

AMITA V. JOSEPH

WHEN THE SEARCH BECOMES ONE'S LIFE...

...

For me, working for over a decade now in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), has raised more questions than answers. Where does one start? Where do journeys begin? Where do journeys end? Do they?

Where do I begin to tell my story? Do I start with the salubrious summer vacations of my childhood in the village of Veliyanad in Kerala's Kuttanad backwaters, with memories of fruit-laden mango trees, glistening paddy fields, waiting for the small *vanjis* (canoes) to bring our daily needs, or the visit of the lone postman? Or do I begin by recounting the social and political events that took place... the unionization of agricultural workers (a first in the country), land reforms that meant all families (including ours) gave away ten cents to each worker? Or with the reminiscences of a peaceful time when the followers of Buddhism and Christianity co-existed and all went to the lone Sanskrit school in the village?

It was a time when my identity was that of my family's, my respect came from being my grandfather's granddaughter, a man who had taught in the local school and had become the headmaster. Veliyanad was a place where there was no electricity and no roads until just a few years ago. We lived life amidst the lazy lagoons, drinking water from lotus covered ponds, and weddings and funerals were community-led, not just family events.

My stint with PRADAN in 1986 was brief, but important, primarily because it was my first exposure to 'development issues'

I was a fairly good student, for whom the library was a more exciting place than the beach across Presidency College in Chennai...I went on to do a Post Graduate Management course in Finance and International Marketing, then law from Delhi University, a Post Graduate in Human Rights Law and followed it with a PhD from Deakin University in Australia, a school which valued work experience and offered a scholarship. Academics always held a fascination for me and I loved to teach. This love for academics found expression in a number of courses I later started and ran with the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT), the Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs (IICA), etc.

My stint as a lawyer mainly focussed on matters of public interest. I had many cases but little income as I worked with the poor and took on issues that concerned the economically weaker sections. So, some consulting assignments helped, especially evaluating the work of Financial Management Service Foundation (FMSF) partners in South Asia, Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), Save the Children Fund (SCF) partners, etc. Development work was for me a choice and

though frustrating, at times, it always alternated between hope and despair. I continued to be involved with the work of the PUCL and Civil Liberties/Human Rights, working with Justice V.M. Tarkunde, who I admire, and later with Prashant Bhushan, who remains a valued friend.

My stint with PRADAN in 1986 was brief, but important, primarily because it was my first exposure to 'development issues'. It was early days for PRADAN too, which operated from a two-room office in Rajouri Garden shared with Deepalaya. I was recruited as Executive—Corporate Affairs, to register Sec 25 Companies and was sent to Kesla for 'immersion' in a village.

Meeting with Eklvaya in Hoshangabad, Shankar, Kusum Aunty, Silvy, Subbu and others, driving to the Tawa Dam, a bike accident en route...are all vivid memories, as much as sitting on the banks of the Narmada, discussing Jonathan Livingston Seagull! In retrospect, I think that maybe PRADAN and I were together at the wrong time in our lives. We were young, idealistic and wanting to change the world overnight!

I did take away many lessons from my association with PRADAN.

One important lesson I learned was the importance of sensitivity and empathy with fellow travellers; this stood me well later in life as a team leader. Deadlines were less important than fellow human beings; listening and taking every team member along became a conviction for life. I recall sending my resignation letter to Vijay with a poem of Tagore on 'Farewell', on the need for partings to be sweet...

Life's happy accidents took me to work with organizations such as Deepalaya, Women's Action for Development (WAFD) and longer stints with OXFAM (Trade, not Aid) where I met my life partner Mathew Cherian. Thereafter, came a five-year role as Social Development and Gender Adviser with the Department for International Development (DFID) on urban poverty programmes; later I became Country Head with Global Alliance. Another role that followed was as the Anti Trafficking Head for South Asia, overseeing work in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, etc.

My stint with the funding sector made me realize that financial resources alone were not the solution. In fact, too many financial resources created avenues for corruption and

If I had the right to migrate from Kerala to Tamil Nadu to Delhi for better opportunities, so did my fellow citizens across India. I also learned that economic deprivation did not mean the absence of cultural or spiritual values and labelling people 'poor' had to be qualified with the financial deprivation aspect usually

wastage. Change was a long-term agenda and one could at best be a facilitator in that process and it required the deep wisdom, commitment and involvement of communities. Consultants who flew in were resisted fiercely because the cost of poor advice was very high and would ultimately be borne by the poorest.

I realized that slums were the hubs of enterprise; that it was the shortage of low-income housing and infrastructure that forced people into the margins. I realized that, if I had the right to migrate from Kerala to Tamil Nadu to Delhi for better opportunities, so did my fellow citizens across India. I also learned that economic deprivation did not mean the absence of cultural or spiritual values and labelling people 'poor' had to be qualified with the financial deprivation aspect usually.

Having two daughters meant juggling various priorities at home and at work, with all the causes that one cared about...and bringing those lessons home.

I do not know what it is that drives me? Is it anger? I recall a movie of our times '*Albert Pinto ko gussa kyon aata hain?*' People used to ask me the same

question. Or is it empathy? Or is it a sense of identification with the cause? However, it is often my voluntary work that gives me a deep sense of being able to contribute, be it the involvement since 1995 with Palluruthy Relief Settlement (PRS), a home for the mentally-ill destitute people in Kochi, Kerala, or the struggle for entitlements for the urban homeless since 1999. Delhi itself has 1,50,000 persons on the streets and their daily struggle is heartbreaking although their spirit of entrepreneurship always inspires me.

They subsidise our cities with their cheap labour as head-load workers, rag pickers, rickshaw pullers, etc., and yet they get nothing in return. How can one tolerate and coexist with such endemic poverty? How are they so peaceful? Will any of us even survive a day or two on the streets? We just need to tap their strengths and great resilience rather than preach to them! Is it all then just an accident of birth? Answers elude me.

Another question I ask myself is—are we as Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) holding out hope rather than facilitating people to be able to demand their rights and entitlements? Would 1000 mutinies have happened

but for NGO interventions as the paper by Prakash Karat (Marxist 1984) outlined? And yet, ironically, the government is hell-bent on crushing dissent and maligning civil society/NGO initiatives! Why are non-profits not valued in India for their contribution to nation-building as much as the corporate sector is?

We employ people in steady jobs, raise our own funds; we extract no minerals nor do we pollute or exploit. In fact, every important initiative...be it the right to information, leprosy eradication, water sheds, work on TB, preventive health-care by the Aroles, Amtes, Bangs, work on environment, the Jaipur foot, etc., began with pilots by visionaries from the Non-Profit Organization (NPO) sector, which later the government took to scale. Yet, there is no formal recognition or acknowledgement of the tremendous contribution by the non-profit sector.

Tragically, NPOs are often treated only as sub-contractors by the government and the Corporate sector and it is time to remedy this. Is it the lack of unity, then, and the inability to stand together and for each other as a Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) or The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce

It is this unsustainable growth pattern that needs to be challenged and questioned. The prevailing economic conditions and policies that allowed this to happen are unjust and unsustainable

and Industry (FICCI) that is the bane of the non-profit sector? Are there any efforts to remedy this? Should organizations like PRADAN attempt this? Should they align with other networks and organizations for collective action? Many heads and hearts are better than a few; and rather than mediating, our role, in my opinion, is one of 'creative subversion' and to work for the 'last and least' in our society.

For me, working for over a decade now in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has raised more questions than answers. Can companies that have caused a problem be part of the solution? Should they not first be law abiding? Should they first not do harm with their products and services before they can even attempt to do any good?

What are the resources that the corporate sector wrests from the governments and the banks (budget foregone, tax holidays, subsidized land, non-performing assets—NPAs, etc.) and from the communities (water, forests, clean air, commons, etc.) and is that proportionate to what they give back? Is two per cent adequate when jobs are outsourced, supply chains abound with human rights violations? And will 'the polluter pays principle' recharge ground

water in Plachimada or in Kala Dera when it takes years to be replenished or to mitigate environmental pollution? Can we allow CSR to be a 'temple hundi' of sorts, which allows for charity to be a plea bargained for various acts of wilful commission and omission?

Baba Adhav, who led the unionization of railway porters in Pune, said publicly at the TOI Awards function, attended by the then Prime Minister of India, that the GDP stands for 'Garib, Dalit, Peedit' in the Indian context and we need to find better solutions than accept western models of growth or philanthropy/CSR that leave a huge footprint on the planet!

Ramesh Agrawal of Chhattisgarh, who won the Green Nobel award, said of CSR, "You take away my hoe, you give me a needle." At the end of the day, it is the tribals of Niyamgiri, the villagers in Odisha among others, who have understood and withstood the onslaught against their impoverisation against the corporate Goliaths of this world.

The Oxfam Annual Report on Inequality points out that a tiny elite group of individuals control about 83 per cent of the world's resources and in India a mere one

per cent own 73 per cent of the wealth! It is this unsustainable growth pattern that needs to be challenged and questioned. The prevailing economic conditions and policies that allowed this to happen are unjust and unsustainable.

Piketty's epic research throws light on some of the trends and reasons across the world. It is said that "Nothing can succeed in a social environment that fails." We cannot work on economic parameters or livelihoods alone without addressing the marginalization of Muslims, tribals, Dalits, women and the general violence in our society—in the hearts and minds of our fellow brethren. As Harsh Mander poignantly puts it, "We cannot look away."

We do so at our own risk because when they come for us, there will be no one to protest unless we do so ourselves...

Where do journeys end? Do they?

Amita V. Joseph has a Management, LLB, PG (Human Rights) and PhD as qualifications. She is a lawyer, teacher and development worker. She has a three-decade long work experience across legal, corporate and development sectors. She is associated with a number of non-profit organizations as a Board Member. She is one of the founding members of Corporate Responsibility Watch India, a collective of 16 non-profit organizations.