholder groups. This multi-perspective approach (which in academia is referred to as triangulation) means that if you are more or less getting the same sorts of views from different groups' perspectives then you can be reasonably sure you are getting closer to the truth.

Let's go back to the original title of this blog. How can we make social impact, not only more relevant by placing it at the core of the organisation, but also interesting to do and interesting for participating stakeholders?

I was recently involved in supporting the GENERATION Co-production programme and helped them keep social accounts on their outcomes. This outreach programme worked with five separate arts projects across Scotland – all of them exposing young people actively to the creative arts. The programme lasted almost two years and what was really interesting was that the social accounting process used the medium of art itself in collecting qualitative information from the young participants. Instead of the traditional questionnaires/interviews/events/etc., young people were invited to draw pictures and 'storyboards' of their experiences. They were then filmed telling their stories and all the information was put up onto a website.

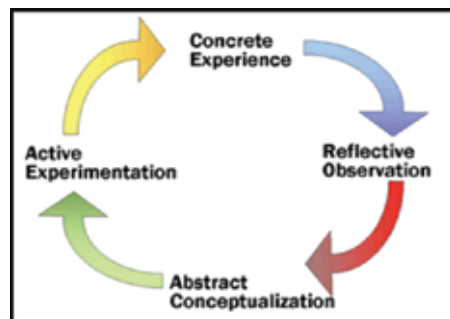
This illustrates how the consultation with stakeholders can be integrated into the core of what the organisation is trying to do. Similarly, different types or organisation can find ways to integrate the consultation process into the delivery of their initiative. It is not outside the bounds of possibility for nurseries and schools to have evaluative games, for those holding training or events to have dialogue sessions on assessing change, for sports clubs to have physical challenges in obtaining feedback and so on.

This thinking and subsequent implementation means that the social impact process becomes part of what you do and not just an add-on.

At the end of the GENERATION Co-production programme the social accounts were, however, written up in a more traditional report form but they drew on the information collected on the website. Both the final detailed report and the illustrative summary will be publicly available soon.

In conclusion, in working to encourage organisations to adopt a social impact framework we have to encourage them to pull the process of social impact into the centre of the organisation – a crucial and integral part of what the organisation is actually trying to do. At the same time organisations should explore how to consult on the quality of their services in a way that is appropriate to what they do... Eureka!

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



your organisation. Often organisations will tack it on as an additional activity as can be seen in the diagram on the left – an add-on that may persuade funders to continue to support the organisation.

The real trick – and the thing that makes a difference in adopting an integrated social impact process, is to try and 'locate' social impact at the core of the organisation as in the diagram on the right. This will mean that social impact assessment is an integral part of what you actually do. This can then contribute hugely to planning, reporting, as well as decision-making – it can have multiple uses.

Moving social impact into the centre or

forming new concepts. Social impact for organisations resides in the reflective part of the cycle.

So far I have tried to show the process of social impact and where that process lies within an organisation that is trying to make social change. But why would we want to do it? For me it is really about seeing if you, as an organisation, are really making a difference. And if you are, can you prove it and thus can you improve as a more effective organisation.

Within the world of social impact there is a lot written about measurement. What cannot be measured easily is often ignored – but many of the social changes that an organisation with a central social purpose



# Mainstreaming paper bags

There are a range of interventions tried and tested in the context of various social/development issues. Educating and sensitising beneficiary communities on the concerned subjects has been a significant component in all of them, reiterating the passage between nudge and behavioural change, that is often concealed. While both have their due credits, executing them together promises to bring about an internal willingness to change. That is the juncture where attitudes transform and lead to a sustainable life.

Kaagaz ki Kashti, a social enterprise based in the textile city of Surat, in Gujarat has been trying to do the same. Right from identification of the cause, problem analysis and the choice of strategies, they have an interesting narrative on mainstreaming the use of paper bags. Founded by two passionate women from diverse backgrounds—Aakruti Dalmia and Mimansa Shastri—Kaagaz ki Kashti demonstrates the potential of interventions that are layered in nature. One of them a Chartered Accountant, and the other a researcher in atmospheric science came together through the Global Shapers Hub in Surat and resolved to reduce the use of plastic bags in this city, as much as possible.

Well informed of the kind of city Surat is and the rationality of decisions among its residents, the duo were forced to assess the economic value of paper bags. Post this assessment and the inevitable comparison with that of plastic bags, they brainstormed on the path for change. “Our strategy had to be two-fold. We were not inclined to set up a production facility to manufacture paper bags as this could be a promising livelihood option for the underprivileged. With the question of production answered, we had to figure out a way of making paper bags cost effective,” explains Aakruti.

Kaagaz ki Kashti is only eight months old and has already trained two groups in the production of paper bags. Regular procurement from these groups has helped them meet the present demand. “Whenever there is a sudden surge in demand, we also procure from groups run by other NGOs. Our supply side has always been adequate and efficient. Building the network to ensure timely supply happened faster than anticipated. We had to shed more focus on building the demand for these paper bags,” she adds.

Clearly, paper bags were at a disadvantage at the cost front. While one plastic bag cost only 10 to 30 paise, a paper bag costed 4 to 5 rupees. This huge disparity in economic value affected consumer behaviour. To bridge this gap



and to make paper bags more affordable, Aakruti Dalmia and Mimansa Shastri decided to subsidise the cost by sourcing advertisements and publishing them on the paper bags. This revenue allowed them to sell the paper bags at the rate of plastic bags. Now, that the cost has been subsidised, they had to find buyers for these paper bags that are promoting local brand products.

Aakruti recalls that identifying buyers was a task in itself. They decided to approach merchants who used plain plastic bags. “We had to find out merchants who were not keen in creating

their brands. Medical shops and stationery shops became our niche consumers. Other business units like textile showrooms, boutiques, departmental stores and others, usually had their plastic bags printed for brand promotion,” she elaborates.

In spite of addressing the crucial cost factor, there was resistance to change from both ends. Affordability did not result in making paper bags an attractive option. For one, business units were apprehensive of the reach advertisements on paper bags could have. On the other hand, store owners were not convinced about the utility of paper bags. This resistance to change, Aakruti says, was the toughest challenge they encountered. “Surat as a city has not yet woken up to the menace plastic can create. There has been no movement against the use of plastics – neither from government nor from the civil society. No bans like the ones in Bangalore and Delhi. The community is not sensitised against the use of plastic bags,” she laments.

After a lot of discussion and convincing, Kaagaz ki Kashti’s rate of conversion is not more than 30 percent. Yet, they are hopeful as the chain of motivation to mainstream paper bags has finally set in.

Although promising, the duo are worried about another trend that has set into the markets—the increasing use of non-woven bags in departmental stores, jewellery shops, etc, replacing plastic bags. “While the idea of reducing plastics is making its way, there is little awareness on the right alternative. Non-woven bags are made of 98.3 percent poly propylene. These bags are as dangerous to the environment as plastic bags – the only advantage they have over plastic bags is that they are reusable. They have been banned in Delhi, Chandigarh and Haryana. Kaagaz ki Kashti is now designing awareness programmes to inform merchants and commoners on right alternatives to plastic bags,” she says.

Every plastic bag coming into the house and going to the bin counts. The irreparable damage to the environment needs to be contained. Sensitisation, as team Kaagaz ki Kashti believes, can motivate change in behaviour. “It is the customers who have the power to build the movement for change. It is their demand that can nudge business houses to use paper bags. We shall do all that is possible to realise the chain of impact in our city,” says a hopeful Aakruti.

—Shanmuga Priya.T



# Nruthya Bodhini – Musings of an Artiste

## 13 – Paradoxes and Life

*Life is a paradox. It is true that when things settle down and there are less challenges to face, people are happy and productive. Paradoxically, it is also true that challenges and unhappiness of current state moves them to seek different levels of engagement in life. Yet, people are so emotionally reactive when upheavals happen and things don't move as desired.*

Similar was Sadhana's life. Just when she thought that life was a smooth wonderful ride something would land in her plate, which would need immediate attention. She always had the choice to react or respond. To react, she just had to release her loaded emotional self, creating drama. But, to respond she had to learn to move her location, uplift herself to the next level and grow.

"Amma, I am afraid the roof will fall on us one night. The rain is incessant and the house feels so scary with those huge trees shaking wildly in the wind. God, please save us in times like this!" With no power, continuous rain and those huge trees shaking around the house, no number of vessels and buckets to collect the leaks seemed to serve their purpose. There is always a good samaritan who makes a difference and in walked Uncle Chandra one morning. He inspected the leaks and said its time you brought down the house and rebuild it; this meant a huge cost that her family could not afford. How would they manage living in that house? For every problem there is a solution; one just has to find it. He came out with the solution that if they can just break the house midway and remodify and rebuild the roof, handling the design, purchasing materials and supervision to themselves, then the cost could be halved. They had to pay only for the labour charges which could be managed. Uncle was quick to say, "I will oversee and Sadhana can supervise and take care of material purchase on which I will update her." It seemed exciting to Sadhana to know she was going to build her own house.

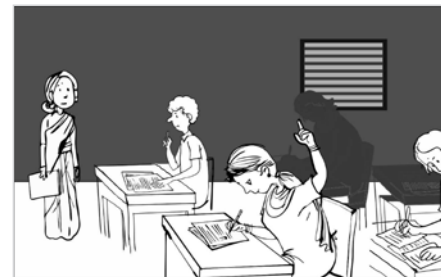
And, it turned out to be the most trying time as well as the most significant turning point to her acquiring confidence and leadership that will stand through her life.



Managing labour, moving parents to different parts of the city till construction was over, to find the money needed for the project, pushed Sadhana to explore new avenues. She conducted workshops for children, went to houses to take dance classes that would fund her education and also give her pocket money that took care of her essential needs. On the day of house warming after nearly 6 months of hard-work, she had grown into a woman with confidence and self-belief to face anything that came her way. She had funded her own education and being a dance teacher had opened a new vista of seeing the depth and breadth of dance.

*For many social entrepreneurs every step is a challenge. Unless they love to face the challenges they will find the path full of struggles. If they can convert every problem into an opportunity, they will find new solutions not only for themselves but also for the world.*

The confidence led her to pursue Vidwat, a masters program in dancing. This called for higher level of music and dance studies. She had to also perform in two panels and it was an exam conducted by the government.



"What is the use of all this struggle? Are you going to teach dance or be a performer? Why are you crazy to study more for all these exams?" Her friends and relatives quizzed her. Sadhana was clear that academic and research understanding would build her base and one day everything she learnt would be useful. She put her heart and soul into it and it gave her rich dividends in terms of marks and awards. Achievements are dangerous rewards in life; while they lift the individual to a height, they also keep them precariously high, held by the ego which when punctured can let the person drop like a hot potato!

*Social entrepreneurs are made through the studies they do or through the passion they hold to make a difference? While the passion may set them on a path, it is important for them to understand the sociological and*

*psychological perspectives as well as the technological dimensions of the interventions or products they want to use to make that difference. Research and development has to become a part of the entrepreneurial journey. Many a time, the doing takes precedence over understanding. While doing may be essential for beginning the journey, the sustenance, quality and growth are highly dependent on the depth of understanding.*

"Meet me tomorrow afternoon and we will decide", said the voice on the other side. Sadhana had applied for an internship in an organization. This also included an opportunity to participate and manage a cultural event from the HR perspective. She had gone into this with a high recommendation and couldn't quite understand why the person who was supposed to give her the information would want to decide anything after meeting her. In any case, she decided to go after college and went along with two of her friends to meet this man who had sounded so highhanded.

*"What is the difference or connect between stayi bhava and sanchari bhava? In the varnam that you mentioned, what would be the nayaki*



and what would be the movement of this person from where she begins to where she ends?" Sitting across the table was a middle aged man, Mr. Rishi, the HR executive. He looked like an artist as well as a saint with a magnetic personality and a volley of questions, catching every word that Sadhana uttered. He asked the meaning, purpose and the intricate nuances of music. It seemed very stifling to Sadhana, as though she had to prove her every certificate and award with an answer from intellect. "It's interesting - the government gives medals for writing English than for understanding and living the art", remarked Rishi.

"I am appalled at the way you dismiss the hard earned efforts of 15 years training Mr. Rishi. Are you conducting an interview for me or are you trying to prove I can't do the job? If you find me unsuitable, just say so. I will tell the Director HR that you find me unsuitable. It's not courteous to blame the system or be judgemental about a person you hardly know".

Rishi had questioned the integrity of the knowledge Sadhana held proudly. She was afraid of the tears forming at the corner of the eyes, threatening to roll down and give her away. Her ego



was punctured and she thought she will have to teach him a lesson someday for doing this to a stranger like her.

Rishi realised he had pushed her to the edge and was laughing within himself. He enjoyed these ego puncturing acts of course, but he had already begun to like this young ferocious girl who had the spirit to fight back. His softness inside sprung out and he interjected with "Hey,

hey... relax... I love the way you stood up with your knowledge and gave apt answers... but I want you to begin to live this Kuttima. Oh, can I call you Kuttima? I see an enormous potential in you to explore the meaning of oneself through your art. That is the true purpose of this art taking its birth in you. Integrate this art and you will find yourself. I am nobody to decide if you get this internship or not. I was just spending time trying to know you

and your art. Please join next week and you are welcome."

Sadhana fell silent and was confused. She didn't know if he truly appreciated her capacity or was finding her inadequacies. She didn't know if she liked him and found him interestingly challenging or if she felt threatened by the questions he had pushed her with. However, the gas balloon inside her as the Rank holder and medallist had come crashing down. A new era had begun. A mentor had found a mentee.

*Universe has its own unique ways of normalising. Social entrepreneurs when they find success in what they are doing can also get onto a pedestal that doesn't allow integration to happen. Sometimes 'knowing stops them from knowing more' (Sampath. J.M.). Then come people in various forms to batter that ego. If the worthiness of the act is recognised, there is growth. A useful mentorship can be evolved. If not, it leads to bitter battle of proving and not of elevation and journey towards humility. The growth and development is sacrificed for sustaining the ego allowing decay.*

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

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath

## Winning



A farmer whose corn always took the first prize at the State Fair, had the habit of sharing his best corn seeds with all the farmers in the neighbourhood. When asked why, he said, "It is really a matter of self interest. The wind picks up the pollen and carries it from field to field, so if my neighbours grow inferior corn, the cross pollination brings down the quality of my own corn. So I am concerned they plant only the very best."



### Explicit Learning

- In all that you do to help others, you are helping yourself.
- Competition is one winning with the other losing, while co-operation is both winning.
- Sharing of the best corn seeds led to everybody enjoying quality corn.



### Introspective Learning

- What does 'winning' mean to me?
- Why do I fail to see the possibility of win-win?
- How do I learn to be truly selfish?



## “Every girl child should be given an education that prepares her to face a difficult, competitive, and stress-filled environment.”

**Dr. Sr. Jasintha Quadras fmm shares with Marie Banu her thoughts on girl child education**

**D**r. Sr. Jasintha Quadras fmm, took office as the eighth Principal of Stella Maris College on May 1, 2008, after serving as Vice-Principal of the College for over three years. She holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Computer Applications from Stella Maris College and an MS Degree in Computer Science from Marquette University, USA. She has an M.Phil. Degree and a doctorate in Mathematics from the University of Madras.

Dr. Quadras holds several expert and advisory positions in various academic bodies in the country. She has been the Member-Coordinator of several NAAC Peer Teams which has assessed and accredited several colleges across the country. She has also been a Member of the UGC Expert Committees to evaluate the UGC XI Plan requirements to consider proposals for grant of financial assistance to colleges, for minor research projects, and evaluating proposals for autonomous status of higher education institutions. She is on the Board of Research Studies of the University of Madras, a member of the University Senate and of Governing Bodies of several institutions of higher education.

Dr. Quadras was the only Indian academician and administrator of a college to be selected for a three-tier leadership programme titled “Leading Catholic Universities in the 21st Century” organised by the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), France, during the period 2012-2013. In 2015 she was elected Vice President (Asia) of IFCU at the 25th IFCU General Assembly held in Melbourne, Australia. She has received several awards for her services in the field of education. To name a few: The “Best Principal Award”—“Sigaram Thotta Penmani” and was the recipient of an award jointly given by Deakin University and Education Matters for her “on-going commitment and dedicated service to education.” In 2016 she was conferred the status of “Honorary Citizen of the Great State of Nebraska,” USA, by the Nebraska Secretary of State in the course of an exchange programme—“South Asia Women in College Administration”—at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

Dr. Sr. Jasintha Quadras is also an active researcher. She was the Principal Investigator for a UGC Major Research Project, the first of its kind in Stella Maris College. She has published a book titled, *Embeddings and Interconnection Networks*, and more than 30 research articles in peer reviewed international journals. She has guided both M.Phil. and Ph.D. scholars and convened international conferences, seminars and workshops.



*In an exclusive interview, Sr. Jasintha Quadras shares with Marie Banu her thoughts on girl child education.*

### **What are your thoughts on girl child education today?**

Every girl child should be given an education that prepares her to face a difficult, competitive, and stress-filled environment. Education is not just the conferment of certificates which recognises academic accomplishment. True education is the process which enables the person to develop intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally in a trajectory that will help him/her become well balanced individuals, capable of taking responsible action, being socially aware, and a citizen of the world. The education of young women, to empower them with a whole person education that will enable them to take on challenges of a complex social milieu is our mission.

### **Can you discuss the issues faced by first generation learners and students from marginal sections of the society? What are the steps taken by Stella Maris College to tackle them?**

Young women, entering the portals of an institution of higher education at the age of 17 or 18 are confronted with multiple challenges, not the least, the problems arising out of having to cope with rigorous academic schedules, and a completely new environment.

Given that our policy is to admit students from marginalised sections and first generation learners, a major hurdle for them when they enter college is lack of

expected levels of competence in English. To add to this, is the sense of alienation they feel because of the new environment, and the difficulties they face in coping with the rigorous demands of the system.

We have established two unique support systems for such students so as to enable a smooth transition from school to college. The Stella Maris Pathway Programme emphasises the overall development of these students from the first year onwards through training in life skills, employability skills and computer skills right through their three-year undergraduate programme. They are also given English language skills to bring them on par with the rest of the student community. The training sessions are handled by experts from within the institution and outside.

The Language Partnership Programme follows up with a focussed English Language Skills training programme through their first year of college. This is a peer-led training programme, where senior students who have the requisite proficiency in English teach small groups of 12 to 15 students who need the extra coaching.

Remedial coaching and tutorials take care of the other academic needs of students. These are conducted by the respective departments. All newly enrolled students undergo an orientation programme over one week on various aspects of college life. Senior students take them on a guided tour of the campus. This serves two purposes: familiarising new students with the layout of the campus as well as creating bonds of friendship between the seniors and juniors.

Stella Maris is also concerned about the mental health of its students. Counsellors are accessible at our campus extension centre, SMCDRIVE, for those who need psychological support. Our faculty are also trained in counselling skills.

Social and cultural compulsions, in conflict with personal and other factors lead to confusion, stress and tensions. Some cope, while others need help. Issues arising due to diversity in culture and language, lead to identity crises and affects some students. To deal with these issues, we have a well established mentoring system in place. Every student is assigned a faculty mentor who meets her mentees periodically to monitor and track her progress and advice and counsel her when need be. Mentees are free to meet their mentors whenever they feel the need.

The Students' Union is encouraged to organise programmes that are inclusive and celebrate diversity in positive ways. They do their best to ensure that almost every student has some role to play in the

various events they organise.

### **Can you tell us about the “green policy” adopted by Stella Maris College?**

Adopting environment-friendly initiatives on a continual and sustained basis is the focus of our policy. The College constantly seeks to promote the care of Mother Earth in keeping with the spirit of St. Francis, the Patron Saint of Ecology and of the religious congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. Therefore, one of the primary objectives of the institution is to sensitise students on environmental issues and to motivate them to promote ecological justice and sustainable development.

As a College administered by a Catholic religious congregation, it is but natural that the Franciscan charism of our patron, St. Francis of Assisi permeates its ethos and worldviews. Concern for Mother Earth, the environment, flora and fauna is embedded in the educational systems, processes and activities of the institution.

Tree planting supported by CSR industry, water harvesting, using organic manure, developing composting pits, recycling grey-water for watering plants, lighting the campus with solar panels, providing solar powered hot water systems for hostels and convent, adopting “Green Chemistry” by the Department of Chemistry, using simulation for practical application and reducing use of live animals by the Department of Zoology—are some of our sustainable, environment-friendly initiatives.

### **Being the first educational institution to conduct a Social Audit, what has been the key findings?**

Overall, we are well on our way to achieving our mission objectives which is: To empower young women to face the challenges of life with courage and commitment, to be builders of a humane and a just society, and to promote a learning community in which all, especially those from less-privileged backgrounds, feel part of the collaborative high quality educational process which is value based and leads to holistic growth.

It was significant that our alumnae gave high ratings to all the key values. The curriculum was rated quite high, with the focus on a liberal education approach to education to create “well-rounded” individuals.

The social audit has given us insights into our relevance and reason to exist and has given us additional motivation to continue our mission to be builders of a just and humane society.