

# Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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## FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Though the major indicators of socio economic development – birth rate, death rate, infant mortality rate, literacy rate and economic progress – are all inter-connected, the literacy rate has been the major determinant for the rise or fall of other indicators.

Education is a critical input in human resource development and is essential for the country's economic growth. In a developing country, such as India, the great divide is between the rich and the poor. Therefore, the need for education, hardly needs any justification.

Girl child education is crucial for nation's development because an educated mother plays an important role in shaping her child's future. Several researches reveal that girl children in rural areas face a lot of challenges to pursue their education. Low family income, lack of access to health centres, traditional practices, safety, and family responsibilities, to name a few.

Offering basic education is one sure way of giving the girl children the power to make genuine choices over the kinds of lives they wish to lead. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women establish this as a basic human right.

Fortunately, our Government and non-government organisations have been taking several steps in promoting girl's education and gender equality. The latest campaign 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' is one such example. Education will not only change their way of thinking, but will also help them in improving their life and the life of their family.

Education imparts knowledge, skills, and character. For some, it is more than a mere asset and hence investment in education is in a way crucial for existence.

Marie Banu

# PATIENCE

*"Every time you practice the act of patience, you relinquish your attempt to grasp what you can't control." - Paul Wilson*



All of us understand the value of patience. However, accessing patience when required is hard. How do we release ourselves from this pressure so as to exercise patience when required?

A hermit well known for his austerity had been practicing in a cave for twenty years. An unconventional teacher named Patrul Rinpoche showed up at the cave, and the hermit humbly and sweetly welcomed him in. Patrul Rinpoche said, "Tell me, what have you been doing in here?" "I've been practicing the perfection of patience," the hermit answered. Putting his face very close to the hermit's face, Patrul Rinpoche said, "But a pair of old scoundrels like us, we don't care anything about patience really. We only do this to get everyone's admiration, right? We just do this to get people to think we are big shots, don't we?" And the hermit started getting irritated. But Patrul Rinpoche wouldn't stop. He just kept laughing and patting him on the back and saying, "Yeah, we sure know how to dupe people, don't we? We really know. I'll bet they bring you a lot of gifts, don't they?" At this point the hermit stood up

and screamed, "Why did you come here? Why are you tormenting me? Go away and leave me in peace!" And then the Rinpoche said, "So now, where is your perfection of patience?" So that's the point. We can create the ideal situation in which we have a very high opinion of ourselves, but how do we do when it comes to the big squeeze?" *—From Start Where You Are : A Guide to Compassionate Living by Pema Chodron*

When we experience pain we react with impatience. It is a strategy we have used to cope with pain. By choosing impatience we are not really dealing with the pain we feel within and we also go through external disturbance as a result of showing impatience.

Patience begins with self where we learn to relax with the restlessness of our energy—the energy of anger, frustration, and excitement. When we are unable to handle our energies, it turns into impatience and spills out with unintentional consequences.

Can we choose to acknowledge our pain? Can we choose to invest in hope instead of despair? Can we choose to share our expectations, support and allow things to unfold? All in service of patience.

### ***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.

## EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh

Marie Banu



# Awareness and Choices

The human dimension to development is a strong idea, compelling development practitioners to analyse situations from the perspectives of all stake holders. Significantly, it emphasises the need to look at stake holders who are end users of programme benefits. Applying this phenomenon in any field can lead to incredible revelations and disturbing trends alike. Ms Sirisha Challapalli, Content and Curriculum Specialist at Learning Curve Life Skills Foundation couldn't agree more.

Sirisha was always a nerdy student, who was successful in getting her first job from the very first interview she attended. With an MPhil in Immunology, she started off as an Assistant Professor teaching Bio Technology to undergraduates and post graduates. She was passionate about her job and publication of books added to her merit. However, the unfortunate suicide of one of her students gave rise to many questions in her mind. "I was completely shaken up by that episode. Don't students fully realise what they are getting into when they choose to study courses of their choice? I thought we have moved far from the notion of courses being forced on children by parents. I learnt that choice was a privilege many didn't have, be it students or professors. A professor for about ten years, I had failed to notice the inability of my students to face emotional challenges and peer pressure. I then began to think of students who dropped out without completing their courses. It was a big cycle of introspection that I got into," says Sirisha.

A seemingly successful career did not satisfy her anymore. Meanwhile, the news of a Delhi school boy murdering a fellow from school to avoid appearing in board exams hit her hard. "Why weren't students capable of facing challenges? What threatened them so much?" she wondered. Sirisha left her job and joined a start-up organisation that worked to improve cognitive skills of school children. Her questions still remained unanswered and she didn't feel better. "Emotional development of children was not a priority from any side. Focussing only on cognitive skills cannot take them far," she laments.

A friend's suggestion led her to CSIM and thereafter, there was no looking back. Beginning as a Biologist who eventually became desperate to do something for the betterment of students, Sirisha couldn't find the proper channel. CSIM helped Sirisha identify herself with many like minded individuals and organisations who understood what holistic learning meant. Following a guest lecture by Mr Subbu Parameswaran, the CEO of Learning Curve Life Skills Foundation, Sirisha continued her association with this non-profit organisation to learn more about the aspects of social and emotional learning. Their focus on under privileged children who often miss the privilege of 'choice' convinced her to look deeper.



"This is where I want to be," she reckoned. She appreciates that this organisation recognises social and emotional learning as continuous processes that cannot be confined within the limits of any institution. "The idea is to develop a culture of social and emotional learning in schools and families. The workshops are customised to adhere to the roles of students, teachers, parents and also members from school administration teams. Facilitating an interface between them is the objective and when I saw that happening, I wanted to be a part of this change," says Sirisha who joined the team as Content and Curriculum Specialist in April 2019.

Having struggled hard to answer her

questions, the platform provided by CSIM exposed her to newer insights and the intricacies in operationalising them. "The discussions strengthened my resolve to move forward and the Learning Curve Life Skills Foundation in Hyderabad was the best place to start with," says a content Sirisha who also acknowledges the difference this journey has made in her approach towards her children's behaviour.

Every time she handles a teacher development workshop, Sirisha is amused by the variety of experiences they share and the extent to which her curriculum can add value to their capacities. Rigorous documentation and meticulous evaluations help the team stay

***CSIM helped Sirisha identify herself with many like minded individuals and organisations who understood what holistic learning meant.***

abreast about the reach of their content. "Last year fifty percent of the teachers who enrolled in the programme showed improved social and emotional competency," she says.

Sirisha feels happy, satisfied and content. Her awareness of self is her biggest strength. She feels empowered to be able to support the disadvantaged children, enable them make informed choices in their lives and also take full responsibility for that.

"I have not only evolved to be a better person, but an aware and conscious parent too," she says.

—Shanmuga Priya. T



# Leader & Leadership Matters...

## 18. The Coaching Leadership Style : value of development orientation



### Meaning of coaching in leadership:

*The process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to fully develop themselves to be effective in their commitment to themselves, the company, and their work. ... True coaching improves employee and organizational resiliency and effectiveness in change (<https://www.toolshero.com/leadership/coaching-leadership-style/>) ICF defines coaching as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.*



Gone are the days when organizations expected employees to listen and do what is asked for and the Leaders directed, controlled and monitored the performance and productivity. We are now working with the millennials and building organizations that have employees who are self-directed, connect to the organizational vision and willing to be coached and Leaders who are good coaches and facilitators enabling holistic overall development of those employees. One of the latest and much endorsed Leadership style is 'the coaching Leadership style'. The Leaders of today are expected to lead their team members with development orientation.

Coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them." — John Whitmore, Coaching for Performance. The coaching federation trains and certifies people as a coach. We are not discussing the same in this article. As a leader, they are expected to have the competence to give and receive feedback, mentor their team members on the technical understanding as well as coach them on the decision making and behavioral attributes. They are expected to grow and develop the second line and move people into leadership positions for their own growth and movement. To be an efficient and effective coach, there are some attributes that are critical to be developed by the Leader. I have been running a not for profit organization (EFIL educational services private limited) last 15 years and share

experiences with my team members.

The five main attributes according to LOI, [www.opptimise.in](http://www.opptimise.in) are:

1. Outspokenness (outspoken and frank in sharing his/her thoughts and opinions)
2. Concern (take care of people's feelings and emotions when expressing his/her opinions)
3. Authenticity (substantiate his/her opinions and thoughts when challenged)
4. Conviction (stands by whatever (s)he says and takes responsibility for the same under all circumstances)
5. Context sensitivity (takes care of when to say what when sharing his/her thoughts and opinions)

**Outspokenness:** The Gen X employees have grown to believe respect is shown in not easily voicing opinions to authority especially when they are differing opinions. The Gen Y and Z believe their thoughts unless spoken out has no value and they have the right to their speech whoever the person opposite to them. This comes as a culture shock in many organizations which have been functioning for a long time and the Leaders coming from the 1970's times. The attribute of outspokenness is key to giving feedback and in initiating coaching possibilities with a team member. Gone are the days when a Leader can escape with "I am an introvert" or "I am more a techy and people management is not my forte". When AI takes over most of the technical

dimensions of the job, all that is left for the Leader to make a difference is in managing and growing people who are well above the bots and who manage the bots themselves. Also, outspokenness becomes crucial when many relationships within the organizations are virtual. Though this may be much less in a social organization, yet technology penetration and expanding horizons of work has been affecting the people connectivity within the organization. People connectivity with outside stakeholders may have improved. The Leaders will have to come out of their own comfort zones and recognize the power of expressing their opinions and viewpoints succinctly and powerfully with their team members.

The flip side of outspokenness is that the Leader can't be brunt and brash spitting truth in the name of sharing opinions. It will affect the Gen Y and Z who are interestingly very sensitive with thinner lines of emotional management than their previous generation. The Leader has to be prepared to be corrected, questioned and willing to receive feedback from the team when outspokenness is high.

At EFIL, every review meeting is more of a process lab replete with reflections, feedback and additional inputs in knowledge. This methodology removes the hierarchy and puts all the team members on the same platform with equal time to share and explore, easing them to be outspoken and frank in giving their opinions and suggestions.



**Concern:** Concern has been seen as something soft and most taken for granted. Showing concern has been mistaken with sugar coating and therefore questioning the integrity of the opinion shared. Taking care of the feelings, emotions and the background of the team member will largely help in giving feedback and opinions. Truth by itself is not resisted or considered bitter. The way it is given and received makes it bitter and unpalatable. A leader has to be engaged with the team members to understand their sensitivity and accordingly speak to them. It is popularly called as sandwich feedback. Instead of giving a volley of improvements and negatives, initially preparing the person for feedback and ending it with an appreciative and encouraging note would go a long way. Every person has a way in which they are most comfortable interacting and the Leader has to figure out that way with the team member. Emotional awareness, management and adaptability has been seen as the highest challenge amongst the millennials.

An over-concerned, too soft Leader who is afraid of hurting the team member can sugar coat the opinion so much that only the sugar reaches and not the feedback. Concern has to be well balanced keeping both the employee and organizational growth perspective.

At EFIL, we have ensured a family culture of mentorship for both behavioral as well as task. A family culture gives space to share, take advice and discuss personal as well as work dilemmas with the colleagues which makes their situation easier to understand and therefore tough feedbacks are given with love and care.

**Authenticity:** The main stay of integrity for a Leader is in their capacity to substantiate with data for the feedback or opinion that is given and stand by what they speak. Additionally, data based feedback and using visual, auditory and kinesthetic dimensions are important to substantiate data. The usage

*An over-concerned, too soft Leader who is afraid of hurting the team member can sugar coat the opinion so much that only the sugar reaches and not the feedback.*

of terminal words like 'always', 'never', 'every-time', 'forever' are most dangerous death knells for a feedback receiver. When the Leader is not able to substantiate, the feedback or opinion automatically loses its validity. When there is no validity it turns towards either an emotional space or biased casual comment for the receiver. If Leaders keep their personal stake into consideration and the team member feels victimized, there is automatic drop in their motivation and morale to give their best.

Authenticity and data are usually standing precariously on a thin line balancing head and heart. Authenticity is evaluated by the micro as well as the macro context. For example when diabetes produces gangrene, cutting a toe is good to save the rest of the leg and life. The larger macro picture has to be considered with data while the decision on the micro is being taken.

At EFIL, care is taken to collect process and system based data to give feedback to each other. We collect

feedback from students and participants every year. We also do expectation match exercises periodically both formally as well as informally ensuring data is reached out appropriately.

**Conviction:** A strong belief that allows the Leader to be reliable, dependable and trustworthy which makes the team member respect and accept the perspective that is given even if it is different. Reliability comes out of consistency. A Leader has to be consistent in thought, action and words. When there is high reliability, the team member feels safe and secure in the relationship and can evaluate the feedback with openness.

When the feedback comes from conviction, there is higher level of clarity. Clarity helps the team member to understand the feedback or the opinion in right perspective.

A too high level of conviction can make the Leader rigid and judgmental. A Leader has to take care to balance faith in his own beliefs and the reality of the team member beliefs while coaching.

At EFIL, the vision and values were drawn from the initial set of faculty in the form of beliefs. The on-boarding is done with each of them understanding the expectations and the non-tradeable values EFIL upholds as an organization. Whenever there is a conflict or difference of opinion, beliefs of all concerned are examined and collective informed decision is taken.

**Context sensitivity:** The Coaching Leadership style puts a lot of emphasis on context sensitivity of the Leader. Many right things could be said in eth right way at the wrong time and wrong context. The honesty and integrity of the opinion and the feedback is lost due to bad timing and wrong context. A Leader's ability to read a context and all its multi dimensions is a crucial competence. This has to be developed and nurtured in Leaders. Striking at the right context and capitalizing on the moment is a difficult learned behaviour.

There would be some trial and error situations before the right chord is struck amongst the team members.

Over dependence on context may also rob the spontaneity of the Leader. It's again a fine balance.

At EFIL, this attribute has been work in progress in many dimensions. While the family culture allows us to create a context to give feedback within the organization, at times with the clients, it is a difficult proposition – to say no as well do the needful.

The CLS expects a manager who is a coach to ask some critical questions to themselves, like -

- Is there a basis for trust between myself and my employees?
- Am I prepared to adopt a fundamentally different attitude?
- Do I have the abilities and behaviour characteristics of a coach?
- Can I cope with the dilemma between coaching on the one hand and setting targets and judging results on the other?
- What do I want to address myself to when coaching – producing better results, increasing the problem-solving abilities of my employees or developing competences?
- What do I want to achieve by coaching?
- Am I looking forward to it? And, last but not least, does the employee want to be coached by me?

For a Leader of the current consciousness era, it is no longer an option to learn to coach and develop the team members. This has become a natural expectation with development orientation as default outcome.

–Dr. Kalpana Sampath



## Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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

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

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

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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# EDUCATE, INNOVATE, CREATE

*Pratham’s programs operate across verticals like education, vocational training, technology, vulnerable children, research and advocacy.*



Universal preschool education to Mumbai’s slums was the objective with which Pratham began. Make no mistake: it was a daunting task, but when achieved it led the NGO to believe that it could replicate the model in multiple cities and villages.

“As we grew, we encountered new gaps, new experiences, and began to build new ideas to address some of these gaps. By 2005, in just 10 years of existence, we had expanded to more than 10 states, launched the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), and developed specialized initiatives aiming to tackle key challenges in the Indian Education landscape,” says Devyani Pershad, Head, International Collaborations, Pratham, “The years beyond saw continued growth and innovation, coupled with rigorous research and evaluations, to test impact and scalability of our innovations.”

The organization’s approach: identifying gaps in existing systems and efforts and developing low-cost, impactful

and scalable solutions to address these gaps has been successful. Today, Pratham’s programs operate across verticals like education, vocational training, technology, vulnerable children, research and advocacy.

“Pratham’s methods and models have at least two major characteristics: one is related to frugal use of resources (manpower and materials), often using what is locally available or can be locally generated. The other has to do with prudent use of time and fast paced speed of change,” says Devyani.

Impact at scale is a core area of Pratham’s belief. Most programs are implemented on a large scale to not only reach as many children as possible, but also create a model for state governments, thereby leveraging resources and investments in the sector.

“Today, we see ourselves as an innovative learning organization working to improve the quality of education. We now have interventions ranging from

building foundational skills in early childhood years, helping children catch up in elementary school, widening children’s exposure to the world through digital learning, to enabling high school drop-outs complete secondary schooling,” says Devyani, “On the research side, over the years, the ASER reports facilitated by Pratham have become a key annual feature of the education landscape. Our vocational training programs cater to youth and prepare them for entry-level jobs in the organized sector.”

There is a two-pronged approach that Pratham adopts in the education sector: direct implementation and government partnership. While direct interventions have Pratham’s team members leading the teaching-learning process, the interventions create LIVE laboratories and demonstration sites to prove that progress for children is possible in a short period.

“We continuously engage with governments at the state, district, and city

levels. We believe that working together with the system and catalyzing government resources is essential for achieving the goal of every child learning well,” says Devyani, “In recent years, Pratham is active in over 20 states and reaches an average of 5 million children every year.”

Pratham’s conviction is simple: when schools and communities support children and families, children learn well and thrive. The organization has believed in developing a learning ecosystem can support children’s learning. “Our work involves working with children, families, and schools to build sustainable solutions. Our approach starts with identifying, articulating, and analyzing a critical challenge,” shares Devyani, “We then begin to work towards finding a solution. Our engagements involve experimenting with assessment methods, developing appropriate teaching-learning methods, designing contextually relevant materials, engaging family and community



members, leveraging data and evidence, and designing delivery models for large scale implementation.” However, should this continue, all stakeholders will have to come together to enable an environment of learning.

Pratham’s hybrid learning program involves getting children aged between 10 and 14 in a village to form their own groups of 5 to 6 children each, to co-create a learning space within the community. “Digital devices and content placed directly in the hands of children providing them with opportunities and choices to learn on their own,” shares Devyani, “Community based children’s groups engage in choice-based learning and are guided by the coaches and youth members in the communities. The communities are organized to facilitate and support the learning activities and assessments.”

Pratham’s hybrid learning programme is expected to enable children to prepare for school, work and life. Fully conscious of the premise that children can be motivated to learn by themselves, the students learn on tablets and do projects before presenting them before a LIVE audience or on video.

“Pratham programmes have touched



millions of lives, having reached more than 50 million children over the years, through a combination of large-scale partnerships with government and direct work by Pratham teams,” shares Devyani, “Today, on an annual basis, Pratham programs directly impact more than 1 million children and youth, and partnerships with government reach more than 5 million children.”

The last decade and a half has been spent by Pratham in understanding children who are “left behind”. “We have worked hard over the years to develop, evolve and refine an effective and low-cost method that helps children to catch up,” shares Devyani, “We know how to do it ourselves and we have helped many others do it too (government partnerships). Our approach has spread to other countries too. Despite

being “behind”, millions of children have been able to “catch up”.”

As Pratham moves forward with the next set of innings, there are three key challenges that it will have to deal with: move on from “catching up” to “leap forward”. “Our investment in early years has already begun – across all our locations we are developing an understanding of what should be done with young children even before they come to school so that they are guaranteed to succeed,” shares Devyani.

The second challenge lies in how to help children sustain and grow reading and math skills. “We are learning to sustain these gains,” shares Devyani, “We are learning now how communities can transform themselves in such a way that they provide strong support for children’s learning.” The last challenge: leverage technology to broaden horizons. “It helps with going “beyond basics” and developing ways to explore the wide world beyond textbooks and classrooms,” shares Devyani before signing off.



# Friendships shaped by a pair of scissors

*Free haircuts start conversations with the marginalised and poor.*



➤ **Backalley Barbers depends on local volunteers to cut the hair**

The sun is scorching this Sunday afternoon in Singapore's east, which makes the gazebo being set up along a backalley of Geylang a much welcomed escape from the heat.

A group of young Singaporeans unfazed by the searing temperatures is busy laying out scissors, electric razors, brushes, mirrors, aprons and chairs. They are here to volunteer with the community initiative Backalley Barbers (BAB), which has been snipping away at social barriers since 2014 by offering free haircuts to the discriminated and impoverished.

Among them is Cai Yinzhou, the young man who heads Backalley Barbers. He was inspired to take barbering matters into his own hands after befriending a group of migrant workers. "I was playing badminton with a group of workers who lived behind my house. And one of the workers, his father had a health issue. He was working very hard...to try to save money to send back home," Yinzhou recounts.

"One [way] was also not cutting his hair. I thought, why not learn how to cut my own hair and offer him a free haircut. It was a very small thing that I could do for him. That was how Backalley Barbers started."

To date, volunteers have styled more than 2,200 heads, picking up their skills from professionals. Many say it has been an enriching and innovative way to meet and get to know migrant workers, who are often described as "a silent, invisible population". Considering that there are more than 1 million low-wage foreign

workers in Singapore, it is ironic that they often remain unseen and unheard.

"Our volunteers they come from various kinds of backgrounds. The common heart is people who are willing to serve. When you serve, you get your hands dirty and that's when you really empathise with people on the ground, the struggles they face. With collective people working towards a common goal, we can change communities, that's a great starting point," says Yinzhou.

## CONVERSATIONS THAT BOND

Beyond the free haircuts, conversations form the root of BAB's mission.

Says Yinzhou, "We learn about the sacrifices they've made, the challenges they have at work. And some of them with issues, for example, injuries, or salary claim problems, we refer them to the relevant authorities for help. But the baseline is really being friends with them first."

Ang Min Jia has been volunteering with Backalley Barbers for nearly two years. She says, "Even though they don't know you so well yet, they will share their personal stories, their dreams. I actually learned a lot from them, compared to how much I can give in terms of a haircut."

She adds, "A lot of the time we [are unable to] see them as a person, like you and I. We just see them as a worker on the street, who has been building our city in invisible ways."

And these initial bonds have evolved beyond the first snippets of dialogue. For

instance, the volunteer barbers play volleyball with Bangladeshi Friends, a migrant worker group started by Mamun, a regular BAB customer.

"We stay very far from our country. We can have many kinds of problems, sometimes financial problems, [mental health] problems," says Mamun. "We all try to help each other so we [do] not feel lonely, and not feeling we have nobody here to help."

"Many Singaporeans hang out with us. Every Sunday they come, play with us and support [us with] many things. They really care about us."

Mamun was one of the first migrant workers Yinzhou met, and he says hanging out with him was like "finding a long-lost brother". He has even travelled to Bangladesh to visit Mamun's family.

Yinzhou believes these friendships are invaluable, as they foster cultural understanding, while reshaping negative misperceptions and stereotypes.

"We often see them as beneficiaries, or see them as people who are different from us. So we see ourselves as a bridge for migrant worker issues," says Yinzhou. "People coming together although we are different, but also realising that they have the potential to help one another."

## COMMUNITY IMPACT TO THE MARGINALISED

Over the past five years, Backalley Barbers has made a considerable impact in the neighbourhood where it all began. So much so that the owner of a salon in Geylang, Vita Hair, offered to have his

professional stylists train BAB's volunteers in advanced haircutting skills. Away from the alley, BAB visits nursing homes, migrant worker shelters or rental flat communities to give haircuts. People can also go to its office on Wednesdays for a haircut if they needed one.

Looking ahead, Yinzhou has big plans for making BAB sustainable, while extending its hand to other marginalised segments of society.

"We dream of reaching out to community partners, who have populations of youth-at-risk under their care. And work with them to have employability and a training model," he says.

"Imagine if we can hire the youth in this community that we serve to learn how to give haircuts and see a future for them being employed as a barber, and open their own shop in the future."

## ABOUT BACKALLEY BARBERS

Backalley Barbers is a ground-up project by Geylang Adventures, a business for social impact in Singapore. Started in 2014, volunteers learn skills from professionals, and give free haircuts to migrant workers, the elderly at nursing homes and the poor living in rental flat communities.

To date, they have shaped more than 2,200 heads of hair.

—A story by Our Better World (the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore International Foundation ([www.ourbetterworld.org](http://www.ourbetterworld.org)))



# Voice of Biligirirangana - VGKK

*"All the wealth of the world cannot help one little Indian village if the people are not taught to help themselves" – Swami Vivekananda*

Taking inspiration from Swami Vivekananda's life and words, Dr. Sudarshan started the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK) in BR Hills region near Mysore in 1981. During his childhood, Dr. Sudarshan was deeply impacted by the principles and life of Vivekananda Swamy. After graduating from Bangalore Medical College, he took a different path, a road that was less taken indeed. He started working for the upliftment of the tribal community, called Soligas, that dwelt in the forests of Biligirirangana (BR) hills.

The BR hills are home to rich variety of flora and fauna that are unique to Eastern Ghats and Western Ghats. It is a protected reserve under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. The forests here act as a large corridor between both Ghats linking the largest population of Asian elephants and tigers.

Initially, Dr Sudarshan established a clinic on top of a rock in a small hut where he lived. The tribal community was not accustomed to seeing outsiders and kept their distance. There were ailments that were not curable for the tribal people and slowly the doctor built the trust of the tribal community. Through cure and medicines, he slowly found a place in their hearts.

From a clinic on a hut, VGKK grew to a 20-bedded full-fledged tribal hospital that offered free medical health care. The campus houses a telemedicine and mobile medical unit, and conducts community based preventive, promotive and rehabilitative programmes through local health workers. The organisation also conducts a tribal auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) programme, and training programme for Dais.

VGKK has developmental experiences with the Soligas for more than 35 years. It proudly reflects the might of a dexterous team and endearing volunteers. The organisation is committed to the holistic, sustainable development of tribal people keeping in mind their socio-cultural background and their rights.

VGKK has also reached out to other tribes in Chamarajanagar and Mysore districts of Karnataka, as well as those in Tamil Nadu, Arunachal Pradesh and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The long-term goal of VGKK is to create an empowered and self-reliant tribal society rooted in its culture and tradition. The organisation concentrates on development with Health, Education, Livelihoods and Biodiversity conservation as a means of sustainable development and empowerment.

From health programmes, VGKK has expanded its focus to education of tribal children. More than 500 children attend the school at BR Hills which has a hostel facility for 200 students. Notably, there are four non-formal schools in these remote forest areas.

VGKK also has centres for industrial training, nurse training, forestry, and a



school of drama. Environment education and conservation education are also nurtured in school. Three among the first batch of students have graduated with a PhD and have returned to serve their community.

"I want to ensure that the tribal children carry with them their extensive traditional knowledge. Hence, our school children are also taught to farm and cultivate herbs and vegetables," says Sudarshan.

"In order to sustain the livelihood of the tribals, through our vocational training centres that was set up in 1982, we train them in the production of natural resources like honey, herbal medicine and amla. The community are also taught cane and bamboo crafts, agarbathi making, bee keeping, and carpentry using lantana. They are also involved in compost making, seed fairs and campaigns that promotes organic farming. By adopting an holistic approach, the tribal community now feels close to the nature," he adds.

In order to build a stronger community, Soliga Abhivrudhi Sanghas



are formed at village, taluk and district levels. These Sanghas' addresses local problems and take part in planning and implementation of development programmes along with the Government and other agencies who work in this area. Village Resource Centres in collaboration with ISRO have been established for tele-education, tele-agriculture, livelihood opportunities and e-governance.

"Earlier, the tribal community were vulnerable and had no voice. They often fell prey to outsiders who took advantage of their ignorance on land rights related issues. Things have

changed now. The Soligas are literate and are aware of their rights. Most of them have claimed back their land," says Sudarshan.

It was sheer determination of Dr. Sudarshan that led VGKK to where it stands today. Dr. Sudarshan is the recipient of the Right Livelihood Award (1994) and Padma Shri (2000). It all started with him helping the tribal community at Nilgiris as a student with Dr. Narasimhan. With a clear mind and a dream, he took the tough road and has made a difference in the lives of the tribals.

—Angela Anish



# Conversations with Shri Ramana Maharishi

**D.:** What is staying with the Guru? **M.:** It means studying the sacred lore.

**D.:** But there is the special virtue of the Guru's presence. **M.:** Yes. That purifies the mind.

**D.:** That is the effect or reward. I asked about how the disciple ought to behave.

**M.:** That differs according to the type of disciple - student, householder, what are his own ingrained mental tendencies and so on.

**D.:** If so, will it naturally come out right?

**M.:** Yes. In former times the Rishis sent their sons to others for education.

**D.:** Why?

**M.:** Because affection stood in the way.

**D.:** That cannot be for the jnanis. Was it in respect of the disciples?

**M.:** Yes.



**D.:** If so would not this obstacle get removed along with all the others, through the Master's grace?

**M.:** There will be delay. Owing to the disciple's want of reverence, grace may become effective only after a long time.

It is said that awaking from ignorance is like awaking from a fearful dream of a beast. It is thus. There are two taints of mind, namely veiling and restlessness (avarana and vikshepa). Of the two, the former is evil, the latter is not so. So long as the veiling effect of sleep persists there is the frightful dream; on awaking the veiling ceases; and there is no more fear.

Restlessness is not a bar to happiness. To get rid of the restlessness caused by the world, one seeks the restlessness (activity) of being with the Guru, studying the sacred books and worshipping God with forms, and by these awakening is attained.

What happens in the end? Karna was ever the son of Kunti. The tenth man was such all along. Rama was Vishnu all the time. Such is jnanam. It is being aware of That which always is.

—Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi

## Convictions



A saint came to educate the inhabitants of a city. At first people listened to his sermons, but soon they drifted away till there was not a single soul to hear the saint when he spoke.

One day a traveller asked him, "Why do you go on preaching?" Said the saint, "In the beginning I had hoped to change these people. If I still go on shouting, it is to keep them from changing me."

### Explicit Learning

- If we believe in something different from what the majority believes in, we'll have to continuously resist the influences of the majority.
- If we wish to maintain values which are different from most others, we should express them frequently.
- The majority tends to influence and absorb the minority.

### Introspective Learning

- Why and when do I give up my convictions?
- How do I hold 'values' that are very dear to me?
- How strong is my conviction about what I believe in?



# MAKING THE BLIND VISIBLE

According to the WHO nearly 36 million people in the world suffer from blindness. India alone is home to around 8 million of them, with most living in the poorest parts of the country. “Over 75% of all blindness is avoidable, that is, it is either preventable or curable,” says Mr. R N Mohanty, CEO of Sightsavers India. An eye-opening fact indeed.

Sightsavers works to eliminate avoidable blindness and to ensure that people who are irreversibly blind are supported adequately to lead lives of independence and dignity. The organisation focusses on collaborating with various state governments to scale up operations in three broad areas: Eye Health; Inclusive Education and; Social Inclusion.

Sightsavers International or the erstwhile Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind was started in 1950 by Sir John Wilson. Blinded at age 12 in a science lab accident, Sir John Wilson believed that disability should never overshadow one's identity. The organisation started its operations in Africa to prevent a condition called “River Blindness” caused due to a bacterial infection found commonly in African region. In the 1960's, during his visit to India, Sir John observed merely a handful of organisations working for the blind. India at that time did not have any national programme or plan for people with visual impairment. Thus, Sir John's organisation started its work in India in 1966. In the initial years it worked closely with the National Association for the Blind (NAB).

Dr. Rajendra Vyas, one of the pioneers of the NAB, started working with Sir John from 1967 operating mainly from his residence in Bombay (Mumbai). The organisation was registered in 1970 as the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind, under the Bombay Trust Act and Dr. Rajendra Vyas became the first Regional Director for Asia.

What causes avoidable blindness? For instance, Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) may be a major reason of preventable blindness in the countries of Africa, but the same is not true for the Indian subcontinent. In India, cataract, refractive errors and glaucoma are the leading causes of avoidable blindness.

Mr. Mohanty explains, “In India, good quality cataract and refractive services are accessible to only half the people who are in need. This is largely due to a lack of social or family support and direct or indirect cost associated with the surgery. Unless eyesight deteriorates to a level which significantly compromises normal human functioning, people tend to undermine the need for treatment. Children often find it hard to articulate

the problem. Resigned interest in school and interpersonal activities, coupled with falling grades can be seen as a symptom of eye problems.”

## EYE HEALTH

Sightsavers ensures availability of affordable, quality eye health services in rural districts, urban slums and government schools. They focus on raising awareness about eye health, training health care workers, school teachers and community volunteers and strengthening their capacities. They routinely conduct screenings for mainly Cataract, Refractive Error, and Glaucoma. Subsequently they provide referrals, check-ups and wherever needed, free surgeries, distribution of spectacles and contact lenses, training of new eye-care personnel and after-care for surgical patients.

## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

“Blindness creates an endless cycle of illiteracy, poverty and social exclusion, making blind children one of the most vulnerable groups of people,” explains Sightsavers India's website. The key objective of the Inclusive Education Programme is to raise learning outcomes of Children with Visual Impairment (CVI) through mainstream education. Sightsavers aims to promote a positive and enabling environment in schools, families as well as communities to support the holistic education of CVI.

14-year old Kiran hails from Dumka district of Jharkhand. Visually impaired at birth, Kiran barely attended school,

until Sightsavers, in association with Chetna Vikas, intervened. She was given a tab to facilitate her learning through technology; her parents and teachers were trained in such assistive devices as Braille Slate, Abacus and Taylor Frame, that enable teaching for the blind. With this support, shortly Kiran mastered the usage of these devices and excelled at school, even going on to become the Cultural Minister of the Bal Sansad Committee of her school.

## SOCIAL INCLUSION

Sightsavers's National Social Inclusion Programme emphasizes three priority areas that includes economic empowerment, strengthening Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) and enabling environment for People With Disabilities (PWDs). While highlighting the many achievements of this programme, Mr. Mohanty points out, “The state level DPO of Rajasthan was recently registered in the name of APNO SANSTHAN under the Rajasthan Societies Registration Act, 1958. This is a long awaited initiative. Though Sightsavers facilitated the process, the state DPO members played a critical role, gathering all the information and addressing all queries.”

“In the past two years Sightsavers has strongly focused on strengthening the DPO and has facilitated capacity building sessions on vision building, advocacy, fundraising. The members plan to now strengthen the DPO by developing a fundraising plan for effective execution of the activities and

the next step is to access government as well as other funding opportunities to take up their future plans and ensure sustainability,” he says.

Sightsavers' Equal World campaign calls for political leaders and global organisations to ensure that the one billion people with disabilities around the world, 800 million of whom live in developing countries, can claim their rights and participate fully in society. The petition includes a call to the Indian government to make all public places fully accessible by 2025 (as requested in the national Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016).

The latest endeavour of Sightsavers India is the India Fellowship Program (IFP). The motto of IFP is to groom young ophthalmologists through an innovative course of mentoring and surgical exposure to expand their perspectives on rural eye health and to shape the youth into promising and skilled ophthalmologists.

When asked what his vision for the future of Sightsavers India is, Mr. Mohanty says, “Sightsavers envisions a day when ultimately we are no longer required. In the meanwhile, we would like to bring down the prevalence of blindness to 0.3 percent in the 100 districts across the nation.”

—Archanaa Ramesh





# “I learned that positive thinking, honest efforts and willpower can bring about incredible change to our society.”

## Shri P. Narahari IAS shares with Marie Banu his initiatives to benefit the elderly and girl children.

Shri P. Narahari IAS is an Indian Civil Servant and a writer. He is presently the Secretary & Commissioner, Public Relations Department; and Commissioner-Cum-Secretary, Urban Administration Department at Government of Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal.

Narahari studied mechanical engineering at Osmania University and was selected to work with Indian Engineering Services in 1999.

He joined the Indian Administrative Service in 2001. He made Gwalior District 95% barrier-free in two years to help persons with disabilities, senior citizens, women easily access public spaces. Thus making Gwalior an example for other cities in India as reported by Satyamev Jayate. In Indore, as District Collector, he focused on health, education and Smart Cities Mission. Indore also became the cleanest city in India under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan where Narahari played a key role.

Narahari has authored two books, *Who Owns Mhow?* and *The Making of Ladli Laxmi Yojna*.

*In an exclusive interview with Marie Banu, Narahari IAS tells about his initiatives to benefit the elderly and girl children.*

### What was your inspiration to join Indian administrative services?

Indian Administrative Services (IAS) is considered as top level services in our country. For me, joining the Indian administrative services was not about, ‘Just getting a job’. In fact, I had many other options of getting government jobs. I joined Indian Administrative Services with a vision and a specific goal of serving the nation.

I hail from a small town of Basantnagar, Karimnagar District which is now in Telangana. When I was growing up, I noticed a common man in our country struggling with various issues – be it access to services or benefits from government schemes. I realised that only administrative bodies can help such people to find a solution.

Development schemes and activities can be paced up for growth and progress of rural regions. Hence, I joined Indian administrative services so that I can help a common man by providing him access to government schemes, policies and programmes thereby leading to the betterment of society. Nothing is more satisfactory than doing a job where you can contribute for our nations’ development and help its citizens.

### What steps did you take to make

### Gwalior district to be 95% barrier free thereby benefiting the elderly and persons with disabilities?

It reminds me of good old times. It is embedded in our culture to offer special care and facilities to our elderly and specially-abled people (Divyaang). It is our responsibility to provide them a better and safe environment.

As the Collector of Gwalior, this was an effort to provide a barrier free environment so that the local society need not have to struggle in managing their day-to-day matters. The key focus were on ramps, railings, low-rise toilets, drinking water facilities that are low enough for wheelchair-bound persons to reach.

We have building codes that specify what kind of infrastructure needs to be created. We called the organisations, especially government agencies, and trained and educated them on the specifications needed. For example, the railway and bus stations frequented by the public for their day-to-day activities needed to be disable-friendly.

After the training, the individuals were divided into four to five groups and are then asked to visit various institutions to conduct an ‘audit act’ to determine if the institutions were accessible to the elderly and specially-abled. The findings were discussed with the institutions mentioning the areas where they lacked accessibility and were given time to carry out the recommendations. A lot of follow-up work is done to ensure that the work is being carried out. With good follow-up, a lot of positive things happen.

What we have found is that while people were aware of the building codes, it is actually the absence of training and information that led to poor infrastructure. We received support from almost everyone - government officials, social workers, and the common people - for this initiative which led to its success. I learned that positive thinking, honest efforts and willpower can bring about incredible change to our society.

I firmly believe that the very purpose of Administrative Bodies is to serve the people, and to provide them with the right solutions for their problems. We should take note of the general problems and prepare a solution oriented programme ahead. The goal should be to find a solution before the problem gets bigger. We should not wait for people to come and ask for their right. Deliver it before they ask!

### About “Laadli Lakshmi Yojna” that you initiated in Madhya Pradesh?

I was born in a small town and there



was a time when people, especially the economically backward families, were worried when there was a girl child born in the family. The cost of her education and marriage was a matter of serious concern and they treated the girl child as a burden.

There were cases of female foeticide and female infanticide that I read about and this troubled me much. Both girl and boy children should be treated equal and I decided to do something to put a stop to the discrimination that was prevailing in our society.

When I was serving at “Mahila Evam Baal Vikaas” Department, I had the chance to do something for our daughters’. I prepared the first draft of Laadli Lakshmi Yojna and everyone welcomed the scheme. In this, a girl child would receive each year 2000 rupees from the time of admission in the sixth standard, 4000 rupees on admission in the ninth standard and 7500 rupees when she gets admitted in the 11th standard. During her higher secondary education, she would get 200 rupees every month and on completion of 21 years she would receive the remaining amount, which would be more than one lakh rupees.

Today, more than 10 states are executing this scheme, although with different names. The smiles I see on the face of the girl child’s parents and their family members are priceless.

### Your thoughts on effective use of social media.

Social media is a very powerful and an effective medium of communication today. Now, people have more options of communicating with each other. One can connect to the masses easily through it. Social media is revolutionary as long as it is not misused for defaming someone.

If a common man wants to convey something to me or he needs to ask me for help and due to some reasons cannot meet me directly –he can still convey his/her message to me directly through social media.

### Your advice for IAS aspirants?

Well, I want to convey my young friends who are aspiring to be a part of Indian Administrative Services that they should focus on achieving their goal of serving our country. Their goal should be bigger than just passing the civil service examination.

One should develop a strong affinity towards social welfare and nation’s development. To be an active part of this whole process he/she should help people in every possible manner. This thought should always be in your heart and mind. You will be the game changers who can bring positive change in this country. Have courage to face the challenges. Wherever you go, create a positive environment and try to benefit more and more people.