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Real life accounts of seven initiatives which are striving to change the world for better.”

PURSUIT OF GOODNESS

Vijayendra Haryal

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Preface

On 23rd September 2007, the first Social Entrepreneurship Fair at IIM Ahmedabad was organized which I coordinated. The team had to work extremely hard as such an event was the first of its kind. We had a great mentor in Prof Anil Gupta who despite of his extremely busy schedule did help us put the pieces together. Our efforts did bear fruit and the event was a success. It was received well by students, social entrepreneurs and the audience. It was a very humbling moment as it concluded. At the fair, talks by Social Entrepreneurs were also organized. Listening to the tales of conviction, passion and generosity had an immense impact on me. I realized that not only me, but all of us in the auditorium were moved and some of us motivated to help in these and more such noble causes in whatever way we can. I took a resolve that day that I shall try my best to make these real life stories reach to a wider audience and thus began the journey of the book. It has been a spiritually growing journey interacting, understanding and writing about each of these initiatives and Social Entrepreneurs. I am not sure how good I am at writing but someone once told me “You are ok with non-fiction” and thus I have made an honest attempt to pen down an account of each of the seven initiatives. I have made this open source and share it with all in my ‘Pursuit of Goodness’.

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***Dedicated to February – The Change Agent of
my life***

Arzoo[1] - A beacon of hope

Sulekha's parents hail from Kerala. Even before she was born, her parents migrated to Ahmedabad. Her father ran a restaurant to support the family. After high school, she graduated with an arts degree in 2001. She then enrolled for LLB attending Night College. During the day she used to work in a boutique. Things were going well till February 27th 2002 when one of the coaches of 'Sabarmati Express' was set on fire right after it left the station. 58 Hindu pilgrims were burnt alive. Soon riots broke all across Gujarat.

She lived with her family in a predominantly Muslim society surrounded by Hindu societies. The mobs wrecked havoc and arson was common place. Muslims's living in Hindu dominated localities started fleeing their houses so that they can be in areas which had a Muslim majority. The families living in her society decided to stay there after they were given assurance by the neighbouring Hindu societies that come what may, they will not be harmed by them. Succumbing to the hourly news of the widespread murder, loot and arson, women and children however were shifted to camps or to other relatives' place where they were assured safety.

One night a Muslim household in her society received a call warning them that the Hindu's will attack them in a few hours. On hearing this, the anguished youth got provoked and started gathering arms. A doctor in the society advised

them against it and he went to talk to the representatives of the Hindu society. He then got to know that even they had received a similar call. Since then, in order to prevent distrust from building up, every night five elderly men from both the societies, slept in the other. This not only sustained the trust but also helped in strengthening the bond even further.

Sulekha was also shifted to a relief camp which was being run by a Muslim shrine. Being an active person, sitting idle the entire day did not suit her. As she could understand English, she helped the pharmacy unit dispense medicines. Then she volunteered for dressing and nursing. One day when someone who was burnt severely by the mobs was brought to the dressing room, she fainted. She has realized that she could not handle such gruesome sights. Soon she started spending time with kids who were stranded alone in the camp. A lot of them were orphans and had no one left to take care of them. Almost all of them had seen the dance of death in front of their eyes and were traumatized. She started spending time with them, telling stories and playing in order to help the kids come out of the state of shock.

“There were kids who were so shell shocked that they did not even talk to anyone. Some of them have seen their friends and family butchered in front of them by the horrendous mob. It required a lot of effort to lessen if not eliminate pain,” says Sulekha as her eyes speak for themselves the brutality they witnessed. “Some of them sought revenge – it was heartbreaking to see young kids talk about killing.”

She along with her two friends, worked dedicatedly to revive the childhood which was almost completely lost. Advised by one of the physiologists, they started conducting sessions with the kids who were suffering from acute trauma. Starting in a jovial mood, they then asked the kids to think of the day when they saw someone getting murdered, burnt alive or any such unfortunate incident that they would have seen which has left a deep imprint on their memories. Then kids were subsequently made to sketch the incident. This helped in getting it all out of their system. On being asked about the effectiveness of the exercise, Sulekha says, "It definitely provided some relief. It's very difficult to erase the horrendous acts from their memories, but this certainly helped these to fade away!"

Red Cross was conducting relief work and surveys in the camp to assess the situation. FIRs and media interviews had become a day to day routine for the riot victims.

She recalls that as many as 15000 people took refuge at the camp she was. Growing up, she did not even like to share her room with anyone but being at the camp with thousands of people around was a unique experience. For almost six months, they had become like an extended family to her. Slowly the people started migrating from the camps as the situation improved. Some of them whose homes in the areas dominated by majority community, were still scared to move back.

On moving back home, she kept on holding classes at a place known as '*Kasai ki chawl*'. It was one of the worst affected areas. Almost the entire chawl was burnt injuring quite a few people.

"I needed the kids as much as they needed me. It was so much fun being with them at the camp. I missed them a lot once I moved back home and realized that it was almost impossible for me to live without them!" exclaims Sulekha.

She remembers that it took quite a while for people to come out of the trauma. Some of them were so terrified that when Sulekha urged them to send the kids back to school, a father said, "*Yahan par kam se kam Zinda to rahega*" (At least he will stay alive here) She taught around 40-50 kids with the help of volunteers. They came, worked with her for sometime and then left. At the same time she continued counseling the parents and coordinated with the teachers from some schools who then came to the *chawl* and did have a talk with parents. They were assured that the kids will be safe in the school premises and there would be no discrimination against them. Convinced, some parents got their kids go back to the school again by end of 2003.

In 2004, she went to Bangalore to learn paper making. When she came back, she rented a house. This belonged to a Muslim family and had been burnt to ashes at the time of riots. The family never returned.

From the last 7-8 months, a small fee of Rs 10-15 is being charged per student. Those who can't pay the fee are allowed to pay in installments. ¹

“People seldom give importance to anything that comes ‘Free’. This amount though being notional is symbolic and should ensure some responsibility on the part of kids and their guardians,” says Sulekha.

When she started there were mostly kids from the minority community. Now it has almost 70% from the majority community. Kids of vegetable vendors, house maids, domestic servants and the like benefit from Arzoo. Now they have three teachers. Classes take place from morning 10 am to 11: 30 am for the kids of age 5-8 years. In the afternoon from 2-4 pm, children aged 8-14 years attend classes. The emphasis is on learning by games. The kids learn about the numbers, alphabets, poems and colors playing with them. Quite a few extracurricular activities are also conducted like music and drama. They do arrange sports kits to encourage the kids to pick up sports like cricket, football and games like cricket, chess¹. Plays and shows organizing children based on real life issues are organized. They have already stage shows at Municipal Schools and Darpana Academy of performing arts in Ahmedabad. Post Gujrat riots, there was an imminent need to kindle hope and love in the minds of all and young children in specific who had undergone extreme trauma.

One such play was based on real life experience about the cooperation between the societies in which Sulekha lived, with the neighbouring Hindu societies at the time of riots. A Hindu boy was to play the role of a Muslim and his character was called Rafiq¹.

He got very annoyed when he was addressed by the name initially and was very reluctant to take up the role. However, after the staging of the play, there was a complete change in mindset and he says “How does it matter what they call me?”

1

In order to make sure that the children will be able to face a larger audience, rehearsals were performed first at 10 -15 *chawls*. The people living there were informed beforehand about the play and they gathered to see the play. Slowly the confidence of the kids built up and the Town Hall was booked with the help of an NGO known as Manav Sadhna. On successful screening of the play, the media asked Sulekha whether she thinks this will help the message reach a large number of people. She promptly replied

“Logon tak pahuncha tak nahi ye to nahi pata. M ere bacchon tak pahuncha ye bahut hai.” [I don’t know whether it reached the masses or not. It has definitely reached my kids and for me, that’s enough.]

“At Arzoo, even Hindu students celebrate Ramzan. When they see their Muslim friends fasting for the entire day, they

also do it with them. We then have *iftaar* parties sometimes. Similarly even Muslims celebrate Diwali, they do “*aarti*” (hymn) with the Hindu kids. And even apply teeka,” says Sulekha speaking enthusiastically about the culture at Arzoo.

Arzoo has also undertaken cleanliness drives in the vicinity of the area they operate in. They have also organized awareness sessions for the importance of education amongst the underprivileged, especially the orphaned. In August 2006, when severe floods hit Gujarat, Arzoo worked with Jagruti foundation to serve food to people every day and it also helped in serving around 3000 patients who were flood victims.¹

Arzoo generates some of its’ earnings from the greeting cards that the kids design. Some student volunteers from the National Institute of Design (NID), help screening the designs which can be used for making cards. These are then made by the households of these kids. They also make files, file boxes, diaries and lampsets. These are then displayed in various events at colleges and sometimes at corporate houses. It has also joined hands with *Gram Shree* in 2004 which is helping them market their products¹.

Arzoo is moving towards self sufficiency by expanding its business of goods made by the households of the children who study at Arzoo on a profit sharing basis.

On being asked her philosophy in life, Sulekha says, “ More than religion, people should give emphasis to humanity. That’s what Mahatma Gandhi’s call was for. We all stood up as a nation for it. First identity should not be religion,. It’s sad that even if not directly, people indirectly ask me about my religion. From my name no one can make out. The first part of my name is Hindu, the surname Muslim. Whenever I am asked, I just say that do consider me of whatever religion you like but before that please know I am a human being.”

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MAM Movies[2]- Channelizing Media for Social Change

Madhusudan's and Meghna's lives changed forever when they returned to India armed with a Bachelors degree in fine arts and an anonymously gifted video camera to use media for social change. After a lot of churning within and exploration, they did set up **MAM** (pronounced as 'MAAM'): "**I AM**" is what it means in Sanskrit. It symbolizes the supreme soul.

Born and brought up in Bilaspur, a town located in the Central part of India, Madhusudan hails from a business family. Leaving home at the tender age of five for a boarding school, Madhusudan has been an independent thinker right from his school days. He did his Bachelor Degree in Fine Arts, majoring in Motion Pictures from Academy of Art University, California. His father supported his education initially and subsequently he covered most of his expenses working part time.

Madhusudan's interest was kindled during his stint with Charity Focus in San Francisco. Run entirely by its volunteers, it has helped put in place web-solutions for hundreds of nonprofit organizations. He fondly recollects his days with Charity Focus, "It is a fluid organization where the members are bound by a concept rather than organizational rules. We used to meet periodically and the meeting would be preceded with an hour of meditation, which created a vibrant resonance and set the tone for the proceedings."

Professionally, he had directed *Khwaab*, his first feature film in the US in 2004. It was about a young software engineer who on soul searching realizes that he always wanted to be a film maker. The film depicts his tryst to find himself. It left Madhusudan himself with lingering emptiness and several unanswered existential questions. He battled them for 6 long months until he stumbled on the idea of making documentary films for inspiring people who had the courage to be the change they want to see in the world. As beginners luck would have it, he received a \$3000 Canon G1-2 video camera with all accessories as an anonymous gift from someone in CharityFocus. It was signed off with the quote. "When you really want something from the bottom of your heart, the whole universe conspires to help you". He almost cried at the warmth and the love he had found.

"Three years down the line I still don't know where it came from and its amazing because nobody there has any money" he exclaims.

On Gandhi Jayanti he left the US and along with it a lucrative career to find his purpose in life. He decided to make a movie on Dwarkoji in Bodh Gaya, who is one of the last active disciples of Gandhiji. In his late 80s, he runs an Ashram called Samanvay in Bodh Gaya. He runs several schools for untouchable kids from the poorest families in the area. They live in areas where there is no electricity. Some of them are called 'rat catchers' as they kill rats and eat them to survive. All of the initiatives run by Dwarkoji are either self sufficient or striving to be so. He has never asked for any money and the donations have been voluntary. He says there has never been a deficiency of funds.

“Dwarkojis spirit is indomitable. He speaks very little yet understands everything and you instantly feel you are before a saint, a true karma yogi. He carries on his work with his steadfast conviction of three values of life-love, compassion and truth. Yet, he does it with complete detachment. When I asked him who was going to take care of his ashram after him, he said he didn't know. I was surprised to realize that here is a person, who had dedicated fifty years of his life to build this ashram from nothing, and is still not attached to it,” exclaims Madhusudan.

Samanvay was a film Madhu was making just for himself on Dwarkoji. When the film finished, Madhu asked for his leave, " Dwarkoji, please allow me to go now." "What are you going to do now?" Dwarkoji asked.

Madhu promptly replied that he was going to make more and more films travelling from Himalaya to Kanyakumari. Dwarkoji repeated the question. Madhu was taken aback as he thought that he had given an adept reply.

He now recollects fondly, “The true mark of a Karmayogi is , that they seldom say anything and you are transformed just by their presence. Dwarkoji was such an influence. I still remember his last lines when I left the Ashram,” *Brahma Satyam, Jagat Sfurti, Jivanam Satya Shodhanam*” (The divine is the truth, the world is its manifestation, questing for that truth is life). He has instructed us to search for truth through whatever we do. Filmmaking is just an instrument for us to realize our true goal. It did not struck me then; it however made a lot of sense a year down the line when we were

establishing MAM. I now realize that we are just vessels. We fill, transform the energy (the volunteers who want to make films) from one place to other and then are empty again. There is so much joy in the acceptance of the fact that God has chosen us as an instrument for the larger manifestation"

Madhu then circulated the film in his circles of friends and was ready to mail DVDs to anyone who would bear the postal fees. He kept the option of paying for it optional. He was surprised when he sometimes received \$100 cheques though there was no obligation to pay.

He continued his exploration to find the answer to "What Dharma is and what is sin". In the process, he met religious heads of different communities and traveled across the length and breadth of the country.

By 2006, Meghana had also shifted back to Mumbai from the US and was working in a Production house. On April 2006, both of them decided to take the plunge and MAM was born.

"We got married in April 2007. There was a lot of pressure from friends and family and we were being told time and again that MAM was a big risk and since we were starting a family, we should look for stable careers. We both did set a deadline that if things did not move till December 2007; we would take up jobs in the mundane corporate world. Thankfully Genesis happened in October and since then, there has been no looking back," says Meghana.

MAM was started with the idea of using media for social change. It supports and nurtures independent film makers

who are making such films. It also provides a means for NGOs to make professional videos very economically.

‘Our aim is to bring in volunteers from the first year students of mass media courses across colleges in Mumbai. We give them a camera and they have the freedom to shoot on any subject of their choice. The 3-4 days spent with the NGO in shooting the movie often translates to a more meaningful long term association with the NGO for the volunteers. In that sense we act as a facilitator and catalyst for those who wish to volunteer for a social cause but do not put it in action.’

In 2007, MAM partnered with Peacock Projects for the Genesis film project. Peacock projects work towards improving the arts scene in South Asia and facilitate using arts as a medium to communicate to the Youth about social causes. Genesis invited 101 filmmakers to make a 5 minute short film on 101 local charities in Mumbai within a limited time frame of 101 hours.

"We could not give all of them cameras and other equipment that they needed. We just gave them a challenge," says Madhusudan. "I had heard of similar concepts in US where film makers are given 48 hours. I was thinking on how we can do something like this in India. One fine day, while in the bathroom, the idea struck that we can do it for non profit. It was the Eureka moment!"

They did hold discussions with a media house earlier for a similar proposal on commercial film making. However,

Madhusudan and Meghana from within always felt that such a mammoth effort should be to create a lot of impact for those who deserve it the most. While they were still contemplating, they were called on one day and offered Rs 20 L in advance for their commercial proposal. Further, they were promised that 1 crore will be arranged as sponsorship. However, by that point in time, they had already made up their mind and the idea for using media for social change had struck.

“It was not such an easy decision to say no to the amount at that point in time , when we were just starting up , having no substantial funds. We did consult all our mentors and all of them congratulated on following our heart more than anything else, “recalls Madhusudan.

In an event they came across Dr Nachiket Mor, President ICICI Foundation and were able to arrange a meeting for 15 minutes. Once they started presenting their vision to Dr Nachiket, the meeting went on for nearly an hour. ICICI Foundation had agreed to sponsor them and they were given 5 L just 2 days before the launch of Genesis.

“It came in very handy at that point of time. We could publicize the event a lot better. Genesis also started media attention. We had just 5 entries four days prior to the launch when leading English daily published about the event on the front page. Soon it was covered by other newspapers as well. By the launch the entries increased to 150!” exclaims Madhusudan.

The logistics was a nightmare. Managing 101 teams and then making coordination possible with the NGOs was too daunting a task. Some volunteers joined hands for the seemingly impossible task. Amongst them was Vishal who was an engineering student.

“My heart was always in media. I liked the work MAM was doing, but still was not sure about joining it as there was no stable funds that supported it,” says Vishal. He then went on to work in a corporate but a few months later, he returned back to MAM and now works fulltime.

“He is almost like a one man army and ensures that the coordination is ensured for ‘I am the Change’,” smiles Meghana. Genesis is rechristened ‘I am the Change’ for the year 2008.

MAM’s grand vision was indeed getting accomplished. Genesis reached about 350 colleges in the Mumbai University. NGOs like CRY, PETA, SPCA, Akanksha, AIDS Alterniva, Women’s Trust (WIT) participated. The films attempted to bring to light the unsung heroes and the spirit that drives the NGOs to change the world for better. The vision of the NGO, challenges and difficulties faced by it and the motivated individuals- all had to be covered in the short span of five minutes. In just four days, ninety films were made. The project got its much-deserved spotlight, when it got screened in the Cape Town Bollywood Film Festival. Well known artists chipped in as judges to adjudicate the winners.

Not being overwhelmed by the unprecedented success of Genesis, MAM continued the media revolution passionately. It partnered with Adlabs and *Laadli* for ‘She creates’. *Laadli* is

a girl child campaign which was launched by an NGO known as Population First to address the grave issue of falling sex ratio in the age group of 0-6 years. *She creates* gave the girl children of Mumbai an opportunity to bring forth their opinions and views on “What it feels to be a girl” through the language of films. It was the first of its kind film making where 25 girls from the cross section of the society were given film making workshops by professionals from the film industry.

“They came from varied backgrounds. Some were slum dwellers, children rescued from trafficking, child labor and some even from public schools. For 21 days, they were taught the art of movie making by the MAM team. Though these girls were mostly in the 10-15 year age bracket, they could create movies on issues as sensitive as female feticide,” says Madhusudan.

“These girls now have become citizen journalists. They have formed a video community within their own organization and make short videos about local stories which they later share with the community. “

Neha , who was a volunteer with an NGO coordinated a team of girls Dharavi – one of the largest slums in the world. She liked the spirit and enthusiasm at MAM and later joined to work full time at MAM. She has helped create a video community in Dharavi with the help of an NGO there.

“I started training five of them. It was not an easy road at all. All of them feared that they would never be able to pick it up. I had to be good friends with them before anything else.

Once I had won their confidence, I gave a camera and made them try it. They slowly started picking it up,” says Neha.

She used to visit them thrice a week for nearly two months. She asked them to come up with some stories from their daily lives to make movies. To her surprise, all of them came up with stories from popular soap operas. She had to try really hard to explain that they need to bring out the happenings in their lives and not the kind they see in soap operas and cinema. Her efforts did bear fruit and they all came up with stories weaved around events, issues they go through on a day to day basis. Each member was asked to read her script aloud. Others will then give their inputs and improve it.

One of the movies that they wanted to make was on the life of the workers in the factories nearby. They decided to do interviews of the labourers working there. They were not allowed to interact with the workers as the owner was skeptical that it may lead to trouble for him in the future. However it did not come in the way of their strong determination. They talked to the workers without the camera and then did voice over to make the films.

“One story which reflected the immediate impact of this was of Raziya, who wasn’t getting her ration card, but when she went to the office with a video camera and questioned the officer in-charge, she had her card within a week,” recalls Madhusudan.

In an effort to consistently make inspiring films on NGOs and use media for social change, another initiative spearheaded

by MAM is 'Seva Journals'. It serves non profit organizations by making short films to tell their stories by working with volunteers and professional filmmakers. The cost incurred is fraction of a cost of commercial production houses.

The process is initiated when a non profit organization contacts Seva Journal (SJ) Team with a request for a film. SJ then interacts with the organization to discuss the requirements. Then a comprehensive proposal is created which includes the strategy, timeline and cost estimate. On mutual agreement the project is kicked off. Script writing then begins for correctly positioning the organization and brings out effectively its key message. A final script is then mutually agreed on. Crew members to shoot a film are selected based on their passion to tell a good story as well as technical capabilities. In a typical film made by SJ there are executive interviews and a showcase location or an event. The film once made goes through rigorous reviews. A couple of rounds of editing are not unusual. Once approved by the non profit organization, the project is considered complete.

As a part of the Seva Journal project, now a program has been initiated which enables creation of Video Units within the Non Profit Organization itself by the MAM team. This helps the non profit organization to make their own video presentations, short films and other projects related to media on their own. It almost eliminates their dependence to external production houses. Once a request is made, a Video Coordinator from Seva Journal selects people from the organization who will run the unit. These are then trained in

video production. Media students from colleges, selected by the SJ team also volunteer to set up the unit.

MAM is mentored by quite a few dynamic and established names in the development sector. Prof Anil Gupta a professor from IIM Ahmedabad who is also the Executive Chairman, National Innovation Foundation, is one of them.

Madhusudan fondly talks of him,” He is so dynamically enthused with life that suddenly in his presence we find ourselves in tune with our higher purpose of life in serving others. He would often say: ‘Dream so big that your ego looks very small before them’

Dwarkoji, Dr Nachiket Mor- President of the ICICI Foundation, Nipun Mehta-founder of the Charity Focus organization in Silicon Valley which builds websites for non profits are some of the other mentors.

They also have associations with film schools, corporate as well as nonprofit organizations. It includes Anupam Kher’s Actor Prepares -one of the finest acting school, ICICI group-India’s fastest growing financial services conglomerate and Manav Sadhna –an NGO based at Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad.

A friend working with a reputed MNC always used to tell him that they are not taking their careers seriously by running MAM. He believed that this may not work at all and they should do something which will offer him more security. The same friend was about to be selected in a coveted Investment Bank and had the last round of interviews when

the subprime crisis happened. The bank itself collapsed. At that point for the first time, his friend recognized that what he perceives as "security" is fickle.

"You guys are doing something which is really secure. You are living your dream and following your passion. I think this is what life should be all about," he complimented Madhusudan and Meghna . Later he also expressed his interest in joining MAM full time.

On being asked about work-life balance, Meghna says," What work! MAM is our spirit. We have to be here all the time to be in action always. We just love it!.

Everyone at MAM is associated with movies on diverse issues ranging from micro credit to environment. Its other two core team members, Akash Mohimen and Rahul Chittella from the very beginning, first as volunteers and now as fulltime members had a very significant contribution towards building MAM along with Madhusudan and Meghana. Sometimes even till midnight the MAM team keeps working passionately and the atmosphere at MAM is electrifying. Everyone is excited about whatever he or she is doing, which is a very rare site to see in any normal work place. With just a computer and a borrowed table, MAM started in a small room. Two years later it evolved to 6 fulltime members, 50 active volunteers with a large number of them who spill-in and spill-out with the projects and more than 2000 online members with an average of 1 lakh online visitors per month to it's website. They are working to create a support system with self sustaining model for the community. Further they are looking forward to organize more events like Genesis

which is now rechristened 'I am the Change' for the year 2008, and 'She creates' to engage the vibrant community. MAM is now being supported by ICICI Foundation.

“Without Dr. Nachiket's faith and support it would have been difficult to achieve so much. I remember he had said something very interesting when we met him: "Don't worry about money or resources, good ideas will have a life of it's own", says Madhusudan.

On being asked the future vision , Madhusudan says,” We dream of a group of people who will work together to use the medium of video & storytelling for the upliftment of humanity. We dream of a support system for such group of people with the principles of social entrepreneurship. We dream to have a new media industry with more citizen journalists who will empower themselves and their communities through videos. We know these dreams may seem difficult but yet something within tells us!

We are never given a dream without the power to make it come true.”

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Saksham[3]- Working towards Equitable Society

It has rained for an hour almost. Not exactly a drizzle, but neither a downpour. I take a detour from the main road and enter one of the streets in Noida, one of the modern suburbs of Delhi. The drains are overflowing on the narrow road but it's life as usual for the residents of the locality. They are maneuvering their way hopping and jumping, carrying on with their day to day tasks. I somehow manage to get to the small establishment or the Saksham School as it is known in the locality. The cleanliness of the premises startles me. It is as if there are two entirely different worlds separated by the school door.

In four small rooms and a verandah, eight classes take place at a time. The kids are deeply engrossed and most of them miss the stranger. As soon as one of them notices me, he folds his hand and says, "Namaste Bhaiya !" . I am soon guided to Nadira or Aunty as these kids lovingly call her.

It all started when some friends belonging to Kannur in Kerala got together in Delhi. Nadira, one of the trustees, moved to Delhi in 1978 after her marriage. Gradually a group of like minded people came together.

"I have been educated in a convent school. I liked volunteering ever since the school days and consider it a duty to give back to the society," says Nadira. She started teaching her maids kids and slowly more underprivileged kids started

coming to her house. Soon the number became overwhelming to be accommodated and she herself started taking evening classes in the slum area in the year 2000. Being an illegal establishment, the entire area was cleared out in 2001. Some of the people living in the slums relocated to an area nearby. They urged Nadira to carry on teaching the kids as they had started seeing a ray of hope in education. She managed to get a terrace in the same locality where the school runs now.

The number of children rapidly grew from 60 to 150 in a year. In December 2003, the Saksham Trust- a non profitable, charitable trust was established. 'Saksham'ta means capability and Saksham has been rightly directed to the development of capabilities of the deprived sections of the society. The group of trustees is from all walks of life. Apart from Nadira, Krishnan Dubey - a veteran journalist , Venkitesh Ramakrishnan-deputy editor of a leading news magazine, Madhavi Menon-teacher by profession, Madhu Sen-an event manager , PV. Dinesh-a Supreme Court advocate, Sudhir Ahlawat-Building contractor, PC Jain- a retired senior executive and Nasira Razak an architect based in Banagalore founded the trust.

In 2004, with the help of friends, family and putting in their own money the trustees hired a place in the locality to run the school.

“Some of them even gave Rs 4000 a month in the initial period.”

“Were these people belonging to the elite class?” I inquire.

“No, they however are very generous.”

Nadira maintains blog. She keeps on updating it with the work done at Saksham. A regular reader of the blog got very impressed with the work and without even meeting her in person, sent a cheque of Rs 50000 to her. A couple from Europe whenever they visit India, do bring books in cartons which are in English. Nadira hopes that one day the kids will be able to make maximum use of these. Different people have been contributing in different capacity. For example a person sponsors “sattu” (gram with jaggery) for the kids twice a week.

The kids were initially taught basic skills to read and write. Soon the system of classes till Standard five had evolved. At different points of time, the students are streamlined to Government Schools or other regular schools. However these children keep on coming back for supplementary classes. They are usually not happy with the standard of teaching there and the teachers at Saksham try their best to keep them motivated.

An atmosphere of genuine love and empathy for needs of the children helps reinforce their aspirations for a better life. They are encouraged to dream and share what they have

received to carry this on in the future. The learning has had a long lasting bearing as some of the kids who take up regular school do come back and teach the young ones. One of them Soni studied in Saksham for four years and then got into a government school. She is now in the 10th standard and goes to school from 8 am to 1 pm. She then comes to teach nursery kids at Saksham from 4 pm to 7pm. Then she goes home, helps her mother at housework and studies till mid night.

“It is fun teaching these kids! I look forward to being at Saksham every day,” says Soni.

“It is slowly evolving as a self supporting system. Some of them do come back and teach the kids at Saksham. The society, to which the kids belong to, has to take more ownership. For instance, the landlord here has charged us a very reasonable rent and even if we defaulted sometimes, he did bear with us,” says Nadira

One of the problems that Saksham has to tackle is inability to get qualified teachers. This is primarily due to the salary demanded. Some of the teachers teaching in government and private schools have volunteered but there has been irregularity because of which kids have to suffer sometimes. Some of the motivated volunteers dropped out as they were not able to bear the surroundings in which the school is located. None of this stops the teachers at Saksham to put in their best efforts.

“I do study some of the concepts which teachers find tough and explain it to them here, who then take it up with kids. We do face problems in some subjects like Mathematics,” Nadira says. She is also constantly scouting for volunteers who can help the kids with these subjects.

Care is also taken that kids do not learn just by rote. Learning is made interactive and fun by the use of educational games. Younger kids are provided with drawing sheets and colors to explore their imagination and creativity. Another problem faced is kids dropping out because of their families’ financial conditions. A lot of kids from very poor families never go to school as their parents fail to see the logic, “*Padh kay kya hoga* “ (what good are studies) or “*Zinda rehne k liye roti ki jyada zaroorat hai* “ (In order to survive, bread is needed first.) .These however have not been able to deter the cause of education that Saksham is dedicated to. In spite of such adverse conditions, apart from the academic, overall development is also one of the primary concerns at Saksham. Due to the unhygienic surroundings, the children do suffer from various health problems and diseases. Health checks are organized periodically and medicines given free of cost. Cases which require further attention are followed up by tests and medical consultation. It’s also made sure that kids do participate in extracurricular activities apart from academics and contribute to the society at large.

Some other organizations are also supporting Saksham. While CRY has helped them initially with the notebooks and

other items of stationary, Indian Council of Child Welfare donated clothes water bottles, pencil boxes etc. Goonj has also helped them in similar capacity. Some organizations who wanted to fund Saksham insisted the community in the vicinity to own up the initiative in the long term. Taking into account the fact that the people in the surroundings are barely able to sustain themselves, it seems like a distant possibility.

Nithari, the locality where the school is located is the same place where bodies of about 17 kids were recovered in 2006. Investigations revealed that they were sexually abused and murdered. Everyone was shell shocked by the heinous act. In the hour of grief and trauma, the kids at the Saksham School took a step forward. A theatre group Pandies conducted workshops which later took the form of a play 'Child Looks'. It took a mammoth effort to bring the children out of the shock and help them to talk it out. The children later participated in scripting the play. The audience was moved seeing the children between the age group of 5-15 stage the killing and kidnapping. It was a thought provoking play which left the audience moved everywhere it was screened. It helped them to see the gruesome act through a child's eye.

The children who acted in the play strongly felt that all such criminals should be punished severely for their misdeeds. One of the children played a victim who was lured by the house help and later murdered. He had to gather a lot of mental strength to play the role. After the play, he said that

he did not feel good at all, but he then he thought of the girl who in real life had to go through this. There were quite a few lessons learned by the kids. While one of them felt that they should not be greedy and lured by criminals like these, another felt that he should not talk to strangers. The play attempted to help kids express their feelings, break myths and speak their minds out.

Not only in this particular incident, but otherwise also the children at Saksham are confident to tackle the adversities of life. What started with the intention to bring minimum literacy to the children who could not go to school because of social or economic restraints has now gained momentum and an informal school runs in two shifts with around 350 children enrolled.

Since the last two years, students are also coached for admission to Navodaya Vidyalayas (details about Navodaya in Ashish Gupta's story). The students join Navodaya from the sixth standard. Last year, out of nine students being coached, one made it to Navodaya. This year, 18 of them are being coached and most of them are girls. To start with, they had a tough time submitting the application forms. They needed the seal of the government school they were studying in and a signature. It required the intervention from one of the trustees to go to the school and get it done.

“Even if the kid reaches the fifth standard, she may not know to read and write at a government school!”, says Nadira

“There are other small private schools in the area too, but none of them is upto the mark. Some of them are not even recognized by the State or the Central government. They just exploit the parent’s dream of securing education for their children. “

Nithari used to be a village where the natives earned their livelihood by agriculture and dairy farming. The residents then started building small rooms and rented it to the migrant workers from Bihar, West Bengal, villages of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Slowly a *basti* evolved of the migrant workers and their families. Most of the people staying in the locality where Saksham operates are migrant workers. They do not have ration cards or any other identity. Due to this they have to pay excessively for even the basic necessities like a gas cylinder. They pay almost double the amount or sometimes even more as they are forced to use commercial cylinders. After spending on rent and food, they can hardly save anything. Almost periodically a sudden illness gets them into trap of debt. Usually the rates are as obscenely high as 10 % a month. This means that a household with a monthly income of Rs 5000, taking a debt of Rs 10000 pays Rs 1000 in interest every month. Failing to pay that, further adds to the woes and they end up in a vicious circle of poverty.

Being deeply absorbed in surviving day to day life usually a small ailment is neglected till the point of time it aggravates into a serious disease. The plight of the government hospital nearby does not help the cause further.

“Not every government hospital is like this. There is another one in Shahdara (a locality one and a half hours away from Nithari by bus), where the patients are taken good care of. If that can work well, why can't the others?,” questions Nadira.

Once the kids reach nine or ten years of age they start assisting their parents in their work. For instance a maid's daughter starts accompanying her to work, a vegetable vendor's son starts working with his father and helping him with business. This has been changing slowly since Saksham began its operations. The parents are now becoming open to the idea of sending their children to school and can see the merit in it.

“The parents leave for work early in the morning, instructing the kids to go to school. They cannot monitor them closely however. Sometimes the kids do not turn up. We do regularly inform parents about the absence,” says a teacher at Saksham.

The kids are also vulnerable to picking up bad habits because of the surroundings. If such a thing happens and a child is addicted to tobacco or any other drug, special care of the kid is taken to understand his point of view and help him get rid of the habit. Even if the kid is not able to keep with the pace of the class, he is given extra time to explain concepts which he may have not been able to grasp.

Another unique challenge faced is a kid being naughty because she is very sharp and can grasp the concepts very quickly and starts getting bored with the pace of the class. The teachers are not able to do much in this context and some extra activity is usually assigned to such a child.

Saksham has sparked a revolution in the area where at first girl education was not a priority. Now some of the parents are willing to send their daughters to Navodaya Schools which is a sea change in the way of thinking. Early marriages were a norm and most of the girl children never had a chance to even step in a school. A long road still needs to be travelled as there are still quite a few girls who are denied to step out of the locality. On being asked, why does she not go to a government school, a little girl studying at Saksham says, " *Mummy mujhe bahar nahi jane deti,*" (Mummy won't allow me to go outside).

The trustees and the teachers are however determined and constantly working to make each and every child 'Saksham' for a better tomorrow.

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Ashish Gupta - Committed to the cause of Livelihoods.

A scheme called Navodaya Vidyalaya System was launched by the government to provide quality modern education to the talented children in predominantly rural areas. Ashish qualified the District Level Competitive exam in which more than 10000 children appeared and secured admission in one such school in Jabalpur. Named after saint Jabalie,, Jabalpur is one of the more prominent cities in Central India. It is adeptly called as “Sanskardhani” (Cultural Capital) as it has, at a point in time been home to spiritual leaders like Osho and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

After High School, Ashish enrolled for a Bachelors degree in science. By the time the course came to an end, Ashish had made up his mind to pursue a management degree. He then went on to do his MBA from Institute of Rural Management, Anand(IRMA) in Gujarat. During the course, the ‘Amul’ story caught his fancy there and he was inspired to see how a cooperative of milk farmers worked meticulously to create a revolution which has not only improved their standard of living but also built one of the most distinguished brands in India. He graduated from IRMA in 1999.

On graduation he started working as a Management Trainee at an NGO known as Gram Vikas in Orrisa. It works towards sustainable improvement in the quality of lives of the poor and the marginalized rural communities in Orrisa. He worked

in the areas of Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Documentation.

“My effort was to support institutionalization of working at Gram Vikas (GV). I could see that a lot of good work was being done by GV in the different sectors like health, education, social forestry, community empowerment etc. Most of it was funded by charity and there was a lot of scope of improvement as far as the systems were concerned. I worked towards making them self sustainable and implementing processes which were more efficient.”

At that point of time, Gram Vikas had started working rigorously on livelihoods (refers to how people make their living). Initially it was started as an extension of Social Forestry.

“There was good cashew crop resulting from the social forestry, but the farmers did not know how to market it, process it or for that matter get the right price for it. A lot of work had to be done in terms of providing tools like microfinance offered in an institutionalized and systematic way to create awareness amongst the farmers. It was a challenging assignment but it excited me as I am eager to work for causes that are self sustainable and not merely dependent on charity.”

He had learnt to appreciate the development of an efficient solution to a problem or an issue which could then be replicated to the larger target group.

“It was a very tough assignment both intellectually as well as physically,” smiles Ashish. “Sometimes I had to climb the hills for as many as three days to reach a remote village. The interesting thing is that I was the only member of our team who went on to climb all the hillocks in the region”

Sometimes he even worked with very small villages where no more than ten families lived. He discussed with them their concerns and used his management expertise to mutually come up with innovative solutions to improve their livelihood and standard of living. He found the use of micro finance as a tool very effective as means to achieve sustainability for helping poor and deprived to improve their livelihoods.

Micro finance started in Bangladesh in late 70s has evolved in India over the past quarter century into different forms. One such form is the concept of “Self Help Groups”, usually composed of people below poverty line in groups of 10-20, who save regularly and form the group corpus fund. This fund is then used to advance loan to the members. The group meets regularly. The financial management, interest rates and other norms are mutually agreed on by the group.

The work with Gram Vikas gave Ashish an insight into the ground realities, micro level issues that contribute to efficient

setting up of a system especially Micro Finance and he decided to explore it further. In 2002, he joined the District Poverty Initiative Project supported by World Bank in Andhra Pradesh. It aimed at empowering poorest of the poor to participate proactively in decisions that affect their livelihoods and improve their living conditions. By February 2003, 135000 poor families had been provided with support for their new livelihoods like small enterprise and farming assistance.

“While at Gram Vikas one of the important learning was the importance of the building blocks, at DPIP I had started to understand the bigger picture. Sometimes we would be discussing in a meeting a development budget of Rs 100 crore for a district. We would not talk micro like setting up a Self Help Group (SHG) in a particular village, but we would discuss the macro picture like the policies and norms which will govern sometimes thousands of SHGs. From working in a small team of three to four people at Gram Vikas, at DPIP sometimes I would coordinate 1500 people,” says Ashish.

He knew from his Orrisa experience that in order to set up a single SHG how he would have to formulate a team, make appropriate policies, implement it and sensitize the local people about the benefits of SHGs. While working at DPIP, all this proved to be very fruitful as he knew what would work under a given condition at the ground. By this time he had realized that his calling was to work for improving the

livelihoods of the marginalized. Like in any normal job, he could not implement all his ideas.

“You are not always allowed to do what you want to do. If you really want to contribute something which you passionately believe in, you need to own it. This is what I firmly believe in,” says Ashish.

Initially planning a long term career with DPIIP, he did quit in a year to follow his heart. On contemplation, he realized that Madhya Pradesh would be an ideal starting point for him. Being born and brought up in Jabalpur, he knew the area well, was aware of the local people’s condition and always wanted to pay back to the place he was born in. He came back to Jabalpur and met people who were working for the development sector for two and a half months. He also explored the organizations who were working for social causes. During that time, he came in touch with BASIX which is a leading livelihood promotion institution working in more than 10 states in India. Ashish, keen on working for livelihood, took up the challenging assignment to initiate and expand its operations in Eastern Madhya Pradesh. He established and led Microfinance and Livelihood plans in the region mainly for tribals. The portfolio of the first microfinance unit set up by him was taken upto Rs 50 lakhs in the short period of six months.

“One of the main challenges that I faced was to explain the concept of microfinance to people and establish trust. They had been duped earlier by fake organizations that posed as banks, put camps in the villages, collected money and then disappeared,” says Ashish

“As we were a threat to traditional money lenders who charged exorbitant rates of interest, they started spreading baseless rumours about us. We had to work extremely hard educating everyone about the truth. It also took quite a while to train our own workforce about the concept. Initially they had trouble visualizing how it all will work. Once the workforce was educated, slowly but steadily we were able to put our point across to the marginalized that how can microfinance help them get out of the vicious circle of poverty.”

They operated through the formation of ‘Joint Liability Groups’. These groups usually consist of members of the same socio economic background involved in similar activities for livelihood. This group then offers mutual guarantee for the purposes of availing individual or group loans. Though he had successfully set up the Basix operations , his burning desire to start up an organization on his own, did not diminish. On October 2004, he resigned and served his notice period till December 2004.

“It was time to get married for me. I wanted to be honest with my life partner about my aim to start up,” says Ashish.

He tied the knot on February 2005 and thus began a new phase in his life. From January to June 2005, he worked on free lance consultancy projects for the government and non government organizations. At the same point of time, he made a concrete business plan finalizing the channel of delivery, the policies for his own organization. Ashish was also awarded AKSHARA fellowship during the same period.

Efforts did bear fruit and on 30th June 2005, Jeevika Livelihood Support Organization was registered as an NGO. It was established as an independent organization of AKSHARA Network of Development Support Services, Hyderabad. The emphasis was on improving the livelihoods of rural, urban and tribal poor with a focus on Madhya Bharat (Central India) region.

From his experience he knew that credit is a necessary but not sufficient condition for livelihood enhancement of the poor. A micro loan may help a farmer grow a crop, but until support is provided to use the appropriate pesticides and then later to get the right prices, all the efforts may go in vain. Jeevika aimed at helping poorer sections of the society to form their own affinity group and institutions, providing training and consultancy services to them on an on-going basis. It also aimed at setting up microfinance institutions which are sensitive to their financial as well as business needs.

“We needed a cash corpus to dispense loans. We decided not to initiate any grant proposals and operated in a self revenue generation mode. We did consultancy projects in the areas of microfinance, rural development and livelihood promotion through the Project Assistance and Consultancy Support (PACS) Unit set up at Jeevika. At the same point of time, a feasibility study for setting up micro finance in Madhya Pradesh was done. In the second year we started the microfinance operations. On 30th June 2006, the first branch opened in Sihora- a block headquarter in Jabalpur District. It helped in increasing our outreach to public, establishing trust with the poor as well as funding agencies, investors and technical service providers. We were setting up the entire ecosystem which would facilitate enhancement of livelihoods.”

The microfinance operations of JEEVIKA were directed towards incubating a separate Micro-finance Institute (MFI) in due course of time, having a separate legal entity. JEEVIKA was acting only as a launching pad for the MFI.

The going was not easy at Jeevika. While at Basix, he was replicating a standard model, here it involved determining policies and setting up a whole new culture for Jeevika. Apart from all the challenges faced, he also had to tackle the pressure from friends and family. It was hard to explain it to them why was he taking such huge risks. None of this however proved to be a deterrent for his passion and conviction.

“At our very first Annual Staff Meeting, the police raided one of our premises with charges of money laundering and fraud. It later turned out to be a false complaint. There was also a pressure to disperse loans to anti social elements. Sometimes no matter how fool proof systems you make, things fall apart. These experiences make you grow as a company and as individuals. We did keep our cool when things got out of control and managed the situation well,” recalls Ashish. “I think the most difficult task was building a unique culture for Jeevika. We had to deal differently with corporate, NGOs and banks and still keep the culture intact. It wasn’t easy at all!”

In just nine months, the micro finance operations of Jeevika were reaching to 2075 families. Since disbursing its first loan on 29th July 2006, it had 1760 loanee members through four branches with 100 % repayment rates.

“I always wanted the impact to reach the maximum number of people. Ownership was never an issue. As we grew, we were approached by Sonata Finance Pvt Ltd, an NBFC (Non Banking Finance Company) headquartered in Allahbad for merger. It turned out to be a great deal.”

This was first of it’s kind of mergers in the micro finance industry. As a part of the merger, Ashish joined the promoter group of Sonata and was appointed as one of the Executive Directors. He took up the position of the Chief Operations

Officer along with spearheading Sonata's operations in Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh in future. The merger took place on 1st August 2007. In merged entity of Sonata projected disbursements of Rs 400 million to 48000 families through 25 branches in the following financial year. The merged entity has so far (September 2008) disbursed an amount of more than Rs 800 million to more than 65000 families through 41 branches, exceeding the projections by a handsome margin.

"We have been able to achieve this feat through the support of the village folk, especially the elderly people from the village. They helped us put a point to the villagers who had almost become cynics after a series of frauds."

Microfinance products and services are reaching out to a large number of people in MP under the banner of the NBFC Sonata, through Jeevika. As of now, they are looking at three main sectors- labourers (daily wage employees like construction workers), artisans and dairy farmers.

"The labourers usually are all asset less. There is no specialized skill set and no work guarantee. Virtually they have zero savings. One of their main challenges is identity crisis. Not only the construction workers, but even workers in small dhabas, garment stores, mandis, transportation companies etc are in equally bad condition."

Karigar Panchayat at the national level is looking after various issues faced with the artisans at the central level. This was absent in Madhya Pradesh for a long time. Ashish was nominated as the convener of MPKP (Madhya Pradesh Karigaar Panchayat) and he has raised various issues and taken it to government.

“There is a High Court order that for the 5 km radius of the world famous “Bhera Ghat” marble cannot be extracted. It endangered the livelihoods of almost 2000 people living in the area. We have raised the issue and we seek a solution soon.

Artisans need support not only with marketing but also conceptualization. Earlier whatever the artisans made was used in day to day life. They were not show pieces as it is now. We need to design these products in such a way that they are of utility rather than show pieces”

Ashish has been working with professors from Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IITD) for replacing wood and iron in construction with Bamboo. He did lead a team of Bamboo artisans to IIT D for exploring different ways in which Bamboo’s utility can be enhanced and it can act as substitute to wood and metals also in some cases.

“In and around Jabalpur, as many as 15000 people’s livelihoods are dependent on Bamboo. Many of them are

losing their earning due to fall in demand. We need innovation in design and a new outlook to survive. There are good business models like Delhi Haat and Fab India, but we need to replicate them at a large scale, so more people can benefit from these”

The third sector which he plans to focus on is dairy farmers. His MBA in Gujarat near Amul has given him valuable insights into the model and he strongly feels that Madhya Pradesh can also benefit from formation of such cooperatives.

Besides from his zealous endeavors for micro finance, he is associated with an E-Magazine known as Microfinance Focus for the last couple of years. Now they are planning to take it to the print media. He is also working with Akshara Group for their magazine Livelihoods. He strongly believes that media has a very strong role to play in increasing awareness amongst the common people as well as the organizations that are working in different areas for development. The best practices in each sector should be shared with the wider audience and replicated across. For example, a new offering in Tamil Nadu in Microfinance may also work in Madhya Pradesh.

He was nominated for the seven day Harvard Business School-ACCION Program on Strategic Leadership in Microfinance held from June 15-June 21, 2008. It had an expanded curriculum for financial institutions. Microfinance specialists and leaders from conventional commercial banks

all got together to expand finance to the underserved clients around the world.

“One of the great advantages was the vetting of ideas by the entrepreneurs and experts who had worked in the industry for many years. The young entrepreneurs /executives got a better understanding of the ideas that are replicable and those which won’t work out at all. Viability as well as implementation strategies were discussed for tried and tested as well as innovative ideas. I am looking forward to use some of them in Central India.”

On being asked the vision of his life, Ashish says,” I want to lead a life of simplicity and work towards my best to contribute to the betterment of the society. In the present days, I feel that peace of mind has been lost as we are too obsessed with the show off. We all can live the life of king in spirit if we follow the Indian philosophy. All of us should get together to give back to the society and follow the path shown by the great personalities like Vinoba Bhave and Mahatma Gandhi”

Even on weekends he can be seen engrossed strategizing for the future with a dream to make Central India a role model for others.

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aProCh[4]- A Protagonist in every Child

June was coming to an end. The second year batch had just come back from internship to the well-known Institute of Management in Western India- IIM Ahmedabad. It was an afternoon and the summers at Ahmedabad are one of the hottest in the country. A meeting was organized in the Incubation Center at the campus. The agenda was to have a dialogue with someone who was concerned about making Ahmedabad a 'child friendly city'. As some students and faculty gathered from different institutes in the city, a lady greeted them with a warm smile. She then made a presentation on the importance of creating space, organizing events and making an environment which will be make growing up fun and much more enriching. The audience was amazed as she enthusiastically shared her plans to close down a busy street once a month for an initiative christened 'Street Smart', facilitate showing a movie to underprivileged kids at a multiplex, tying up with an Airline for underprivileged kids to take the 'Flight of Fantasy', revamping a junk bus to make it at an activity center for street kids and so on.

As the presentation came to a close, she turned to the audience and said, "I look forward to some of the brightest minds in management and design to join me in this pursuit! "

There was a pin drop silence. Kiran Sethi, the founder of a school called Riverside, was astonished for sometime as she

expected an overwhelming response after her presentation. No one responded. After sometime a hand raised and then others. aProCh, the concept started taking shape.

Kiran was born and brought up in Bangalore. She fondly remembers how her father, an engineering graduate from the first batch of IIT Kharagpur instilled in her an appreciation for hard work and entrepreneurship.

“He was the first machine tool designer of India. He left the job and started his own company. We used to go to the factory in the weekends and work with him. Every time it would be a wonderful exposure to innovation and perseverance,” she says.

Kiran joined the National Institute of Design and got married while she was still in college. On graduation, she started her own design studio and did a considerable amount of innovative work which worked wonders for the client organizations.

She had gone to a study tour in Italy where she got fascinated by the city of Reggio-Emilia –a child friendly city. On returning to India she conceptualized a ‘partnership between the city and its children’ for Ahmedabad. To start with, she wanted to initiate a dialogue between her school Riverside and the City.

Once on a study tour to Reggio-Emilia, a child friendly city in northern Italy, Kiran was fascinated to see how the war

ravaged town had reclaimed its innocence by consciously creating a child centric society where positive childhood scripting was at the center of the cities agenda.

“Childhood is the point of intersection between biology and cosmology, where the structuring of our worldviews and our philosophies of human purpose takes place. It is this ‘scripting’ that enables societies to have nostalgia for the future. Conversely, the child's sense of connection to the world can be damaged by impoverished surroundings and also by too much affluence. It can be destroyed, in other words, when ugliness, both human and ecological, becomes the norm. Increasingly, our children imitate the values they perceive in us with characteristic juvenile exaggeration and wonder why we get upset by this display of ‘ignorance’ and ‘arrogance’, “says Kiran.

“Frank Lloyd Wright, a legendary American Architect who worked on more than 1000 projects, once said that he could design a house in such a way that would cause a married couple to divorce within weeks. By the same logic, it is possible to create buildings and cities so badly as to cause a culture to disintegrate socially and come unhinged from nature and vice versa,” reflects Kiran. “We claim to love our children, and I believe that most of us do. But we have, like sheep, acquiesced in the design of a society that dilutes the expression of genuine love. The result is a growing mistrust of our children that easily turns to fear and dislike.”

She feels that in order to design a 'childhood' for children, the starting point is the child herself and her need for joy, safety, play, and the opportunity to safely explore the wider world.

aProCh believes in the design for and the nurturing of childhood. The design required the best minds of the city to come together and build a model that would be sustainable and replicable. Hence Aproch partnered with IIM and NID students and faculty to create strategic models for each of its initiatives.

"This unique Team Structure allows cross fertilization of ideas and it has helped to come up with some amazing concepts. Apart from students, we have some citizen volunteers as well. It's fun seeing the brainstorming getting into heated arguments but then gradually give in to the spirit of teamwork," smiles Kiran.

On her tie-ups with the educational institutes as well as the Municipal Corporation and the Police, she says, "All of us need to own the city. It can't be just the school Riverside, or IIM or NID, the government and all the citizens need to work together to make the dream turn into a reality"

An initiative called "Street Smart" has gained a lot of popularity in just a year. Held four times a year on national holidays, one of the busy streets closes down for children ages 6 - 13 yrs. Sometimes for as long as five hours, the place buzzes with fun filled activities where renowned artists engage with the children to give form to their expressions in singing, dancing, painting, story-telling and the like. The street gets converted into a

playground for kids! Interviews conducted at the venue bear testimony to the unsolicited fun that the kids have. After a street play on Mahatma Gandhi, a Riverside School student who played the lead role is asked if she is comfortable with a male role. She replied confidently, " Why not? We have been practicing this play since the last year and before this, have done rehearsals for the last three days. This (Street Smart) is a great initiative. She recollected that at the last street smart, her maid's kids also came and it was nice having fun with them."

During a snake show, a boy studying in the fifth standard is called on stage and the showman put a snake (poison less) round his neck. On being asked how he felt. The boy replied enthusiastically that at first he was afraid but then the fear was gone. He felt that the snake was a bit cold when he touched it but it was great fun. On yet another stage, some professionals taught basic dance steps to a large group of children and invited them to dance with them on stage to rocking Bollywood songs. Vijay a little boy was amazed to learn that he could dance well and the entire experience for him was enthralling. Another part of the street was converted into a huge canvas for the children to showcase their artistic talents. Bundles of sheets were rolled out on the street and poster paints and brushes were given to each child. A little girl Rachana, engrossed in painting said that she enjoyed painting and really liked the way she was being given freedom to paint whatever she felt like. She said that she will now eagerly wait for the next Street Smart.

It is an amazing site to see kids from all classes of the society come together to celebrate childhood. aProCh has had more

than 7 Street Smart events since August 2007 and each event brings more than 3000 children to the street that is designed just for children and 'childhood'.

The Municipal corporation, Police, volunteers, educational and even business houses come together to organize the 'Street Smart'.

"Movie'ing Experience" is also a unique initiative aimed at providing cinema entertainment to 150 street kids every month.' Movie'ing Experience was first launched on October 29, 2007, when 'Chak De India' was screened for 350 street kids at City Pulse, a Multiplex in Gandhinagar. The children were thrilled as they came out of the theatre.

"I enjoyed thoroughly. For the first time, I have seen a movie with all my friends", said one of them.

Veena Purohit, owner of City Pulse Multiplex said, "We are very happy to open up our spaces for the children who don't get such experiences - and City Pulse is pleased to become a 'friend of the child'. Shrinath Travels, a transport company ferried the children to and from the theater. NGO's have also collaborated with Aproch to send the children living in slums. Since then aProCh has had one event every month and children from over 15 NGO's have had an opportunity to enjoy multiplex theater experience. It's yet another initiative that draws on equal participation from the entire community for the sake of children.

"Some of the kids had never even seen a movie before, leave apart seeing it in a multiplex! It's great to see all of them

forget the everyday turmoil they go through during the movie and enjoy their childhood. Not only this initiative but other initiatives too that aProCh pioneers is based on the belief 'to whom much is given, much is expected'. We plan to bring many more such wonderful moments to these kids which will enrich their childhood and make them forget all the hardships that they go through. We are thankful to the existing support that we have got, however we look forward to more of it in order to have a wider reach," says Kiran.

In order to fund aProCh initially, Kiran garnered financial support from friends and family. On being asked, if there has been adequate cooperation from the government bodies also, she says," It has been a very good experience indeed! I too believed in the stereotypes, until I was amazed by the kind of backing and help I have received from the police and the municipal cooperation alike. It wasn't an easy process to start with. When I initially approached the Police Commissioner or the Municipal Commissioner's office, I along with the volunteers from NID and IIM-A, had to put in a great deal of effort in making them understand our vision. I don't think it's unusual. For example, Street Smart was a totally alien concept, not only for the city but for the country! However, once they were convinced and saw the intent behind it, they have been totally supportive. Now we just need to convey our plans and we are assured that the traffic police and municipal corporation would help us in closing the street and conducting the event smoothly! "

Some of the businesses, institutes, enterprises and even Ahmedabad Police have signed up as 'Friends of the child'. This initiative calls upon these organizations to open their

spaces for children on predetermined times and dates. The kids are free to explore and appreciate the nuances of the social infrastructure by active participation in the enterprise.

‘Flight of Fantasy’ a ‘Friend of the Child’ program was sponsored by Jet Airways and 85 street children flew in it’s flight over the city of Ahmedabad with Bollywood star Sushmita Sen. The kids were ecstatic to experience this once in a life time extravaganza and their happiness knew no bounds.

“Some blind children expressed their excitement in words that made us look at a flight with a very different perspective. Some others talked about their dreams coming true and how just one event like this sparked new dreams and a hope to make them come true,” smiles Kiran.

aProCh signed up Seva Café as a Friend of the Child in September 2007. Seva Café, an experiment in selfless service is a café that serves 50 free meals every day and is run totally on voluntary spirit of the citizens. Several Ahmedabad schools have partnered with aProCh for the Seva Café program to foster spirit of selfless service in students of affluent schools. Five students volunteer their services every day at Seva Café and the response from the student volunteers has shown that given the right exposures, a child has the potential to step up to the plate be equal participant in the building of a city.

Kiran worried about the way the kids were being treated in the society, stumbled upon most of the initiatives by

observing the routine life, identifying gaps and spotting opportunities.

“I was in Mumbai for a meeting. All of a sudden, it started raining heavily. I was in a car, well protected from the heavy downpour. I could see the street kids running to find shelter and having a tough time finding it. It was heart breaking to see the little ones being in such a despicable situation. I was near a bus stop and as a bus came by, I started thinking what happened to these buses when they become are taken off road. I wondered, if the defunct ones can be procured from the Municipal Corporation and made into an activity center and shelter for the street kids. That’s how ‘Bus Karo’ was born.”

The initiative called ‘Bus karo’ will paint the second hand or the old buses with bright colors, redesigns the interior for creating ‘experiences’ which will engage, provide shelter and entertain the street kids. At first Kiran wanted these buses to be park these permanently at prime locations so that it creates awareness amongst the well to do about the underprivileged and encourage them to contribute more. On discussions with the Municipal Corporation, it was found out that though it may be feasible to give a parking space, the bus could not be permanently placed at any particular point. As of now Mr Dilip Chhabria, a renowned automobile designer has agreed to design the first bus on a pro bono basis.

Kiran has braved setbacks in her professional career too and has a different perspective in life. She got bored of the design studio after running it successfully for more than a decade.

“I realized that my work was towards making more money for people with more money so far. I could not see the logic in spending the rest of my life doing the same. Besides, I was perturbed to see the childhood being lost. I along with a friend, decided to open a school called Riverside that would have a different methodology bring up the kids differently. A few months before the launch she had to relocate to USA and I had to walk the road alone. I decided to go ahead.”

She remembers that during the initial days, she had to face a lot of hardships setting up the school. The going got even tougher as there was an earthquake in Gujarat on January 26, 2001-the year she wanted to induct the first batch of students at Riverside. 26 kids still signed up and now Riverside has 260 kids. aProCh also had a humble beginning and has now touched the life of 15000 kids in just the first year.

“Whenever something seemed impossible, my father used to always encourage me saying, ‘Why not! Just give it your best’. It has stayed with me forever and inspired me to overcome all the obstacles. It’s human nature to fail before succeeding. The motivation behind aProCh has been the basic premise to do good and create a sustainable proposition to engage children. I strongly believe in ‘To whom much is given, much is expected’. The society has to take ownership and help the underprivileged. The innovative thought has to be backed by a lot of efforts by all sections of the society, the government, the business houses, educational institutes, media and all the other organizations” reflects Kiran.

Another innovative concept that aProCh is working on nowadays is 'Food For Thought'. Millions of children die in India every year due to malnutrition. Hunger not only adversely affects a child's attention span in the school but is also the primary reason why the underprivileged kids either stop attending school or don't enroll at all in order to work for feeding themselves and their families. Food for Thought is an initiative by aProCh to aid the mid-day meal scheme run by Akshaya Patra Foundation that serves healthy meals to over 60,000 municipal school children in Ahmedabad and over 2.5laks children all over the country.

"Even if we can have volunteers or parents of the children in every private school donate 1 kg of pulses and 1 kg of Oil which are the main contributors to the cost of the meal, we can contribute considerably", says Kiran.

She talks another initiative called '*Tees Ka Dum*'(Power of Thirty),"Research has proven that 30 hours of one to one tutoring can considerably improve the academic performance for primary school children and help her reach the next grade. We plan to start these at the Government schools which need it the most. Even the children studying in 8th standard onwards can tutor for this initiative."

aProCh plans to provide free one to one tutoring to municipal school children in the language and math curriculum. They would also be conducting weekend clubs for creative arts.

"We just want the kids to be excited about learning, "says Kiran. "We want the English medium schools to adopt the municipal school neighbourhoods. Especially we would like

the parent community of these schools to volunteer. We also look forward to the support in the form of books and other logistical needs.”

On being asked the future vision, Kiran smiles and says,” I dream of the day when not just Ahemdabad, not only India but the entire world will be a child friendly place.”

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Indian Blood Donors[5] – It's all about saving a life

"I want to make India a country where no one dies for want of blood", says Khushroo Poacha is his vision behind Indianblooddonors.com.

Indianblooddonors.com is the outcome of empathy and generosity which stands out. The husband wife duo of Mrs and Mr Poacha have devoted their lives to the cause of humanity.

In the winter of 1994, Poacha's grandmother slipped and fell in their house. She went into coma and was admitted in medical college of Nagpur. He used to take care of her and at the night sleep by her bedside. One night, while he was taking a nap, he was suddenly woken up by vehement shouting. He looked at his watch sleepily. It was 3: 30 am. He realized that nearby, some people were beating a resident doctor. His clothes were almost torn and they were thrashing him mercilessly. A man was crying out loud at the top of his voice, "He has killed my wife. I won't spare him "

When he intervened and rescued the doctor, he said, "I have been telling them for the last couple of days to arrange for a unit of blood. This lady had a low hemoglobin count. As they are from a village, they could not arrange for a donor in the city. The lady had a heart attack and she passed away."

It did leave an impact and he was disturbed to see a person losing life, just because the blood could not be arranged in

time. What further perturbed him was that even a notice of a couple days was not sufficient in procuring blood. For some days he kept on pondering over the issue, however soon day to day life caught up and over a period of time, he forgot the incident.

In the year 1999, he wanted to get some furniture made for his house. One of his friends owned a furniture shop and he wanted the work to be done by him. He had gone twice earlier to the shop but could not meet his friend. Third time, his wife accompanied him and she said that if this time, they were not able to meet his friend, they would get the work done at some other place. On not finding him there, he called up his friend urging him to come to the shop soon. He got to know soon that a welder working for his friend was in need of an O negative blood and his friend was busy searching for it.

Poacha immediately said, 'I can get it for you. I have been regularly donating blood since college days. We get voluntary blood donor cards. These cards are given to a person donates blood. The donor can produce this card at any blood bank and procure blood when in need of it.'

Subsequently, he approached six blood banks in Nagpur but to no avail. O negative is a very rare blood group and he was not able to locate it.

“I felt very bad when I had to tell my friend that I was not able to arrange for it”, recalls Poacha.

When he called his friend again to inquire about the welder, his friend told him that he passed away the previous night. He was suffering from thalassemia, his blood count got low and he died. This moved him and he vowed to do something for this cause. He wondered how difficult it would be to procure blood for children suffering from thalassemia who need blood transfusion every month, sickle cell patients who needed it once in every two months, cancer patients who require it regularly and patients undergoing operations like open heart surgeries who need it at a very short notice. He felt pity for the people who have to go to the metros when the treatment is not possible in their own city or villages and lamented the fact that they had to shell out a lot of money to touts and sometimes undergo unbearable trauma in the entire process. Some of the unfortunate ones, for who blood cannot be procured, eventually die.

“I told my wife at that time itself that we need to do something about this, “recollects Poacha.” It was the dotcom era. Rediff.com , Indya.com and many more websites were getting launched with all pomp and flair. Entrepreneurs like Sabeer Bhatia were being talked about in every nook and cranny.

I had just learned how to use internet and was sending a mail to my cousin in Canada. Suddenly a thought stuck me that we

can use the power of the internet to save lives. I call it the “Eureka Moment “. I envisioned a website which would provide a link between the patient and the donors,” exclaims Poacha

He immediately rushed to his home and told his wife,” Fermin, we are going to make a website through which people in need would be able to get blood all over India”

She was puzzled and asked him, “What do you know about a website?”

He remembers, “I knew nothing. I did not know what a domain is, how is hosting done, neither did I know how to develop a website. I had no idea of how much would it cost. I had absolutely no idea of what was I getting into. “

“I bought a second hand computer as a first step for Rs 12, 500. Then I started thinking of a good name for the site. I first thought of names like blood donors, blood helpline. None of them actually appealed to me. I wanted the people of India to identify with the name and that’s when I thought of Indianblooddonors.com. At that point of time, I did not know that a dot com is for business and dot org is usually for charity. “

He did not have a credit card then and he asked his cousin to book a domain name for the site. Then he asked one of his friends who was into website design to develop Indianblooddonors.com. He wanted the users to get a list of

donors when they searched so that they can contact them and procure blood.

“The prize that my friend quoted was INR 60000. It was almost equal to all the savings I had in my bank account. “, remembers Poacha. His friend then offered him a discount and agreed to develop it for INR 40000. They both started working on it and gradually the website was developed and hosted in March 2000.

“I was very excited when we hosted it. I wanted to post an advertisement in the paper so that people can come to know about it. I went to an advertising agency and told them that I want to put almost a quarter page ad. When I got to know that it would cost me thousands of Rupees, I told them that my budget was INR 4000. They said that you can only get a small ad for this amount. I agreed”, smiles Poacha. ,”Incidentally it was the first and the last ad that I gave in newspaper. I still have a cutting of it”

On 20th March 2000, the website was launched. He always thought that scores of users will soon register on Indianblooddonors and it's going to be a very big hit once the advertisement came out in the newspaper. To his dismay, not even a single user registered. He was perplexed as he had spent all his savings for the launch of the website and now there was almost no response to it. He decided not to give up and started sending mails for informing people about the website inviting them to join. He also contacted doctors. The

response however was not positive. Almost everyone turned a deaf ear to him causing humiliation. He wrote to some of the distinguished individuals to mentor him. He never heard back from any of them. He then started talking to his friends about Indianblooddonors and urged them to spread the word to their friends. The going was very tough and there was no traction on the website.

“It’s a different thing that now all the major hospitals in the country want to tie up with me and want an access to my database”, he says with a wry smile.

He also approached the famous web portals asking them for a link to his site on their portal which read “Be a blood donor”. They did not pay much attention to him.

The turning point for Indianblooddonors came at the time of Gujarat earthquake. Mrs Poacha’s family is based in Ahmedabad. On 26th January 2001, when the calamity struck, she started calling all her relatives when she heard of it. As soon as they got the first hand information about the intensity of the quake, he immediately realized that a lot of blood will be needed to save lives of the injured. Poacha contacted ZEE News office in New Delhi, and asked them to show a scroll ad of the website as there was going to be an enormous shortage of blood and their website could assist in handling the crisis. The next day, the scroll ad “Be a blood donor on Indianblooddonors.com” was shown. Prior to the ad, the website had 400 donors. A day after the ad, the

number of donors went up to 3500 from all over the country. The earthquake victims who were shifted from Bhuj to Armed Forces Medical College, Pune were in need of blood. He called up the donors to donate blood and around 80-90 of the 100 he approached obliged.

After this, gradually the media started contacting him. Outlook magazine published an article on them titled "Making a difference". BBC did profile it in their program called, "IT India Tomorrow". Subsequently Readers Digest also did a write up. The database started growing and in 2005 about 28000 donors had registered.

Like every newly started business, Indianblooddonors faced a financial crisis as the user base grew. Right from the beginning it has been self funded by the Poachas despite them having a middle class background. He did not buy in to the idea of charging a fee for the service as his conceptualization right from the beginning was not to make the patients pay. Some people suggested him to register the organization as an NGO and get funds. He always believed that before forming an organization the system should start working well.

Then as a blessing of the God amidst the peak of the crisis, when he did not even have funds to pay his phone bills, he received a cheque of Rs 1001 from an advocate in New Delhi. He was soon contacted by a group of youngsters from US who were running a small organization called "Ekjut" and

supported small social causes in India. They came forward to support his telephone bill for three months and also sponsored the stickers and some other publicity material for advertising. Slowly but steadily, people from all walks of life started supporting the cause.

With the help of these small donations and self contribution, the web portal continued to function. Some volunteers also contributed to help the cause. A major concern at that point of time was that the Indianblooddonors database was accessible to everyone making it vulnerable. Soon, they came to notice that it was indeed being misused. The touts used to pick up the phone numbers of the donors, contacted them and when they gave blood, took a commission from the patient. Apart from these there were some genuine concerns of the donors too which required immediate attention. For example, a donor who would prefer to donate blood just once a year was getting multiple calls a year. On the contrary, there were some donors who wanted to donate blood every month without knowing that it is only possible to donate it once in three months. The feedback played a very important part in helping Poacha overcome the shortcomings of the website.

In December 2003, he was approached by a software company which offered an Interactive Voice Response System. The solution would enable the patients looking for blood to call a number, which would then furnish the contact details of the donors. The solution was tested but things did

not work out as expected. Gnanasekaran, who offered the solution decided to render his services as a volunteer. He was already a registered donor on the website. He did develop the code further and maintained the website till April 2005. He then left for UAE to take up a job there. As Poacha was trying to figure out who will take over the development and maintenance, he got a mail. It was sent by Ramesh Sannareddy , a software developer. He offered to sponsor the monthly internet bill. Ramesh also conveyed that networking companies, insurance agencies, and credit card agents started picking up the telephone numbers from the database and started selling their products to the registered donors. When he came to know of all this, Poacha was very perplexed and disturbed. He shared with Ramesh his concern about the future development and the need of a coder, once Gnanasekaran left. Ramesh offered his services free and Poacha did breathe a sigh of relief. "It is said that when God closes one door he opens up another one for you," smiles Poacha.

Ramesh and he discussed for hours every week and conceptualized the new version of the website which would overcome all the shortcomings. They decided to radically change the way the website worked. In the new system, he planned to give total privacy to the donors. No one would be able to access the donors contact details. The patient's caretaker would call Indianblooddonors, who would then send an SMS to donor. 3 donors per request were intimated.

On 11th November 2005, they migrated to the new system. The biggest challenge was to migrate 28000 users to the new website. It was a huge risk.

When he asked Ramesh whether the users would migrate or not, he promptly replied, “If you think it will work, it will work.” In the evening on 11th November the new website was hosted.

Poacha recollects, “I was not able to sleep properly that night. All the time I was thinking whether the users are migrating or not. “

When he got up in the morning, he was elated to see that around 1000 donors had already migrated. Subsequently however, less people migrated. This perturbed him.

While the migration was going on, he came to realize that the patient could not wait till eternity to get a response from the donor. So he started sending an SMS to the patient also containing the profile of the donors when he received a request for blood. Soon, he started getting a feedback whether a donor had donated blood or not. He even kept a track record of the reason why the donor declined to donate the blood. For example if five times, the donor declined to give blood citing high blood pressure; he would send the donor a message requesting him to unsubscribe so that the donor is not unnecessarily bothered.

“I only wanted people registered who could donate blood,” says Poacha. Some other issues surfaced like patient’s caretakers reporting that the phone numbers of the donors given to them were wrong or out of service. He soon recognized the importance of constantly updating the database of the donors. The details like the last time when the blood was donated were updated so that the donor did not get unnecessarily disturbed. Also the phone numbers had to be updated so that only relevant information was given to those in need of blood.

He decided to send reminder for updating the profile along with the good wishes by SMS to the donors on their birthdays. Every morning, he used to send approximately 100 such SMSs. When Ramesh warned him that in this way, he will go broke, he promptly replied, “I just want Indianblooddonors to be alive. I don’t mind going broke.”

The alerts for blood donation were sent to the donors from morning 9 am to evening 6: 30 pm, except in the case of emergencies.

Soon the effectiveness was improved dramatically. In some cases where the patients had been searching for a rare blood group for nearly a week transformed to the blood being procured in six minutes flat.

People sometimes even pay thousands of rupees for procuring a single unit of blood. Poacha did spend Rs 1 from

his own pocket to help procure the same. An SMS to the donor about patient's details did cost him 50 paise and the same amount of money was spent on the SMS to the patient's caretaker containing the donor details.

"I felt deeply satisfied that not only I have saved the patient's money but also eliminate the mental trauma that he or she had to go through," says Poacha with a smile.

In September 2007, when Poacha was invited as a speaker in the Social Entrepreneurship Fair at IIM Ahmedabad, he was once again asked the two questions he had been asked earlier also. The first one was about the sustainability of the model. This essentially meant to find out ways for the helpline for generating revenues to self sustain itself. The second question was about the limited penetration of internet and it still being outside the reach of majority of the population and especially not accessed by the underprivileged. He knew that he had to make the service reach to the people who need it the most and this may require a different strategy.

One day, as Poacha was watching a cricket match, Mrs Poacha asked him to get some groceries. As he was shopping, in order to keep abreast with the latest score, he sent an SMS "CRIC" to a provider and immediately got the score back. Poacha who has been on a continuous pursuit to serve the users better, immediately saw the connection to improve the website. The donors can now be located by sending an SMS

to a code. The process would be almost spontaneous and shall address most of the concerns that had been bothering him. As he was working on the idea, one day while browsing, he stumbled on the Dating service via SMS. He could envision merging this with the SMS code.

On 3rd of December 2007, the SMS helpline was launched. This was received well by both the print as well as electronic media and soon it was featured on the leading dailies and TV Channels. Subsequently, the patient had to send a format specific SMS. He then got an SMS with the name of the donor. The more number of SMS he sent, the more donors' details he could get.

A few days after the launch, a lot of issues surfaced. Some, who used the right format and sent the SMS, still did not get the donor's contacts on their mobile. There were technical issues also. In the new process, there was no feedback about which donors donated and which did not. In some cases the phone numbers of the donors were outdated. In less than six months, it was decided to change the system and disable the SMS helpline.

The future vision was to empower the people to take the ownership themselves. The success of Web 2.0 has proven that the systems like social networking websites which allow user generated content become very popular. Poacha wanted people to not only own but maintain and improve the system also. Once the patient's caretaker posted a

request, he would be given the blood request identification code on his mobile as well as email. He/she would then click on the link Contact Donors and would be prompted to enter the request code. Subsequently the donor could be contacted. Then a feedback can also be filled about the donor using a drop down menu. For example, if the donor's phone number is wrong, a mail would be sent to the donor to update his phone numbers. A history of all the donors would also be maintained.

Last week of July, 2008 the system was put in place. It worked according to the plans. It was then being improvised as feedback was given by the users. Poacha did not feel good about scrapping the SMS based helpline as a lot of effort has gone into it.

“Ramesh had put in a lot of effort coding. We together spent numerous hours conceptualizing this! But then one has to move ahead with life”, says Mr Poacha with a wry smile.

Indianbloondonors has received a lot of appreciation from the patients, their relatives, the doctors and press. There have been a lot of cases where the website has been the savior. The father of a two year old from Ludhiana had to come down to Chandigarh for his son's mitral valve replacement surgery. He was asked to arrange for four units of blood. He searched for five days without any success He then came to know of Indianbloondonors and instantly found a donor. After the surgery was over, he called up Poacha and

cried over the phone thanking him again and again. He then asked how could he be of some help to him. Poacha replied, "Just pray that IndianBloodDonors.com goes on and on and on for eternity "

Lots of people from all parts of India and also from other countries who come down to India for their treatment have benefited from the website. Poacha accepts donations but does not charge a single penny for the priceless service he provides.

He has been asked many times as to why is he is doing it out of his own pockets and what does he get out of it?

He always promptly replies, " *Logon ki duaen mil jati hain. Meri liye wahi sabse jyada mayne rakhti hain*" (I get people's blessings. This is most important for me).

E-mail ID: info@indianblooddonors.com

Manzil[6] –A hub for holistic mentorship and mutual learning

"I have no formal qualifications in the field of education. Instead, I have an MBA from a premier Indian business school, IIM, Ahmedabad. But after I graduated from there over 10 years ago, I worked only 8 months in the corporate sector, indeed, in any formal sector (including development). The last 10 years of my life have been outside any kind of institution, self-made or otherwise, full of both unlearning and learning experiences, often not of my own making, that have contributed to my growth", says Ravi Gulati, founder of Manzil

Manzil emulates the fact that no matter however small, a positive impact counts a lot to the society. Ravi Gulati a brilliant youth educated in the best Institute of Management in India, found his calling in enabling others youngsters also to find their "Manzil" (destination). He left the lucrative corporate world and embarks on the path less traveled.

"Every morning, when I boarded the school bus, I found the conductor cutting tickets and making a living out of it too! I just wanted to be like him when I grow up," smiles Ravi. "Even now when I think of it, I realize how I was told that it was not something that I was ever supposed to do. I could not relate to the conventional thought then and I can't do it now."

His father was against receiving or giving gifts of any kind. Ravi used to go to the birthday parties of his friends empty

handed. When it was his birthday and his friends brought him gifts, they were asked to go back to their homes to leave the gifts and then only allowed in. His father in spite of his principles which may seem absurd to the world was liked by not only the extended family but everyone around. His sister is differently abled, still everyone was comfortable with her around. Growing up in an environment where everything was not 'normal', Ravi partly due to the surroundings and partly due to self motivation started questioning the conventional.

It was the third term of the rigorous first year at IIM Ahmedabad . Ravi was attending a class where Prof Anil Gupta was teaching. He was surprised that none of his batchmates had any idea of what poverty is. How can they be so indifferent and fail to observe what is happening around them. Like any Indian kid, Ravi had been instructed to study hard to qualify for the highly competitive entrance tests and get into the best educational institutes. Ravi's always had the inclination to find purpose. The indifference moved him and he decided to take the road less travelled. From that point of time, he decided that he will leave the narrow tunnel which he has been following till now. The breaking point came during the time of placements at IIM Ahmedabad. People who could not get placed on the first day or the coveted 'Day Zero' slot as it is popularly known in B-Schools were shattered and some of them could not even control their tears. His batchmates- the cream of the cream, the best of the nation were getting depressed because they could not

get the jobs that pay the highest! He realized that day that there is no end to materialistic desires and you can keep on chasing them endlessly all your life.

Khan Market is an up market place in Delhi. It's the place where some of the most rich and powerful people of Delhi stay. In the servant quarters of the lavish bungalows live children of cooks, maids, electricians, washerwoman, drivers and servants. These are usually families which have migrated from different places in pursuit of a better life. Once in Delhi, they seldom visit their native places. Government schools generally are not able to provide decent quality education to the children. The kids often have questions unanswered, concepts unexplained and an urge to learn which is seldom satiated. For the last ten years a ray of hope to these kids has been Manzil run by Ravi Gulati.

When asked if Manzil is a shelter to help underprivileged children, he replies promptly, "Help!? I would not like to use this word. We are a community of children and young people nourishing our inner strengths and exploring synergies. The children and youth that over the last 10 years we have come to regard as our family – my buddies – grow up in their servant quarters. They are children of housemaids and cooks and electricians and barbers and drivers and servants. That's about 120 young people at any given point of time, and more

that have flown from the nest and return as they feel, like one returns home.”

Ravi’s elder sister has multiple handicaps. Because of her special needs, she went to one of the first integrated schools in Delhi – Balvantrai Mehta Vidya Bhawan . His mother volunteered at the school for almost 20 years. She then worked for 10 years in Sahan Institute which works with even more severely challenged children. In 1996, at the age of 62, she wanted to open her own little school to serve little children with learning disabilities. It was around the time when Ravi had lost his father to a year and a half’s battle with cancer. She wanted to run it in Kotla, a slum-like area lying in the heart of Delhi, originally a cluster of villages that Delhi just grew around. *Manzil* was the name they chose.

When his father was struggling with cancer, Ravi had left aside an extended phase of broad exploring in order to take care of his father. After his passing away, he decided to settle down in a remote hill village basing his life on farming organically. Life however had other plans for him. During the days when he was contemplating on the future course of his life, two children looking for help with their school maths approached him. Hemant was a washerman’s son studying in the eighth standard while his friend Pramod, a gardener’s kid, was in the seventh grade. Ravi was trying to reorganize family affairs before making the move to the hills, so he had

some time. He thus agreed considering it to be a constructive utilization of the time at hand. The kids came up with a question which a child studying in the seventh grade should not have much trouble solving. Ravi did not give them the answer outright, but tried to lead them to it. He broke down the problem into stages and took a step back testing their understanding in the concept prerequisite to solve the problem. He soon realized that there was an acute lack of clarity. Ten minutes with the children unraveled their totally sketchy understanding of numbers. He then took to the basics, "What is $2 - 5$. Is it 3, -3, or can't be done?" The kids had no clue! In the next ten more minutes he asked the kids to imagine how numbers would look if the current decimal system of representation were to be replaced by the binary one. To his amazement, he found an incredibly sharp comprehension of this utterly alien concept. There was something completely contradictory there. The children were clearly bright and intelligent, but somehow they had been dumbed by how they were taught at school.

Over the weeks and months that followed, Hemant and Pramod requested Ravi to include another of their friends, then another, then yet another. Ravi found himself acquiescing each time. Soon there were 20 children, from various classes, all together because irrespective of the class, they lacked the same basic understanding of what they had been doing for years. When Ravi was explaining the same basic concept the third time, for the benefit of a new-comer,

Hemant protested. He had already understood it well, and was hungry to learn new concepts. This was getting too repetitive for him. 'In that case', he said to Hemant, 'I invite you instead to explain this to your friend'. Hemant was confident of his learning, but hesitated to teach. Years of conditioning had taught him that a teacher was a 'position' and he wasn't in that position. One needs to be in the 'position' to teach! Once Ravi said that teacher was a 'role-for-the-time-being', he was ready for it as far as that concept was concerned. Besides, Ravi needed to carry everyone along in the class, and he wasn't ready to start a separate class then. "After some persuasion and promises of back-up support, Hemant reluctantly agreed to try his hand at teaching and, unknowingly to us then, together we laid the foundations of a crucial aspect of life at Manzil today", Ravi recalls.

Ravi had grown up in this home in Khan Market. As a child, he had played cricket in the neighbourhood, with children from all backgrounds.

"Even then we had the 'good' sense to discern who of our friends we could take home and who we couldn't. Now for the first time I was old enough to understand the context of my 'don't-take-home' friends, through which I 'saw' their lives anew," says Ravi. He felt pity that these underprivileged kids had children submitted to a farce perpetrated on them in the name of education. He then questioned if children,

anywhere, have much of a choice anyway. Over the months and years that follow as the child grows up, that their parents, whether under the sway of a widespread modern myth that schooling equals education, or having observed that any schooling, good or bad, still brings respect and status and better earnings, put their children in the only affordable schools accessible to them – those run or aided by the State.

“Often in these schools there is apathy, clearly visible in the form of absenteeism or no teachers assigned or books available for months into the academic session. There is also an over-emphasis on blind obedience and a generally stultifying environment. Questions measure rote-learning ability rather than any understanding. Blatant cheating, including in the form of letting children know in advance the questions that the teacher plans on asking them in the exam, having also supplied in advance – verbatim – the answers sought,” Ravi contemplates.

Ravi believes that the parents of the children at Manzil are interested in education’s utilitarian benefits. They do not even bother to pay lip-service to the classical ideal, and so in this way they are clearly more grounded in today’s reality of what schooling actually pursues as opposed to what it likes to say it does.

“The promise of jobs on which ‘Education’ (schooling really) was primarily ‘sold’ to parents turns out to be hollow when they leave its portals with the much coveted certificate in their hands. Too many people enter the job market, certificate in hand, unprepared with the skills, knowledge and attitudes that modern jobs demand. Nobody taught them what they really needed to know. Nobody even told them what it was. We used to call them the educated unemployed. Some now call them the educated unemployable”, Ravi recognizes.

“Interestingly, in their frustration, they often return to even higher studies. But all this does is drive a kind of ‘education inflation’ where people pursue progressively higher and higher degrees in the hope of out-pursuing others, thereby seeking to thin the crowd of competitors for any given job. Few really acquire the skill-set needed to perform the available jobs through their education. If and when they do, it is through experience, often accidental.”

Over the years as Manzil evolved, it became clear to Ravi that trigonometry or any other textbook concept was not going to serve the children he taught in any way. It may just be the passport to class 11th where the first thing they were going to do was run as far away as possible from Mathematics. Ravi had realized that if there was one thing

that would give them a real shot at what they wanted, it was the ability to converse confidently in English.

“English is used as a means of communication by less than 5 % in India. Still, not a sign on a shop in Khan Market is in any language other than English. Not a programme is announced or introduced at Delhi’s cultural hubs like India Habitat Center in a language other than English. On the other hand, big business, higher education, higher judiciary – all are completely monopolized by English. Our slavish attitude towards what should otherwise be *just a language* is betrayed by oft-heard phrases like, “He is dumb, he doesn’t even know how to speak English”. And in spite of having learnt English as a subject for years in school, my children could not have a simple, meaningful, independent conversation in the language. If there was one thing that would not only dramatically improve their chances of landing good jobs, but also generally address the diffidence they felt in dealing with things outside their ordinary spheres of experience, it was learning Spoken English,” says Ravi.

They started English classes soon after Mazil began. Ravi however, did not want to take the conventional way of teaching as done in a typical school. To him, being creative is about clearing out what already exists, often about being

prepared to reinvent the wheel and not condemn that as waste of time. The books were cleared out as they felt that, in the main, the books distracted both the teacher and the students from the real task of the learning of English. Usually covering chapters is a race to complete the syllabus in time. Often, the best students could only keep pace with an externally imposed agenda and speed.

At Manzil, with no books and syllabus they had an English hour to talk freely about anything that caught the collective fancy, but strictly forbidden at the same time to use Hindi. They had managed to recreate the conditions of most complex of learning that almost every human being is destined to master – the learning of his or her first language or mother tongue.

Soon Ravi bought his first computer for self use. It was obviously available for children to learn. When friends and relatives visited, they interacted with the children. When he traveled outside Delhi, he took kids with him. When he met someone interesting, he invited them home to meet the children. When one of the kids told him he wanted to be an Air Force pilot, searching for one, he met some other interesting personality. This went on and on. Cause and effect interloped, until their separateness could no longer be discerned. Years later, he read a Sri Lankan social worker's words, "You build the road, and the road builds you". Ravi

could relate to this a lot as he had already experienced its truth.

That's how Manzil grew, in numbers of young people, and more importantly in the richness and diversity of their experiences that the group lived together, but not in the size of its buildings or coffers. As a matter of fact there were no coffers. They've rented the shop that his father used to run. This, coupled with an old habit of keeping their personal expenses under control, has allowed them to give all their time to Manzil, without having to draw any salaries. Rent and salaries are usually the two major costs of running something like Manzil, and they are burdened with neither. For six years, they were able to claim, not entirely accurately, that it takes no money to run Manzil. They didn't seek any funding; some of course came of its own accord.

He asserts that as that the 'human touch' is lost as one keeps on adding more and more numbers to the class. Most of the lectures today are monologues and Ravi cannot envision effective learning unless there is a dialogue. He feels that mostly lip service is being done to interaction between the faculty and the students. As the class size increases, there is very little attention that a tutor can give individually to a student. The pace of the class is usually determined by the once who are already sharp and the ones who cannot pick up never get a chance to speak. Even when they speak up, they are mocked at and so they never do it again. Ravi likes the workshop model where dialogues guide the learning. At

Manzil, Ravi never pats any student who gets good marks, nor does he discourage the ones who are consistently performing badly. For him all that matters is that the kids should think more and grow intellectually. He detests the rote based exams and the pain that students have to go through to excel in them. Ravi also believes that too much structure in an academic organization ensures that kids are interacting with a position, rather than an individual.

“ I want them to manage the system they have been a part of , on their own. I am sure they will do a good job! I am always there to guide them in the endeavor,” says Ravi.

Ravi now travels for weeks together conducting workshops on topics as diverse as “sustainable agriculture” to “Gandhian way of life”. When asked why does he not address a larger audience as there are a lot more people who can benefit from his knowledge Ravi smiles and says,” If provided with a given amount of resources and you want to dig for water, you can either concentrate the efforts on a small area and get water for sure, or you can pick up a larger area and still not get it.”

A transition is being going on since the past 2-3 years and Ravi has been working to pass on the management to a group of students who have been at Manzil. One of them, Anish will be leading the effort. He joined Manzil nine years

back. At that point of time he was in the ninth standard. He studied in a Municipal School. He got ill during his final exams and could not give the English exam. He was promoted due to past academic record. When he saw the paper which was centralized for both the private and public schools, he realized that even if he appeared in the exam, he would have fared very badly. He knew that the way they were being taught at school was not upto the mark and the same day he took a resolve to improve his English. One day in a cricket match, he overheard two of his friends who were talking about Manzil and English classes. He later found out from them about Manzil and fell in love with the concept.

“It really hurts when children realize that they stammer even while answering questions as simple as ‘What is your name?’. I being the eldest of the brothers in my family felt the sense of responsibility. I liked the way English was being taught at Manzil . We did not follow any book or curriculum. It was all application based. Even now we have four modules. ‘Mini’ is for children below 14 years, ‘Learning is for those who have a very poor knowledge of English which then leads to ‘Practice’ for students who have gained some confidence and are not scared to speak English. This then graduates to ‘Discussion’ where the students learn to fluently converse in English! At first we used to focus on the speaking skills, but now we are also stressing on the reading and writing. ”

Apart from English, Computer and Mathematics classes are held at Manzil. While there are students who attend a

regular school, there are some others who have enrolled in distance learning programs. There are also college dropouts and people working in different professions. The youngest student is 12 years old and there is no upper limit. Even a fire fighter aged 45 had also joined the Computer class a few months back. The mathematics classes are for students of standard sixth to twelfth.

“We conduct 24 Computer Classes, 15 English Classes and 12 Maths classes every week. These are taken by twenty teachers, all of whom have been a part of Manzil before. It’s very difficult for an outsider to understand our unique way of working. Sundays are reserved for other activities. Like today we had Dental Check Up in the morning and admissions are now being carried out.”

Admissions are carried out on ‘First Come, First Serve Basis’. Admissions for English Classes are held once in three months while for Computer it is once in a four and a half months. There are not more than 25 students per class.

“We don’t want to lose the human touch. It’s going to be just another class with 70 students,” says Anish smiling.

A host of extracurricular activities like theatre, music, singing, sports are organized frequently. The classes are designed to ensure that whatever the student learns he is able to apply in real life.

“For computer classes, we have three modules. They are called Windows, Words and Advanced. ‘Windows’ is for the student to learn basic functions like switching the computer on, starting the widows, logging in and similar very elementary tasks. ‘Words’ is about learning to use documents, editing them etc. The students at ‘Advanced’ learn how to make presentations and use formulae in spreadsheets. The students are able to make practical use of almost all that they are taught in their day to day life!”

On being asked why did he choose to be a full time coordinator at Manzil, Anish says,“ I wanted others also to learn the way I learnt. More so, amongst all of us, Ravi *Bhaiya* has faith in me that I will be able to take this forward as efficiently and passionately as he has done so far. It’s a commitment of a lifetime for me now. My family is also fine with the decision and I am sure that there will be no pressure from them at least for the next few years. Till that time, we may be able to find someone amongst us who is ready to take on the responsibility!”

Apart from being the coordinator at Manzil, Anish has appeared for the final year exams of a Bachelors Degree in Tourism which he is doing by a Distance Learning Program. He is also is a part of a theatre group. He believes the basic fundamentals that are followed at theatre and in education are same. Both require concentration, hard work, innovativeness and team work. “All the classes are like rehearsals and what the students see are just trailers. The

real movie begins when they start applying these learnings in real life! We are committed only to learning. We don't even give a certificate to students who attend Manzil. We want only those who have a burning desire to learn from within and that we believe should be the only motivator for all at Manzil!"

At Manzil the students and teachers go out on about two Educational Trips every year. The major cost component is travel. Usually accommodation is taken care of the hosting organization. Anish back from one such trip had picked up some of the best practices which he wanted to replicate at Manzil.

" One of the organizations that we visited in Ahmedabad has excellent documentation. They have some 200 centers and anyone in the management has instant access to even minute details like what is being taught in which class, attendance per class per day etc. Another thing which I found very effective was their documentation. We at Manzil need to lay a lot of stress on documentation so that we are not reinventing the wheel all the time. And this can be in the form of films, plays and even music!" exclaims Anish.

Pondering on replicating the Manzil model at other places also so that more people can benefit from the same, Anish says," We would like to ensure that the same philosophy is

followed at the other places also. Manzil teachers themselves have to go to the new centers. It has been tried on some occasions before. Unfortunately, there have been some issues and despite good starts, they have not been able to sustain. We would need to work upon this.”

Anish seems much wiser than his age and his commitment is evident from the passion that he puts behind his work. Manzil is evolving into a self sustaining model and as the lyrics of a song composed by them says,

“ *Mushkil ho chahein jitni rahein, Payenge hum apni Manzil...*” (No matter how difficult is the road ahead, we will find our destination)

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