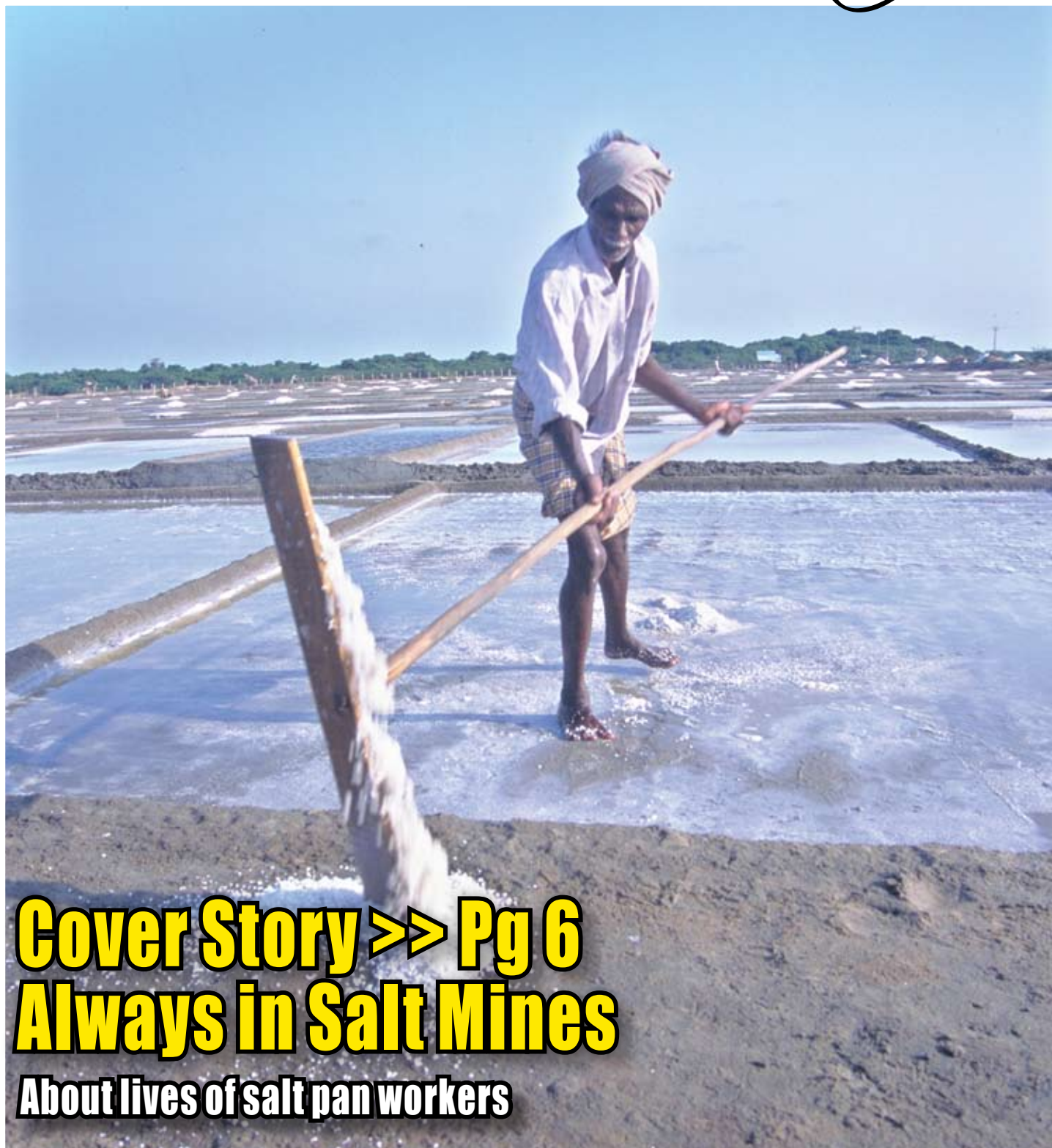


Conversations

A Chronicle of Social Currents

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Cover Story >> Pg 6 Always in Salt Mines About lives of salt pan workers

Photo: Rajendra Shaw

From the Editor

Dear Friends,

The heart and soul of leadership lies in inspiring others. It is about courageously casting off fear and doubt, limiting beliefs, and giving people a sense of hope, optimism and accomplishment. It is about bringing light into a world of uncertainty and inspiring others to do the same. This is what we call passion, the fire within.

Passion is a heartfelt energy that flows through us, and not from us. It fills our hearts when we allow it to and it inspires others when we share it. It is like sunlight flowing through a doorway that we have just opened. It was always there. It just needed to be accepted and embraced. Under the right conditions, this 'flow' appears effortless, easy, and graceful. It is doing what it is meant to do. It is

reminding us that we are meant to be purposeful.

All our change makers featured in this edition share this common trait. Enjoy reading about them and also meet a few of them during our celebrations at Bangalore on 3rd March.

Happy reading!

P.N. Devarajan

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"I ensured that the bureaucracy catered to the vulnerable groups which do not have a voice."

An interview with
Rajendra Ratnoo, IAS



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A Small Story, but with a Bigger Message

A doctor entered the hospital in a hurry after being called in for an urgent surgery for a boy who had met with an accident. As soon as he received the call, he changed his clothes and went directly to the surgery block. On seeing him the boy's father yelled and asked: "Why did you take all this time to come? Don't you know that my son's life is in danger? Don't you have a sense of responsibility?"

The doctor smiled and replied saying that he was not in the hospital and he came as

fast as he could after receiving the call. He apologized for being late and requested everyone to calm down so that he could attend to the patient without further delay.

The boy's family remarked how they could calm down in such a situation and asked if the doctor would be calm if his son had met with an accident and was in this room right now. The boy's father asked the doctor angrily, "if your son dies now what will you do?"

The doctor smiled again and replied: "I will say what is said in the Holy Book,

'from dust we came and to dust we return, blessed be the name of God.' Doctors cannot prolong lives. Go and intercede for your son, we will do our best by God's grace."

"Giving advice when we are not concerned is easy," murmured the boy's father.

The surgery took some hours, and the doctor said happily, "Thank goodness! Your son is saved!"

Without waiting for the boy's fathers to reply, he carried on his way swiftly adding,

"if you have any question, ask the nurse."

"Why is he so arrogant? Couldn't he wait a few minutes so that I can ask about my son's state of health," commented the boy's father on seeing the nurse.

The nurse answered with tears, "His son died yesterday in a road accident. He was in the burial when we called him to attend to your son's surgery. Now that he saved your son's life, he has left to finish his sons burial."

—Rtn. Narasimhan Rajagopal

Information provided by the Office of the Commissioner of Police, Chennai

Particulars	Aug' 2011	Sept' 2011	Oct' 2011	Nov' 2011	Dec' 2011	Jan' 2012	Feb' 2012
Number of road accidents	490	813	721	641	695	795	724
Loss of lives due to accidents	57	133	111	93	85	121	97
Number of cases booked for traffic violation	124149	281641	284457	308886	326815	304870	279746
Signal violation	12873	19453	24457	26480	24864	21181	19305
Wrong side driving	480	0	847	0	0	0	88
Over speeding	4063	5442	4837	5140	7118	4650	5571
Violation of one way rules (No entry)	3332	4695	5995	7191	8182	6770	7961

ADD SPARKLE TO THE SEASON WITH A
TOUCH OF THE ORIENT AT **China Town**
A SIP OF SCINTILLATING SPAIN AT **Zara**
A TINGE OF EXOTIC THAILAND AT **Benjarong**
A MESMERISING SENSE OF NORTH INDIA
AT **COPPER CHIMNEY** A SPLASH OF COASTAL FRESHNESS
AT **Kokum** A MÉLANGE OF SPICES AT **ENTÉ KERALAM**
AND VEGETARIAN GOODNESS AT **Cream Centre**

Celebrating Social Work



“Consciously or unconsciously, every one of us does render some service or another. If we cultivate the habit of doing this service deliberately, our desire for service will steadily grow stronger, and it will make not only for our own happiness, but that of the world at large.” - Mahatma Gandhi.

When the human race set out on the path of civilization the seed of inequality was inadvertently sown. Over the ages this gap has become a formidable abyss wedging its way through all sections of society. Deeply disturbed by this widening gap, Mr. P. N. Devarajan realized that the need to initiate social consciousness amongst people would be the key to bridge this gap of inequality. In his quest to understand what was really happening in the social sector, meeting many social workers across the nation and interacting with them became his passion. He realized that many of them, mainly women, were left unnoticed by the society despite the great work they rendered. He also realized that many of these social workers needed to scale up their work and be more entrepreneurial in their approach in order to reach out across the nation.

Soon after his retirement from the corporate world, he decided to contribute to the growth of the social sector in India in a small way. After having a lot of discussions with many of his associates, social workers, and few spiritual leaders,

he resolved to start a non-profit organization that would help resolve few of his concerns. His discussions with the spiritual leader, Swami Nityanandagiri of Tapovanam in South India led him to decide on the name of the non-profit organization: ‘Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani’. This Sanskrit name coined by the Swami means —the Divine Mother who kindles the natural, inborn but hidden inclination in every human being to serve others with love.

Thus, Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS) was registered as a Public Charitable Trust in the year 1999 in Chennai, by Mr P. N. Devarajan and four of his friends. The MSDS Trust has been in existence for the last twelve years and has been successfully carrying out various activities that have helped to accelerate social citizenry. The multifarious activities have benefitted many people across the society and across India through its multi pronged approach of recognizing social change agents with the Sadguru Gnanananda Awards; grooming prospective social entrepreneurs to launch new initiatives; providing educational opportunities for the marginalized; and triggering the social consciousness amongst individuals through focused giving by the Dal, Oil and Sugar (DOS) scheme.

—Latha Suresh

HIGHLIGHTS

MSDS has conferred the Sadguru Gnanananda Awards to 115 social change agents across India comprising of 95 women Social Entrepreneurs, 9 ‘families in social work’ (husband and wife team) and 2 ‘Socially responsible Corporate’ from across India. These awardees address various issues like rehabilitation of street children, care & support to mentally challenged children and women, empowering the physically challenged individuals, providing care and shelter for destitute people etc. We have also felicitated women involved in teaching Social Work practices. Sadguru Gnanananda award consists of:

- Cash prize of Rs.75,000/-
- Silver plaque,
- Shawl and
- Citation.

Till date, 18 award functions have been organised in 4 cities – Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Mumbai and over twenty thousand individuals have attended these celebrations.

In 2010, MSDS transitioned from Sadguru Gnanananda Awards to Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowships to support budding social entrepreneurs who have launched new social initiatives. A monthly fellowship amount of Rs.10,000/- is given for three years to the selected Sadguru Gnanananda Fellows who will be mentored and periodically reviewed by MSDS.

So far, 4 young aspiring social change agents have been the recipients of this fellowship.

MSDS has been promoting the concept of Social entrepreneurship through formal training to over 1000 individuals through CSIM centres in four locations. The four-month Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Program (SEOP) and the One year Post graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management (PGDSIM) are the 2 courses offered at CSIM. CSIM also promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship through workshops and seminars across India. Over 50 social enterprises have been launched by the CSIM alumni on completion of the course.

Besides, MSDS is involved in the DOS programme in which donations from individuals in the form of Dal, Oil and Sugar are collected and distributed amongst orphanages in and around Chennai.

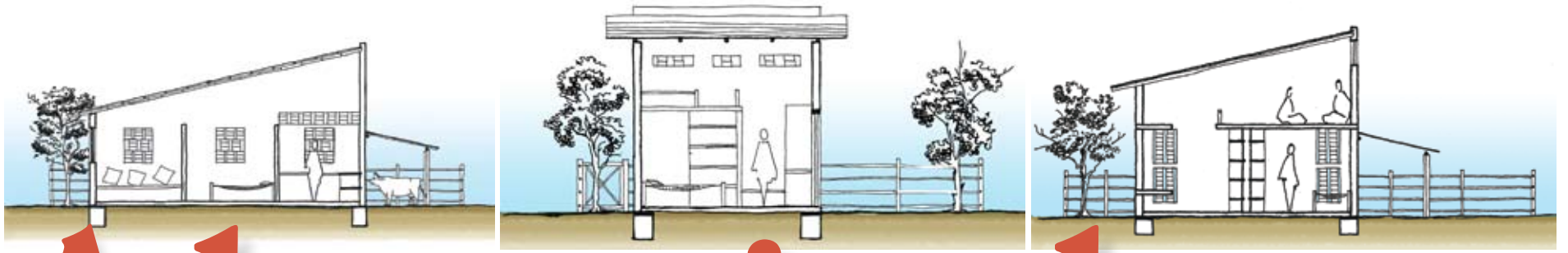
In 2010, MSDS has partnered with an International organization SAN, UK to promote the concept of social accounting and audit. Over the last two years, 23 organizations across India have written their social accounts and been audited.

MSDS has also focused upon making a difference in the lives of the children who belong to the Narikurava Community by sponsoring their higher education. So far, 15 children have been offered support. Also, 10 transgenders have been empowered to launch their own social enterprises in Chennai.



MAJOR ACTIVITIES

1. Felicitating women social change agents with the Sadguru Gnanananda National Awards.
2. Building learning centres that promote social entrepreneurship through Centre for Social Initiative & Management (CSIM).
3. Initiating focused giving from homes through the Dal-Oil-Sugar (DOS) distribution scheme and Annadhanam schemes.
4. Providing books and saplings to rural children through the First Million Project.
5. Providing financial support through sponsorships and donations to other social organisations and social entrepreneurs.
6. Promoting the Social Accounting and Audit process amongst social enterprises across India.



A home is a home

“I am not a social worker, nor am I an activist. All I have is my passion.”

Heterogeneity is expressed in every strand of life in India. Housing is one that reflects both— one’s own culture and absorption from other cultures. The richness in our architectural history grew out of local materials and local labor responding to regional climatic conditions.

With migration being the norm in our rural areas, rural homelessness needs a fresh impetus to accommodate the personal and cultural needs of the people. “Nivasa is an effort in this direction,” says Ms. Akhila Ramesh, Founder, Nivasa – a rural housing initiative.

“Rural India is home to 71 percent of the population, of which, one in every five rural dweller lives in a *kuchha* house. Schemes underway do not accommodate the cultural needs of the people, nor are they friendly to their life style. Nivasa is a venture to redefine rural landscapes through culturally sensitive, site driven and cost effective design and construction,” points out Akhila.

A corporate life after Masters in Project Management and Urban Design did not satiate Akhila. In her desire to do something meaningful, she realized that the forces that drive others (like money, corporate ladder) did not drive her. “My firm belief is equality in this mixed society. As an architect, I decided to work for 10 years and then embrace the task of giving back something meaningful to the society,” she says.

Nivasa is the product of her effort in bringing together her training in architecture and her passion for equality. “I am not a social worker, nor am I an activist. All I have is my passion,” smiles Akhila. Before recognizing where she would fit in, she spent a year researching on various options and volunteered with different organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Sandhya Kirana, and Sambhav Foundation.

Building a dry toilet in a village unveiled her inclination towards rural areas. While meeting Ashoka’s Director of Housing, in Ahmedabad, she realized that cities did not enthruse her and it was villages where she wanted to be. The final spark came when she met a veteran architect in Ahmedabad,



Mr. Kirti Shahwho. He had told her: “It is either rural or urban, and never both.” Thus, Nivasa was born to provide professional design and construction support for rural housing and infrastructure as a design and build venture.

Akhila came to know about CSIM through her mentor, Dr Usha Vasthare, a neuroscientist, and Founder of the NGO, Yogakshema. “The course on social entrepreneurship is just the right package for individuals who wish to contribute towards change and development. The knowledge that I acquired here has brought me a long way. Networking was taught as an art in itself and it helped me in

approaching people from a wide spectrum,” elaborates Akhila.

On 19th March, 2012, Nivasa will be launching its first project in Timmaianadoddi Village, located in the outskirts of Bangalore. Nivasa is involving the community in the construction to give them an alternate source of income. Physical scaled models for various options of design are being presented to the community so that they could choose which model would suit them best. Additionally, the materials already existing are being reused— like asbestos sheets for cow sheds or toilets. “It takes about three months to build each house,” says Akhila.

Nivasa has gradually identified other needs of the people that can be addressed in the process of constructing the houses and rain water harvesting was one such concern that demanded attention. Nivasa roped in Mr. Aiyappa Masagi, an Ashoka fellow and founder of Water Literacy Foundation and proposed for rainwater harvesting in this village. NIVASA has involved Ex IISc Professor Dr. Yogananda to provide expert guidance on cost effective materials and construction techniques on optimizing construction costs without diluting the quality. A bamboo expert has been roped in to enable the basket weaving community to learn usage of bamboo in construction. The Panchayat is also supportive, and NIVASA hopes to get financial support towards toilets and labour component while constructing public infrastructure. Nivasa is extremely lucky to have corporate backing for its first project.

Nivasa’s growth has been largely influenced by the earlier travel and volunteering experiences undertaken by the founder. Nivasa was part of a vernacular study of three villages in Hubli, along with Habitat for Humanity, on their cultural usage of space. “We realized that people are keen to build their houses and are also willing to contribute towards the same,” states Akhila.

On future plans of Nivasa, she says, “Nivasa must grow on the principle that a house is meant not just to provide shelter. It is a home, giving way to improved living conditions.

“I want Nivasa to grow organically and not be driven by targets. It is always one village after another. Only then will comfort and passion go together for creating better lives for the rural people,” smiles Akhila.

With all these in place Nivasa aims at finally evolving houses at a cost of fifty thousand rupees, a tall order given the rocketing costs of materials. “I have a long way to go,” she says.

Let’s wish Nivasa the best in their mission!

—Shanmuga Priya. R.

Of a Rare Kind

“Living in a shelter home, I met girls who were brought into the home as infants. They had never seen the outside world and therefore was never aware of things that children who were brought up in a regular household knew.”



The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act of 2000 makes considerable provisions to fulfill its objective. Children below 18 years of age who are reportedly without a secure home are governed by this act. They are sent to live in rescue-homes, shelter-homes, or orphanages, as their case may be. Once a child completes 18 years of age, he/she is deemed to be old enough to take care of him/herself. If one has even the slightest idea of what it is like to live in an orphanage or a similar home, one would definitely know that they do not exactly offer the most conducive environment for a child to grow up in.

Khushboo Kantharia, founder of Caravan Life (popularly known as Disha Foundation) tells us how vastly different the lives of children in institutional set ups are, as compared to those children who live in their natural families. An Ashoka Youth Venture Fellow, Khushboo founded this organization in (2009), as a support structure to help children, especially girls of the 16-18 years bracket, to reintegrate them with the rest of the society.

“Life in an institution is a life of few needs, all of which are already fulfilled. Everything circles around the ringing of a single bell. When the bell rings, you wake up; when the bell rings you eat, or sleep, or wash clothes, and so on. All that one needs for bare minimum existence is given. There is no scope or room for choice,” says Khushboo, continuing her argument, “As soon as a child completes 18 years of age, he/she is sent out into the big world, without a clue of what they need to do with themselves. The child does not even know that he/she has an individual personality, leave alone that he/she is of some worth to the world around them.”

Khushboo, through her organization reaches out to girls in several child care institutions in Maharashtra, and trains them on life-skills; healing therapies; goal-orientation; and planning and focus, so that they may start their independent lives with confidence, determination, and dignity. “Life for a single woman is full of challenges. In cities like Mumbai, there is every chance that a young woman is either prone to lurking dangers to her safety, or to the spiteful remarks of unkindly neighbours. She has to constantly fight against the tide even to coexist in her neighborhood. We believe that every girl is perfectly capable of carving a meaningful life for herself. We merely play the role of a facilitator, and open their minds to see opportunities in the world outside. It is up

to them to decide what is best for their course of life,” says Khushboo.

Principle of self-determination of individuals is easy to comprehend, but hard to internalize and actually practice. However, that seems to be the reigning principle behind Khushboo’s many initiatives. All of 22 years, she has taken on the mantle of leadership to rare heights already. The inspiration for all of her work springs from a deeply touching experience.

Khushboo was born into a wealthy family in Surat. When her mother died, due to various reasons, she was sent into a shelter home. She was 17 years old then. It was here she saw how utterly cut-off institutions are from a regular environment. She says: “Living in a shelter home, I met girls who were brought into the home as infants. They had never seen

Khushboo also keenly observed what the counselors did when they had visited the home where she was put up. This sparked in her an urge to work with girls who are in the transition-stage of their stay in a home, to assist them to discover their own potential and to look progressively at their lives. She identified a group of volunteers, and based on various resources available such as UNICEF’s life-skills program trained these volunteers to be trainers on life skills.

“At Caravan Life, we build a life-long relationship with our girls. The most beautiful part about our work is how it brings together individuals who are otherwise completely unrelated to each other to become strong pillars of support. All that we need have to do is to provide space to keep the conversation flowing.

“Life for a single woman is full of challenges. In cities like Mumbai, there is every chance that a young woman is either prone to lurking dangers to her safety, or to the spiteful remarks of unkindly neighbours.”



the outside world and therefore their awareness about things were far lower than that of children who were brought up in a regular household. For instance, they did not know how to use money, or how to travel independently, or how to mingle with boys. When such children came out of the institution, the world seemed as one large maze. It is easy for them to get lost. I knew some girls who would very quickly marry an auto rickshaw driver or work at a bar, just because they did not know what else they could do.”

Khushboo, on the other hand, had experienced life in a normal family as well in an institution. She had seen herself be an argumentative rich kid, as well as the submissive one. In all humility she says referring to her association with the organizations Ashoka Youth Ventures and Saathi, “Touchwood! I stumbled upon the right kind of people and got the right kind of support at the right time.”

The girls group up to discuss their problems, and come up with their own solutions,” says a proud Khushboo, adding that, “it is essential that the girls know that there is always someone whom they can count upon when there is a need.”

As her passion grew into what she now calls ‘her life-long mission’, Khushboo decided to pursue a suitable education to aide her efforts. She did a certificate program in Social Work from the College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan, and is presently preparing for a course in psychology and counseling. On being asked how effective her education has been, her response is, “Education to me has been a deeply personal experience—one that came out of my own necessity to succeed in my mission. I had started Disha on an emotional premise, that no other girl should suffer the way I did. Now, I have a vision for my organization. I want to be professional in my work. Although hands-on experience

may be a great teacher, it takes 15 years to understand the field. Whereas, education condenses that information and insight into a few hours of lessons. People look for a professional no matter what your achievements are. Thanks to my education, I can now start new centres of Caravan Life, the next two being planned in Uttarakhand and Gujarat. We will shortly start working with boys as well. Also, we will be customizing all our programs to suit the individual needs of every child care institution that we work with.”

Another side of Khushboo’s vibrant personality is her interest in adventure sports. The spirit of adventure and independence that she radiates is palpable and infectious. Perhaps that is where her practical, “no-free lunch” attitude towards her organization also comes from. “We go trekking to well-researched jungle areas where we deliberately keep a distance of 5 to 6 feet between two individuals. Our girls nurse fears of all kinds and initially they feel utterly lost in the solitude and nothingness of the jungle. Some shout and some scream to be let out, but we move on until they finish their course. This activity is necessary for our girls to unwind. That is where they actually get rid of their doubts, fears, and inertia. When they are done, they keep asking for more such treks!” chuckles Khushboo, who is also getting a certificate for being an adventure sports facilitators and dance movement therapist.

As she recalls one of her most profound successes, she says, “One of my girls, after a particularly tiring trek, woke me up at the middle of the night and walked me into a deep pocket of the jungle. There, under the starry sky, she started pouring her heart about all things sundry. She spoke and spoke and I listened until the sky lit up at dawn. That to me is an important landmark.”

For Khushboo, her biggest success is when a girl, whether a victim of rape or trafficking, comes to her one day to shows off proudly the stars she received at her employee-assessment time at work. That, she says is equivalent to getting an Oscar!

As she signs off, Khushboo leaves us with one piece of advice, “As and when possible, let someone know that you sincerely believe in them. It works magic for their self-esteem. I know it works, because someone told me they believed in me, and that sent my spirits flying ever since. I salute such people.”

So do we!

—Archanaa R.

Always, in the SALT MINES



“I can only see a silhouette of the people standing there.”

“I don’t remember since when but I have always worked here”, said Chinnathambi, 60-year-old salt pan labourer at Lurdhamalpapuram, near Therespuram, a fishing hamlet in Tuticorin. This hamlet was affected by the tsunami in December 2004.

He looked uninterested in conversing with a group of journalism students since he was busy getting the salt pan ready for the next cycle of cultivation. He has never gone to a school and is entirely dependent on the salt pan for his livelihood.

The salt pan is owned by a Naadar, a dominant caste in Tuticorin while Chinnathambi belongs to Paravar community which is classified as Most Backward Class. This caste equation

prevails not only in the salt industry, but also in fisheries where the boat owners are Naadars and the labourers are of most backward or scheduled caste. It holds good even in field of agriculture. Chinnathambi earns Rs.190 a day while his wife who also works at a salt pan earns Rs.180 a day—these are the standard wages for salt pan labourers across the district.

Chinnathambi has three sons and one daughter. One of his sons is married and runs his own family.

The other children are studying in private schools. So, five people in Chinnathambi’s house manage on Rs.370 a day.

Standing under the scorching sun, Chinnathambi’s bare foot kept pounding the mud. He has not received the gumboots that

he is entitled to, nor has he received the gloves, cap, and goggles that all the salt pan labourers are entitled to under the labour welfare schemes formulated by Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

Some salt pan owners had given their employees money to buy footwear and goggles, but Chinnathambi’s owner did not give him any. “I can only see a silhouette of the people standing there,” says Chinnathambi pointing at two girls who were standing some 200 metres away. He has become partially blind due to the glare of the sun reflected off the salt. It’s not just Chinnathambi, who has been working in the salt pan for many decades that encounters this problem. Mani, 42, who works at the same salt pan for over 10 years, also

complains of poor eye sight. “Although the government does not organize medical camps, Aravind Eye Hospital conducts eye camps twice a year which is beneficial,” says Chinnathambi.

Chinnathambi works every day from 8 am to 1 pm, except on Sundays, in the salt pans. The salt pan he works is filled with spilled-over garbage that is dumped by the corporation and the poultry. Therefore, he along with other labourers has to clean the pans regularly apart from monitoring the manufacturing process.

Salt pan labourers are left without employment for four months in a year due to the rains. During these days, Chinnathambi and his wife meet their expenses by borrowing from the moneylenders at an

interest rate of 10 percent. Generally, 160 grams of gold is demanded as dowry among the salt pan labourers of his locality. Although his daughter receives the government scholarship of Rs.1000 for her education, his burden is still not reduced. He has to educate his other children who study in a private school and also save for his daughter’s wedding. His debts keep accumulating and he says that he somehow has to manage them to lead on with his life.

There is regular supply of commodities in the nearby ration shop. However, the quality of rice given free by the government is extremely poor, and he offers it to those who need goat feed. Chinnathambi therefore ends up spending money to buy better quality rice from shops outside. The

government hospital where he can avail free medical facilities is located seven kilometers away. So, in case of an emergency he will have to rush only to a private hospital that is closer to his locality.

To add to his agonies, the government has asked him and other residents of Lurdhamalpapuram to vacate their houses. They are being offered houses far away from their workplace and Chinnathambi who walks to the salt pan every day would have to spend on transportation if he moves to the new residence.

Chinnathambi who toils to add taste to food served elsewhere does not seem to taste debt-free happiness.

—Saradha.V
Asian College of Journalism



Photos: Rajendra Shaw

CSIM IN COIMBATORE

The four-month part-time Social Entrepreneurship Outlook Programme will be offered at this centre on every Sunday from 2 pm to 5 pm



CSIM launched its 5th centre at Coimbatore on 19th February, 2012. CSIM is collaborating with SIVA Trust of Coimbatore and the centre is located at 18/17, Thadagam Road, Luna Nagar, Coimbatore-25.

The Chief Guest for the inauguration was Dr. M. N. G. Mani, Founder UDIS Forum and Guests of Honour were Mr. A. S. Sankaranarayanan, Founder, NMC Trust and Mr. P. N. Subramaniam, Trustee, MSDS.

Mr. Subramaniam Shiva, founder SIVA Trust, welcomed the gathering. This followed by the lighting of lamp by the Dr. M. N. G. Mani, Mrs. Latha Suresh and Dr Madhuri.

Mr. P N Subramaniam spoke about the role of CSIM in propagating the concept of social entrepreneurship and its achievements till date.

Mr. Sankaranarayanan offered his full support in spreading the cause of

social entrepreneurship and promised to enrol 4 participants in each batch from his Trust.

Dr. M. N. G. Mani delivered the key note address and discussed the training needs and opportunities in the social sector. He urged CSIM to customise modules according to the needs and make each NGO develop a professional outlook.

Mr. Kamalakannan, alumni of CSIM, Chennai, working in Satyamangalam district shared his experience of undergoing the course at CSIM and how it helped him shape his ideas and launching his organisation Vizhuthugal.

The four-month part-time Social entrepreneurship Outlook Programme will be offered at this centre on every Sunday from 2 to 5 pm. 12 participants have enrolled in the first batch.

An introductory session was

handled by Mrs. Latha Suresh, Director, CSIM and Mrs. Eva Rosalin, Coordinator, CSIM, Chennai.

The Governing Council Members of CSIM, Coimbatore are:

- Mr. Ravi Sam, Industrialist
- Mr. M. Krishnan, Sri Krishna Sweets
- Mr. A S Sankaranarayanan, Founder, NMCT
- Dr. Sethurama Subbaiah, HOD, Social Work Dept., Bharathiar University
- Dr. Madhuri Ravindra Kumar, Consultant Researcher

—Latha Suresh

To enrol in this programme, please contact: Mr. Subramania Shiva at +919442215014 or Dr. Madhuri Ravindra Kumar at +91 9840222559.



A magazine in Braille, plays by visually disabled people, the list goes on for this multi-faceted personality

“The children demanded that I should do something for them. So, I brought out a special magazine on Diwali in Braille in 1998.”



The subtle yet elegant décor of Swagat Thorat's office, reflects the artist in him. Donning many hats with aplomb, the founder of India's first fortnightly periodical in Braille, 'Sparshdnyan', is not only a journalist but an accomplished wildlife photographer, playwright, director, painter, and a friend and guide to many visually challenged men and women.

Among the numerous awards and citations adorning the walls of Swagat's office, a Guinness certificate catches the eye. It is for a world record he had set in 1997 for scripting and directing a play, 'Swatantryachi Yashogatha' (Glorious story of Independence) in Marathi with 88 blind students from two schools in Pune.

The play had won the first prize at a competition held to commemorate the golden anniversary of India's independence.

"I didn't have any record in mind when I started working on the play. I began with just 12 children but many students got interested and wanted to join. Since I didn't want to disappoint any of them I took everyone on board. With only twelve days of practice, they put on a fabulous performance," says Swagat. The play found a place in the Guinness Book.

Swagat toured through the length and breadth of Maharashtra with the children and staged the play in many places. It

was during his close interaction with them that he realized the dearth of reading material in Braille.

"The children demanded that I should do something for them. So, I brought out a special magazine on Diwali in Braille in 1998. It was named 'Sparshgandh' in Marathi," said Swagat.

The issue became an annual feature until it became a fortnightly since February 15, 2008, with news and current affairs added to it.

Showing the fourth anniversary issue on general awareness, Swagat says they lay a lot of emphasis on quality of contents in 'Sparshgandh'. They cover social issues, international affairs, education/career, music, health, theatre, and several other topics, barring cricket and crime.

Accomplished writers contribute to the magazine, which is printed on expensive special paper. As a result, the production cost for the 40-46 page publication is more than that of a normal newspaper. With no

advertisers or government aid, their expenses are partly covered by an annual subscription of Rs. 1,200 and donations from well-wishers. He makes up the shortfall from his own pocket.

At present around 400 copies are published, but they have a readership of over 24,000.

"The periodical is currently in Marathi but we have plans to start publishing it in Hindi too, as there are demands from rest of India," says Swagat. He laments that apart from educational and religious books in Braille, there is a shortage of quality reading material for the blind. He is trying to get public libraries at district level to have Braille sections.

Though he wants to start a daily newspaper in Braille, lack of funds have made him put off his plans.

Swagat is a former journalist who had done research on the lifestyle, educational methods for the blind, and the physical and mental development of students in two blind schools at Pune.

In 1997, he produced an audio-drama, 'Helen Kellarchi Yashogatha' based on Helen Keller's biography on radio that was appreciated widely. He later

directed a drama with blind people. Swagat recalls that while working on the drama - Marathi adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's famous 'The threepenny opera' - he discovered a blind hawker selling handkerchiefs in a Mumbai footpath with a wonderful voice suited for theatre. He was given the role of lead actor in the play. The man, a school dropout, later completed his education and now is a farmer in Sangli district.

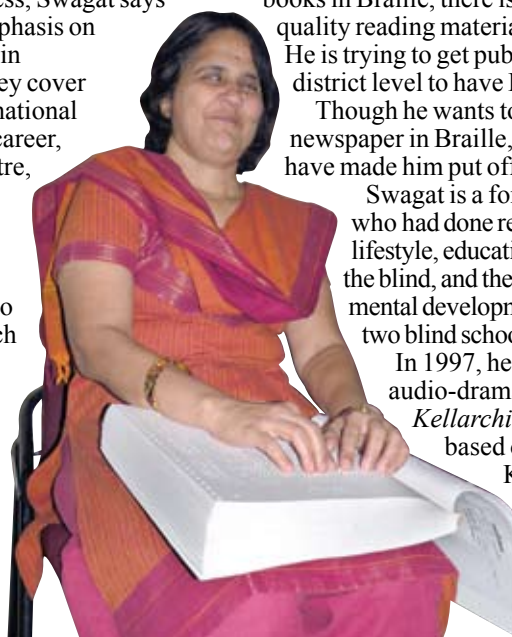
With 44 blind adults from ages 18-50, the drama received tremendous response all over Maharashtra in 2000 and found a place in the 'Limca Book of Records'.

"What gave me immense satisfaction was the confidence boost the actors received in being part of the play, which received great response from the audience who cheered and encouraged the actors," says Swagat, who now wants to do a play with the hearing impaired.

As part of his social obligation, Swagat has also visited 400 schools in the hinterland of Maharashtra to show his wildlife documentaries to those not having access to channels like National Geographic and make them environmentally conscious.

He has visited and recorded wildlife in 52 National parks and 320 sanctuaries in India, been part of Tiger and crocodile censuses and regularly visits Kashmir to document its wildlife.

—Kavita Kanan Chandra
theweekendleader.com



An inspiring conversation with Ramana Maharishi

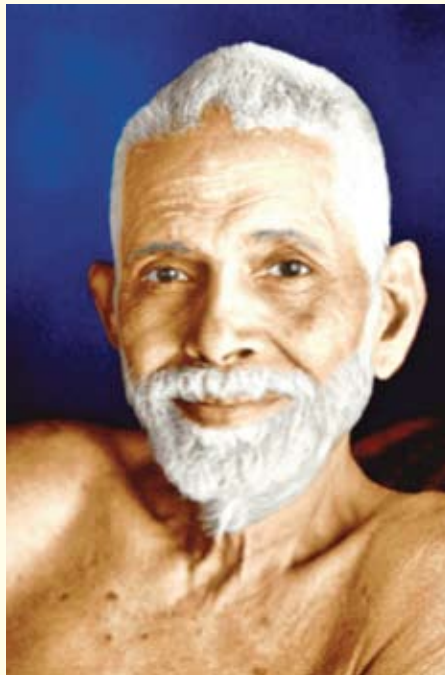
An inspiring conversation with Miss Leena Sarabhai, a cultured Indian lady of high rank who was his disciple and Ramana Maharishi on ego and reality.

D.: How to get rid of fear?

M.: What is fear? It is only a thought. If there is anything besides the Self there is reason to fear. Who sees the second (anything external)? First the ego arises and sees objects as external. If the ego does not rise, the Self alone exists and there is no second (nothing external). For anything external to oneself implies the seer within. Seeking it there will arise no doubt, no fear – not only fear, all other thoughts centred round the ego will disappear along with it.

D.: This method seems to be quicker than the usual one of cultivating qualities alleged necessary for salvation (*sadhana chatushtaya*)?

M.: Yes. All bad qualities centre round the ego. When the ego is gone Realization results by itself. There are neither good nor bad qualities in the Self. The Self is free from all qualities. Qualities pertain to the mind only. It is beyond quality. If there is unity, there will also be duality. The numeral one gives rise to other numbers. The truth is neither one nor two. IT is as it is.



D.: The difficulty is to be in the thought-free state.

M.: Leave the thought-free state to itself. Do not think of it as pertaining to you. Just as when you walk, you involuntarily take steps, so too in your actions; but the thought-free state is not affected by your actions.

D.: What is it that is discriminative in action?

M.: Discrimination will be automatic, intuitive.

D.: So Intuition alone matters; Intuition develops also.

M.: Those who have discovered great Truths have done so in the still depths of the Self.

The ego is like one's shadow thrown on the ground. If one attempts to bury it, it will be foolish. The Self is only one. If limited it is the ego. If unlimited it is Infinite and is the Reality. The bubbles are different from one another and numerous, but the ocean is only one.

Similarly the egos are many, whereas the Self is one and only one. When told that you are not the ego, realize the Reality. Why do you still identify yourself with the ego? It is like saying, "Don't think of the monkey while taking medicine" - it is impossible. Similarly it happens with common folk.

When the Reality is mentioned why do you continue to meditate *Sivoham* or *Aham Brahmasmi*? The significance must be traced and understood. It is not enough to repeat the bare words or think of them. Reality is simply the loss of the ego. Destroy the ego by seeking its identity. Because the ego is no entity it will automatically vanish

and Reality will shine forth by itself. This is the direct method.

Whereas all other methods are done, only retaining the ego. In those paths there arise so many doubts and the eternal question remains to be tackled finally. But in this method the final question is the only one and it is raised from the very beginning.

No *sadhanas* are necessary for engaging in this quest. There is no greater mystery than this - viz., ourselves being the Reality we seek to gain Reality. We think that there is something hiding our Reality and that it must be destroyed before the Reality is gained. It is ridiculous. A day will dawn when you will yourself laugh at your past efforts. That which will be on the day you laugh is also here and now.

D.: So it is a great game of pretending?

M.: Yes. In Yoga Vasishtha it is said, "What is Real is hidden from us, but what is false, is revealed as true." We are actually experiencing the Reality only; still, we do not know it. Is it not a wonder of wonders? The quest "Who am I?" is the axe with which to cut off the ego.

—Excerpted from Sri Ramana Maharishi teachings

Constant Awareness – the real strength of a social entrepreneur

Where does the real strength and sustaining power of a social entrepreneur lay? It is a paradox that the real strength lies in 'Constant Awareness' that we are the only lenders to the idea and not the idea itself! While at one level social entrepreneurship requires highest level of passion, belongingness, and engagement, to let it grow and continue it also requires 'let go'. If let go does not happen, the social entrepreneur can himself/herself become a limitation to social entrepreneurship. Constant awareness of oneself and one's actions enables us to develop an orientation of let go leading to evolution.

No Zen student would presume to teach others until he had lived with his master for a minimum of ten years. Tenno, a young student, having completed his ten years of apprenticeship, acquired the rank of a teacher.

One day he went to visit the master. It was a rainy day, so Tenno wore wooden clogs and carried an umbrella.

When he walked in, the Master greeted him with, "You left your wooden clogs and umbrella on the porch didn't you? Tell me, did you place your umbrella on the right side of the clogs or on the left? Tenno was embarrassed, for he did not know the answer. He realized he lacked awareness.

So he became a student and labored for ten more years to acquire constant awareness.

(Sampath, J.M. story 100 Discovery – 3rd edition, Insight Publishers, Bangalore, India, 1998)

While Tenno learnt several things, he had



to labor again to learn to be constantly aware. Constant awareness is also to be learnt and practiced. It is not an automatic process as most of us believe. We have layers and layers of conditioning that does not allow a state of awareness to be constant. Learning, introspection and let go are continuous serious process elements of awareness. We cannot be aware sometimes and not be aware at other times. It has to be a constant process. It is a state of being. This state of being can enable us to be most effective in our decisions and that results in being a 'Master'.

In every action of ours there is a learning hidden that can be captured with awareness. This state of constant awareness gives one a space to be in what we call as '*Stitha pragra*' – a state of being in absolute balance and appropriateness. While attachment and engagement can result in action, the ability to stay unattached and

respond appropriately can also give enormous power to act. A state of balance in all adversity can come when there is constant awareness. It is the ability to observe self while in action. It is a deep meditative state but with open eyes.

For the last 24 months, we have been discussing the journey of social entrepreneurship as a process of growing. While discussing the points that were enumerated in the previous twenty four articles at an intellectual level can give many perspectives, the real growing happens only when they are integrated into life as everyday process. While our eyes watch the outside world, we need an inner eye to watch self. This entire growing series has been an attempt to move towards this state of being. Recognizing that there is an inner world akin to the external world and the power to edit, correct or move is only with self and not in changing others will come through constant awareness.

For a social entrepreneur who is engaged with society and its issues, this state gives them the courage to allow empowerment and growth organically liberating the self from successes and failures. Constant awareness also allows the social entrepreneur to monitor self and like true social work objective 'help others to help themselves'.

Constant awareness enables us to:

- Be in present moment and respond than react to a situation
- Be balanced within and therefore pay attention to all elements of the context

A Series on Growing -Reflections for Deep Change

- Be appropriate to the context
- Give what the context requires than what one wants
- Allow the flow of the situation than become a block
- Remain positive and do what is essential to handle situations
- Accept others and the consciousness to intervene when necessary
- Keep the ego in check and allow consciousness to play
- Be anchored deeply with faith and trust that all that happens has meaning and purpose in life

Sharing our thoughts through these reflective articles has been a growing experience for us. Thanking all our readers for their patience and acceptance to allow us to share our thoughts as well as wishing them growing process towards a state of constant awareness, we bid adieu.

Points for Reflection:

- To what extent do I go into the minute details of all that I do?
- What processes do I follow to watch myself constantly?
- How do I learn to watch with my inner eye and learn to shut the outer eye?
- In what areas does my attachment come in and how do I deal with it?
- What does let go and awareness mean to me in day to day life?
- How do I learn to learn and watch myself constantly?

—J.M.Sampath & Kalpana Sampath

The Magic Carpet

Rubina Mazher is one such participant of the 8th batch of SEOP in Hyderabad, whose idea gained ground and took shape while she was doing the course with CSIM. Rubina's Magic Carpet project is about empowering economically backward women of the Muslim community without disturbing their cultural ethos. She chose to adopt a strategy that will help build trust among the community and then deliver the goods.

Rubina's firm conviction that women are agents of change for future generations, led her to start SAFA Society targeting Muslim women in Hyderabad. A personal insight of the dynamics of the community helped her to crystallize intervention plans for these women.

Magic Carpet is a project that provides economic support to families below the poverty line by introducing a work-from-home model. The women are taught embroidery and tailoring and produce mats, bags, pouches, and dresses from their homes. Rubina actively networks with professional design institutes to offer training to these women, which makes their work elegant and professional. SAFA is adapting the MOVE program—Market Oriented Value Enhancement program—that has been successful in Karnataka, to



motivate the trained women towards entrepreneurship.

"Any skill training given without the value addition of motivation, vision setting and market orientation is a waste of NGO resources. Even our Henna/tattoo design team of young girls customizes their craft and are now armed with a design book and rate card," says Rubina.

The Magic Carpet project is about getting the women to do value addition on handloom mats sitting in the house. The carpet is used predominantly for religious purpose and the profit earned by its sale is shared with the women. The earned income

is channelized towards the education of the girl child in the family. This two-pronged strategy helps in addressing the problem of today as well as the future. Besides, as the women of the house need not have to go out to earn that income, it fits well within the community's norms. As she contributes to the family's income, her respect and self-esteem is bound to grow which will help her in taking bolder and progressive decisions for the family.

The product chosen is extremely sensitive and attractive which is sure to appeal to the religious sentiments of the community. The carpets are targeted for the prayers in local mosque, exports, and as corporate gifts. Rubina is working toward seeking support from funding agencies and corporate houses for taking the initiative forward. As it has an income component integrated in the enterprise, she envisages making the project sustainable in a period of two years. "We are also producing yoga/prayer mats which are now designed by a NIFT designer. Besides, we also make unique jute and other cotton products too," adds Rubina.

Realising that education is a tool for sustainable development of children SAFA has launched two programs and two



projects. Roshni club is a weekly club based activity program for women to educate them on common diseases, women's hygiene, and low cost nutrition. Awaaz—an interactive and comprehensive program for children on health, hygiene, sanitation, interpersonal relations and general awareness.

As the dropout rate amongst Muslim girl children in very high, she has launched 'Neev Project'—a sponsorship program to ensure continuity in education for the vulnerable children. Till date, around 140 children have benefited from these programs.

A true social entrepreneur indeed, Rubina wants to replicate her model in many slums of Hyderabad and in other cities too!

—Latha Suresh

Mission Education

With just Rs 5,000, Kamalakannan started his NGO, Vizhuthugal in the year 2008. Today, he stands tall as a social entrepreneur supporting nine tuition centers in the district of Erode, Tamil Nadu.

Born in a weaver's family, Kamalakannan is a first-generation graduate. He followed the principles of Swami Vivekananda and was an avid reader of his books. After completing his Bachelors' Degree in Computer Science in Coimbatore, he started a Ramakrishna ashram near his home, where he taught children who lived in the nearby slum.

After a few months of starting the ashram, he joined Deccan Services, a BPO in Chennai, but his calling was in social work. "I wanted to render social work in a professional manner," said Kamalakannan. "When I read about CSIM in a Tamil daily, I called their office and was asked to attend the interview. At the interview, I expressed

my inability to pay the fees and requested for support. Latha Suresh, the Director, was compassionate and enrolled me in the course. This was a turning point in my life and I have never looked back since," he said.

Kamalakannan quit his secure job and joined for the Post-Graduate Diploma in Social Initiative and Management at CSIM. On completion of the course he launched the Vizhuthugal Social Trust in Punjai Puliampatti in June 2008 along with his friends Elango and Parthasarathy. The trust offers tuition services to underprivileged children. Vizhuthugal started working in one village and later expanded to nine villages. Today, there are 365 children studying from standard 6th to 12th who are provided tuition through nine tuition centers coordinated by Vizhuthugal.

Additionally, Kamalakannan coordinated eye camps with the help of Aravind Eye Hospital and planted tree saplings near

the tuition centers. The trust also extended medical support to children in need.

Kamalakannan visits the tuition centre regularly and also spends time teaching the children. Besides regular lessons, children are taught spoken English, computer skills, and yoga. During the summer vacation, the children attend dance lessons which are conducted by trained teachers.

"Villagers from all neighbouring villages are requesting us to set up tuition centers in their villages as well. Individual donations from friends and well wishers enable us to meet the program expenses. If we have more support, we will be able to expand our reach to all these villages," said Kamalakannan. "The respect I gained through my social work activities has been encouraging. My family, who were once apprehensive when I shifted to social work, is now proud of me," concluded Kamalakannan with a glint in his eye.

—Marie Banu



“I ensured that the bureaucracy catered to the vulnerable groups which do not have a voice.”

Rajendra Ratnoo, IAS shares with **Marie Banu** his passion towards social causes

Rajendra Ratnoo, IAS joined Civil Services in 2001. While serving as Sub-Collector of Cuddalore, he coordinated the flood relief programme in Tamil Nadu during October 2004. He initiated the Community Kitchen as a pilot project, and this concept has now been mainstreamed into the common flood management programme. Following this, he managed the tsunami response in December 2004; the Chennai floods in November 2005 where he was given the special flood duty; Cuddalore floods in 2007; heavy rains causing loss to crops in 2008; floods in November 2008; Cyclone Phyan in Kanyakumari in 2009, flash floods in Kanyakumari in 2010, and the Thane Cyclone in December 2011.

In an exclusive interview, Rajendra Ratnoo IAS shares with Marie Banu his passion towards social causes.

Why did you choose to join Civil Services? Who has been your inspiration?

My father has been my source of inspiration. He was a very bright student, but could not complete his education to the level he wanted to. He worked in the District Collector's office at Tonk in Rajasthan, and used to take me to the Collector's chamber on Sundays.

This triggered my curiosity. At the time of my post-graduation, I internalized my goal and decided to dedicate myself for some socially meaningful and productive work either through civil services, or teaching, or working for an NGO.

My aptitude was towards social work. I again attribute this to my father. I was an above average student, but up to the 12th standard was not outstanding in sciences. Somewhere, at the back of my mind, I wanted to pursue Civil Services and therefore chose to study social sciences.

As District Collector of Cuddalore, how long do you think it would take for the farmers affected by the Thane Cyclone to restore their livelihood? What have been the government efforts to support them?

There are many areas in which we have brought in normalcy. For instance, we have restored domestic power supply as well as power supply in agricultural areas where there were standing crops. In that way we have minimized the damage as much as possible. Nevertheless, certain crops like cashew, jackfruit, and coconut will take years to yield as there has been heavy damage.

The government has come out with a very good package for the farmers and we will be coordinating the rehabilitation programme for five years. More than 70,000 acres of cashew fields have been partly or fully damaged and over 40

percent of the trees have been uprooted. This requires a huge amount of manpower and resources for cutting, clearing, leveling the fields, pitting for new saplings, providing new high-yielding variety of saplings, planting, watering, protecting the saplings from cattle, and providing inter-crops until such time the cashew starts yielding. For inter-cropping, the government would be providing all the inputs free of cost for a period of five years.

Have there been cases of migration or threat of farmer suicides due to the large scale of devastation caused by the Thane cyclone?

No. We have been fully able to control the distress. I first came as a monitoring officer to Cuddalore and was later put in charge as District Collector on 21st January, 2012. We coordinated sector specific meetings with stakeholders and affected farmers. We had two rounds of meetings with the cashew farmers, did their needs assessment, and noted their expectations. Similarly, we had meetings with the jackfruit and coconut farmers. We did not adopt a top-down approach, but instead captured their needs to tailor the rehabilitation package. In that way, their distress has been largely reduced and I could see the cheer after the package was announced.

I remember the first meeting with the coconut farmers, when Kothandaraman who had lost around 1000 trees broke into tears. Another progressive farmer was uncontrollable as he was shocked with his loss. But, when the same farmers learnt about the magnanimous package offered by the government, they were ready to take the challenge of growing the crops.

You have been administering the relief and rehabilitation of tsunami as well as Thane Cyclone in Cuddalore District. Were the lessons learnt from the tsunami beneficial for the Thane programme? What has been the steps taken to ensure sustainable agriculture?

I think that we have learnt a lot of lessons from the tsunami programme. Incidentally, this is my ninth disaster management experience.

Until now, the farmers were cultivating cashew using the rain-fed agricultural method. But, due to large-scale tree plantation, there was need for irrigation. As the small and marginal farmers were in majority, the government decided to provide them with a community borewell. In this, 20 to 25 acres of land form one cluster and the farmers would share one irrigation source. The government would further be providing them with micro irrigation and drip irrigation facilities.

To compensate with the restriction of water, the government has introduced water conservation methods as well as planned to provide a large number of check dams to enable recharge of rainwater in this region.

While you served as Collector at Kanyakumari District, you launched the ban of non-recyclable plastics.

Can you tell us more about this campaign? What do you think would be the best method to curb usage of plastic in our everyday lives?

I think that the ban alone would not suffice. The Kanyakumari campaign

had many unique components and experiences. One method was to lead by example. The resource persons who led the campaign had to first ensure that their behavior and attitude changed before they took the message to the public.

The second strategy was to impart knowledge on why plastics affect the environment; the gases that are emitted while burning plastic; soil health; cattle health; and marine health. By imparting appropriate knowledge, we could bring about a change in the attitude of people. But we did not limit ourselves here. Literature on many of past campaigns showed that despite knowledge and attitude, people did not change their behaviour. We therefore targeted formal and informal key persons in the community and motivated them to serve as role models at grassroots level. We brought about change in their behavior and inculcated leadership qualities, thereby empowering and enabling them.

Our communication strategy was a mix of mass media and inter-personal communication. We formed sustainable forums along with the government. One of them is 'Friend For Nature', a citizen's forum. I now hear that over 90 percent of the people in Kanyakumari carry their own bags and have stopped using plastic bags.

This was because, the efforts that were made since the beginning of the enforcement phase was sustained even after the intensive campaign.

Which social issues are you passionate about?

There are a lot of issues, but am afraid we would not be able to capture in this interview. I have always had concern for the vulnerable groups. Wherever I have gone, I ensured that the bureaucracy catered to the vulnerable groups which do not have a voice.

For example, in Cuddalore, the Irula tribals, Narikuravar community, the differently abled, HIV affected people, folk artists, and schedule castes are all marginalized. Considering the unique historical, social, and cultural circumstances which have made an impact in their lives, I feel that the administration should address the needs of these vulnerable groups.



Editorial

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu