

# SAMAGAM 2018

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"If India had mainstreamed what PRADAN had thought of 30 years ago, we would have achieved a lot more as a nation."

**A**pril 18, 2018, marked the 35th year of inception of PRADAN. We chose to commemorate the achievements of the organization as well as the civil society sector by hosting an event called 'Samagam 2018' at Siri Fort Auditorium in Delhi. Samagam was conceived as a platform to discuss issues and challenges faced by the sector. It was part of a larger initiative to create greater visibility and support for the work being done by the development sector. Given the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and complexity of the development issues in India, creating 'a just and equitable society' demands persistent work, and is a long haul, touching more than one facet of the lives of marginalized communities. It also requires all relevant stakeholders, including the community, to come together and forge a systemic collaboration and add to each other's efforts.

Through decades of dedicated effort, in addressing the pressing issues of inequality, deprivation and injustice, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have endeavoured to bring about change and usher in innovations in their domains of expertise. Be it bringing in technological solutions for growing problems in the rural areas or setting up community institutions and health-care systems that later were adopted by the government for its flagship programmes, development sector organizations have accomplished the most challenging tasks in some of the toughest geographies. However, very little is known and/or acknowledged about these contributions. And, above all, it is becoming increasingly difficult for these organizations, especially when it comes to the question of sustaining themselves with stricter financial regulation norms in terms of Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) being inflicted by the government that are drying up several of the

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existing foreign funds due to the mammoth (false?) projection of economic growth in the sub-continent.

Perhaps, it was the right time to convene an event, in which the stakeholders of development work speak out and share with each other, their work, their ideas and the challenges they face. At times, all it takes to bring the desired change is to speak up. Samagam 2018 was organized with this purpose in mind.

The day began with Ms Anshu Vaish briefing the audience on the journey of the past 35 years of PRADAN and introducing Dr Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Vice Chancellor, Ashoka University, to deliver the keynote address.

In his speech, Dr Mehta expressed his joy at being the keynote speaker on the occasion of the 35th Foundation Day of PRADAN. Congratulating PRADAN on this achievement, he articulated that PRADAN was not just an organization but an idea which exceeds itself. How would India's developmental trajectory look like if the ideas PRADAN stood for, and implemented, were to become central to the developmental imagination at the level of the state and society.

Whereas there has been appreciation of PRADAN's work on the ground, there has seldom been any effort to take it to the mainstream. PRADAN introduced and took up the revolutionary idea of the role of gender in development. Contextualizing the role that gender-based gaps have played in deterring India's growth, Dr Mehta referred to, and compared, the idea with the work being done in China.

The very fact that the participation of women in the workforce in China outnumbers India by miles and that women's sense of agency has been the driver of growth in that country is the fundamental difference between the two countries. This is never pointed out by analysts.

"Despite organizations such as PRADAN, SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) and many more that have understood the importance of gender equality and worked on it, since their inception, it is still treated as a sectarian fact—*gender is another social sector thing we will get to*—in the mainstream. If India had mainstreamed what PRADAN had thought of 25–30 years ago, our priorities would have been different and we probably would have had much more success in achieving what we are trying to achieve as a nation," Dr. Mehta stated.

He pointed out that the importance of human capability in making a state successful or



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markets vibrant, completely escapes the Indian intelligentsia. There has been too much focus on the list of deliverable services as key to bringing in change. Instead, if the nation had asked what would be the human prerequisites on the ground to drive the change, the outputs today would have been very different.

There has been extraordinary growth in civil society in the last two decades; yet CSOs are always under the scanner and fingers are pointed at them. A sneering view reigns—do we at all need so many Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)? Albeit today CSOs are doing extraordinary work in their own sphere and making a difference to the lives of many, the paradigm of development remains relatively unchanged. Civil society is in a precarious situation because of regulations, the democratic clamour for accountability or Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) rules and the public perception that civil society is even more untrustworthy than political parties or corporations. It will not be wrong to assume that this clamour for accountability will grow independent of the government and the presumption that civil society is suspect rather than

innocent will persist. CSOs will have to be resilient and continue to work on imaginatively in order to prove that there are diverse forms of accountability and that the democratic system already exists. SEWA and PRADAN are good examples of this.

However, the state comes with a dual conceit: the conceit that it can formalize everything and, on the other hand, not even be aware about its actual capacity to do so. This project of formalization for civil society will be challenging in terms of easier participation in the sector. One advantage of informality is that there were low entry barriers; anyone can enter the market.

While speaking about the spectre of social failures in India, he called them the most profound failures. He pointed out what it means to interact with a citizen on some minimal basis of reciprocity, what it means to overcome a society, which has the vilest form of discrimination any human society has invented. Almost all weaknesses and pathologies of the nation are deeply rooted in social failure, which obviously cannot be cured by laws or administration. It requires deep transformation of our sense of self and its relationship with others.

He ended the keynote address with some prognostication, which again highlighted the relevance for motivated CSOs to work for social good. India, as a society, is going through rapid transformation and every form of social conflict is going to get exacerbated. The conflict between the Dalits and the others is going to increase, which is a good sign in the context that there has been political empowerment. If one looks at conflicts in India, it can take an inward form. There is a risk in that. When people sense that they are not moving forward as a collective or a nation, they can then move in a direction that will exacerbate social failures and social pathologies. Few organizations are capable of taking that conversation forward. The sensibilities of the people in PRADAN are suited to initiate the dialogue between social failure and how to address it. PRADAN has ensured that there is hope but the nature of the challenge is such that it will require many more PRADANs. Referring to Antonio Gramsci, he iterated that in dark times one should have the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will. “We can take heart from the fact that optimism of the will is so alive in this room and will demonstrate, ‘yes we can’.”

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A discussion round followed the keynote address, taking up tenets from Dr Mehta's speech with Anurag Behar (Azim Premji Foundation—APF) and Mirai Chatterjee (SEWA) as participants. The session was chaired by Ved Mitra Arya (Srijan).

Ved initiated the discussion referring to Pratap Bhanu Mehta's speech as a reminder of the old days that highlight the culture of PRADAN, that is, combining intellectual debate with action. These debates are not only valuable for the people who join PRADAN or the development sector, but also the Indian elite and the middle class, which does not value civil society. Ved pointed out that whereas the techno-managerial solutions suggested in the 60s and 70s seemed to provide a new mechanism to address things, they were no longer sufficient in current times. The process of formalization, as suggested by Dr. Mehta, may be beneficial for big players but will pose serious challenges for small businesses and the state, which is largely controlled by these big players.

With a scenario such as this, women show a very high potential, which goes untapped. Mirai Chatterjee, referring to Dr.

Mehta's speech, stated that the development sector, practitioners and thinkers have come a long way and have influenced the development framework in the country. Whereas women's work was earlier considered a mere hobby and a time-pass activity, today it was valued as an economic contribution to the country's GDP.

Pointing out issues with the government up-scaling contextually significant programmes, Mirai Chatterjee mentioned that when the state replicates models, it creates entities that are a far cry from the original. The state-created SHGs and Federations are often very different from what, for example, PRADAN has created.

One key learning from PRADAN's work has also been to see how grass-roots accountability can work and how organizing and mobilizing the poorest, the disadvantaged and the forgotten empowers them. PRADAN has decisively shown the power of women's leadership and has shown how women can be elected to local *panchayats* and demonstrate women's leadership. Finally, what PRADAN does is *anubandh* (linking all aspects of society) that promotes an economy of nurturance. Mirai

Chatterjee stressed the need for numerous, small, formal entities to make the larger informal, instead of having huge vertical formals. This creates a scope for flexibility, a sense of ownership for the locals, local control and decision-making, and a scope for organic growth. On the other hand, mainstream formal institutions have failed these entities. Whereas these mainstream doors were shutting out the women, PRADAN has created bodies of women, who know how to open these doors.

Ved Arya stressed that a major learning that CSOs have learnt from PRADAN is the culture of promoting a sisterhood or brotherhood, which grows to be a formidable bond, and of working with so many families with one common purpose. This has led to many PRADAN-ites going ahead to form many organizations with the same vision and motif. At this juncture, it would be interesting to focus on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17: Partnership and how CSOs can organize and work together to create greater impact.

Anurag Behar, taking a lead from Dr Mehta's analysis of the state of CSOs, posed the question,

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*“Ab karen kya (What do we do now)?”* He spoke of the initial work experience of Azim Premji foundation (APF) in the field of elementary education, enshrining the belief that school education is one way to human development, justice, equity and humaneness. However, Behar went on to say that most of the CSOs are skirting away from political issues. There is a lot of energy being invested in creating livelihood options, the physics of it, and awareness of land rights, but the deep political issues behind these are not completely addressed. And there is a need for that.

The second necessary requirement, according to Behar, is to be organized. Being organized is different from organizing a community. PRADAN has been an extraordinary example to this effort of an organizing organization, which creates the ground for being political.

Behar next focussed on the scarce opportunities available for people, who are willing to work for society. Thinking of it from a political perspective leaves even fewer options. With the decline of Unions, the Seva Dal, and the Communist leftist forces, hardly

any spaces remain for people to contribute to society. Being political, being organized and being on the ground has become very rare and the opportunities have vanished. PRADAN stands for all of this and still stands to be an organization with all these capacities. Behar urged PRADAN to be more political.

Ved summarized the discussion by saying that if one is on the ground and is taking charge of the change process, one can find some answers to what the way forward could look like.

Three panel discussions foregrounding the challenges and achievements of CSOs, expectations from CSRs and expectations from the

government followed the keynote address.

The first panel on ‘Civil Society: Role and Challenges in Contemporary Times’ was chaired by Gagan Sethi (Janvikas). The panellists were Rajesh Tandon (Participatory Research in Asia—PRIA), Aruna Roy (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan—MKSS), Apoorva Oza (The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme—AKRSP) and Amitabh Behar (Oxfam India).

Gagan Sethi started the session with three questions: A). What is ailing our society? Is there any disease? B). What is the course of action needed to rectify the problems? C). Where should we invest in the future?



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## One of the most crucial roles of civil society in a democracy was completely about speaking truth to power and holding power accountable for everything that happens under its aegis

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In response to what ails the country, Aruna Roy pointed to the ambience of utmost fear and violence that has engulfed the country, jeopardising the rule of law to a considerable extent at many places. However, she said, as CSOs it is essential that we create a counter-culture of protest, of speaking out and raising hard questions—all these without being the least apprehensive of the dire consequences the act of protest may imply. It is thus crucial to assert some of the basic values without which there is no India.

In tune with this, Rajesh Tandon pointed out that civic spaces are decreasing steadily. Civic space is our right as citizens of this country. It is not a state-determined right. It is simply a right to be a citizen of a society. Thus, as part of the civil society, it is a must for us to occupy and reclaim that civic space where people can speak, talk, connect, disagree and even fight...but to do all this in a larger constitutional framework and keeping mutual respect unharmed. He also highlighted that the conceptualization of citizenship has also become increasingly vertical vis-a-vis the state as opposed to horizontal

vis-à-vis fellow citizens, which is the desired equation. This has led to an increase in discrimination and broadened the gap in the horizontal relationships with fellow citizens.

Apoorva Oza claimed that NGOs have become players in multiple projects and grants. The ratio of transactional work to transformational work that is being done is changing substantially. However, sometimes just organizing ourselves in a pluralistic way and getting people together, making them respect each other as human beings and overcoming the identities of religion and caste are significant achievements. NGOs are seldom in a position to bring this shift in their approach to development. In fact, they barely stand in solidarity and support each other in times of crisis. Amitabh Behar, agreeing with Aruna Roy, mentioned that one of the most crucial roles of civil society in a democracy was completely about speaking truth to power and holding power accountable for everything that happens under its aegis. And in this respect the Indian civil society has been very shy. With the changing architecture of democracy, it is essential to change the existing stance that

adheres to the structures of the 1980s. It calls for a paradigm shift in the approach and mindset of civil society by adopting something that corresponds to the new, evolved face of Indian political structure and democracy.

Panellists expressed a felt need to increase the number of actors in the civil society domain. The usually ignored ones, for example, teachers, anganwadi and Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers and several other people, who have never been considered part civil society should be included to strengthen the united case. It was also emphasized that NGOs are operational in more or less every block of the country and doing many things beyond their projects. One of the duties of organizations, beyond that of fulfilling project demands, is to start a conversation with the youth in small towns and raise various questions in their minds regarding employment, education, development, etc., so that they are not misguided by external powerful forces.

The post-lunch session began with a focus on the relationship between CSOs and donor agencies, mainly corporate organizations and the state. A book, *A Development Partnership*

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*to Emulate: PRADAN and ICCO (Inter Church Organisation for Development Cooperation)*, co-authored by Dr Prabhu Ghate and Pratyaya Jagannath Panda, was released, documenting the nearly 30-year partnership between PRADAN and one of its donors—ICCO, The Netherlands.

The book highlights the necessity of donor partners supporting NGOs with an aim of building robust institutions and invigorating the development sector. This trend is dwindling. “ICCO does not, as a rule, look for short-term, project-oriented partnerships, but rather for long-term cooperation in which an agreed strategy underpins the common goal of working towards ending injustice against the poor and excluded groups of society. ICCO is required to take a look

at the longer-term prospects of structural change and not just at the projected short-term results.” It “understands that Southern partners are autonomous organisations within their own societies and does not see them as channels for aid-delivery or project sub-contractors.” In other words, it adopts “a partner rather than a project focus.”

The abiding trust and patient capital that ICCO invested in PRADAN for about three decades paved way for the sustained growth of PRADAN as an institution of significance in the civil society sector. If PRADAN has considerably influenced many aspects of rural development thinking and practice today, through human resources groomed by PRADAN, development ideas

or management systems, it has been the result of the long-term unfettered support provided by donors such as ICCO.

The second panel of the day focussed on ‘Civil Society and the Expectations from the World of CSR’. The panellists included Dhruvi Shah (Axis Bank Foundation); Vineet Nayar (Sampark Foundation); Rajiv Williams (Jindal Stainless Limited); the session was chaired by Pramath Raj Sinha (Founder, Ashoka University).

Setting the tone of the discussion, Pramath Sinha mentioned the various expectations and buzz that exist around the volume of money available from various CSR initiatives. However, a perpetual lack of clarity reigns about who to approach and how to access this two per cent commitment. He called the session “an opportunity to hear from the other side and get their perspective on disbursing of CSR funds and how CSOs could access CSR funds—the challenges and opportunities that one sees.” He invited the panellists to deliberate on the mindsets that govern CSR investment decisions.

Dhruvi Shah, pointed to the significance of the two per cent mandate Bill and said that many

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## 'To bring the desired change, one needs to live the future in the present tense'

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corporate entities were now compelled to start funding and many new funders have entered the scenario. Therefore, the quantum of money under this two per cent pool is destined to increase. She highlighted the fact that the Axis Bank Foundation, like several others, has been allocating funds much before the Bill was legislated. However, when CSRs are associated with business ventures, the numbers (data) become more important, although at the end of the day, CSRs and NGOs both look at the same thing, that is, sustainably impacting people's lives and livelihoods. Dhruvi mentioned that there are silos between corporate funding and the intent of the development sector, and this demands a collaborative approach. Working in partnership

with NGOs, the sector experts, will help corporates and other funders make more educated investments.

Rajiv Williams focussed on the requirement for CSR initiatives to concentrate on their industrial plant areas rather than accommodating the funding needs of any other part of the country. This is mainly because the operations of industries, especially in the manufacturing sector, directly impact the population residing in those areas. At the same time, he highlighted a major bottleneck that corporates face when it comes to choosing the implementing partner because many of these corporates had not invested in CSR before this Bill was passed. Also, there are many NGOs that have weaker delivery

models, leaving the corporate organizations in a dilemma about the outcome of their investment. Some of these organizations have decided to directly implement their projects whereas a few have chosen to implement through hired teams that then become part of the company. In many cases, the company outsources it to partners, that have an equal stake in developing and implementing a given project. There are no defined metrics to evaluate a partner NGO. Sharing the experience of Jindal Stainless Foundation, Rajiv mentioned that their partner selection process happens on the basis of word-of-mouth and personal experience.

The third panellist of the session, Vineet Nayar began with an anecdote of his visit to one of the remote villages in Chhattisgarh during his stint as a member of PRADAN's Governing Board. He mentioned that the visioning exercise with the village women, which PRADAN professionals facilitated, was an eye-opener for him. He had had the experience and the wisdom of running IT companies for 25 years and had done numerous visioning exercises himself. However, this one taught him a big lesson: 'To bring the desired change, one





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## Global funding for change initiatives is dwindling as India emerges and will continue to emerge in the world economic sphere. The contribution of Indian foundations, therefore, is crucial because global foundations will find it difficult, if not completely irrelevant, to fund development projects in India

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needs to live the future in the present tense.’ As a corporate person, his notions, thus, underwent a sea change after this experience in an NGO.

Sharing his view on the two per cent mandate, Vineet expressed his apprehension about IT companies spending the entire two per cent of their profit on CSR initiatives. He pointed out that these typically happen on an ad-hoc basis and the choice of partners happens by word-of-mouth. Thus, decision-making is often found to lack the desired maturity. Second, commercial activities are fewer in poor rural areas spreading mainly across Central India whereas corporate organizations are usually based in the urban/peri-urban areas. This results in the lack of CSR funding opportunities in these areas, where a substantial number of poor people reside. The overarching focus is on their plant areas, catering to their own communities affected by their commercial activities. The daunting task of reaching out to the actual poverty-stricken population remains unfulfilled forever. Resonating with Dhruvi’s concern about the importance of data for more effective CSR partnerships, Vineet mentioned that CSOs are organizing

themselves better; in some time, CSOs will come up with more streamlined systems and as per the standards expected by corporate organizations.

The promise of CSR should be seen as a ten-on-ten opportunity. Global funding for change initiatives is dwindling as India emerges and will continue to emerge in the world economic sphere. The contribution of Indian foundations, therefore, is crucial because global foundations will find it difficult, if not completely irrelevant, to fund development projects in India. In this light, the mandated two per cent must be seen as guidance set forth by the government for the corporate sector to follow. However, many of the corporate houses have not considered it as a mandatory aspect and certainly they have not allocated straight two per cent of their profits towards the CSR cause.

The third panel of the day comprised J.R.K. Rao (Secretary, Minorities Commission), Ritu Sain (Additional Resident Commissioner, Chhattisgarh Bhawan, New Delhi), Sandeep Dikshit (former-Parliamentarian), Guru Charan Naik (Afghanistan Resilience Consortium at Afghanistanid), and was chaired

by Sushil Ramola (B-ABLE). It focussed on ‘Civil Society and the Expectations from the State’.

Sushil Ramola set the ball rolling by creating the backdrop of the current situation, in which civil society has played a complementary, supportive role to the state in its development programmes and their implementation. Yet, the state and the civil society seem to be getting polarized in their approach to solving development issues. There seem an apparent lack of trust between the two key stakeholders and it is important to find a way for them to work together for the cause of social development in the country.

Ritu Sain asserted that the ultimate goal of both the state and the civil society was the same—the welfare of the people and good governance. She shared some of the key roles played by civil society, as perceived by the state; these include ensuring mobilization, capacity building and participation of the communities (including in very remote and backward regions) for effective dissemination of information and translation of policy into action. She thinks that the state and the civil society help bring different perspectives,

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## The panel agreed that the state and the civil society could work towards having a symbiotic relationship. Civil society may need to drive a 'Common Minimum Programme' with the state, which defines roles and responsibilities for both stakeholders

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points-of-view and thinking on the table, and this certainly need not happen in a confrontationalist mode. However, Ritu Sain shared that the agenda of some NGOs may be too focussed, narrow or restrictive in the context of the overall development agenda of the state, and may need the state to keep the larger agenda in mind when engaging with such NGOs.

Sandeep Dikshit opined that the state tended to look at the NGO sector with limited respect and a level of suspicion of professionals wanting to 'interfere' in government policies. It was okay with civil society working within the parameters set by the state; discomfort sets in when civil society raises the stature of communities from consumers of

state policy to that of responsible, questioning citizens, demanding their rights and not just fulfilling their duties. NGOs need to be ready to bear the pain and sacrifice, if required, to stand up to the state and get the citizens and the society their due.

There was common agreement that state's approach to development and its attitude to civil society tended to be individual-driven rather than constant across the tenure of officials. Mr J.R.K. Rao highlighted that state officials had not made the shift yet from being 'regulators' to 'facilitators', in the context of developing and implementing community policies and programmes. The difference in motivation of pursuing the

development agenda results in conflict between the state and the civil society. He, however, was extremely positive of the state's growing appreciation of the role of civil society as the new breed of better-educated, more sensitive, new-generation administrators, who had grown up in the era of liberalization, took centre stage. He also mentioned that developments on the IT and Internet front, which made raising of issues and crowd sourcing of ideas simpler and faster, augurs well for the future of civil society and makes for a more sensitive, responsive state, willing to work more closely with civil society on development issues and things that matter to the citizens of the country.

The panel agreed that the state and the civil society could work towards having a symbiotic relationship. Civil society may need to drive a 'Common Minimum Programme' with the state, which defines roles and responsibilities for both stakeholders. Reinforcing the need for such collaboration between the state and the civil society, the panellists pointed out that the state's approach to development and attitude to civil society tended to be individual-driven rather than a constant across the tenure of officials.



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The event was perceived as a one-of-its-kind initiative by PRADAN professionals. Apart from creating a cherished feeling about the organization itself, Samagam was a platform promoting cross-learning opportunities involving actors beyond similar NGOs

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Summarizing the day's proceedings and hinting at the exigencies that the sector should focus upon, PRADAN co-founder, Vijay Mahajan, pointed to the relevance of rewriting the Constitution of India by the youth. "We have to sit down like our founding fathers did in 1949 and remove some of the distortions that have come into our building of that great vision which was laid down in the 1949 Constitution." A body called 'CIVIC' (Citizens' Initiative for Visioning India's New Constitution) has been formed to translate the thought into action. Vijay also highlighted the need to allocate a bigger budget to CSOs that are doing a majority of the development work in India. "The 15th Finance Commission must take into account that if, indeed, civil society is a legitimate instrument of development and agent of change in this country, then just as we found it okay to tell the corporate sector to put two per cent of their net profits for CSR, one per cent of all government budget spent on development needs to be earmarked for the civil society

sector. That is 30 billion US dollars, which is roughly about Rs 2 lakh crores."

The event was perceived as a one-of-its-kind initiative by PRADAN professionals. Apart from creating a cherished feeling about the organization itself, Samagam was a platform promoting cross-learning opportunities involving actors beyond similar NGOs. It helped in generating ideas and practical solutions for pertinent problems from representatives of the state and CSRs. The relevance of organizing this event was a much-talked-about topic among colleagues. Taking a futuristic stance, Samagam, if seen as a platform where ideas and actions are to be celebrated, cannot be a one-time event. There is, thus, a felt need to organize Samagam every year. In making it an annual event, we aspire to bring all CSOs on this platform, hear them, help them acquire more knowledge and forge new partnerships and/or networks leading to more effective community engagement. It is being conceived as the single largest platform for the creation of a knowledge pool about

development and the cradle of new-born ideas and constructs that will design the future development trajectory for India, if not for other countries of the South, worldwide.

However, making it a recurrent annual event does involve certain challenges some of which we faced this year. One of the daunting tasks is to make such an event a self-financed one. Funding this event from PRADAN's corpus fund and from ad-hoc donations is not going to serve the purpose. We will have to come up with solutions and raise funds to make it a sustainable venture. The content and format of an event such as Samagam needs to be so planned that its relevance and importance compel people to attend it every year. The success of any event is determined by the people's interest and keenness to come back to the congregation every successive year.

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