

BLESSED TO SERVE



SHANTILAL MUTTHA

WITH SUDHA MENON

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Shantilal Muttha

with **Sudha Menon**

THE SILENT WARRIOR

The unique and courageous journey of a karmayogi
transforming lives of the downtrodden
and selflessly working to make
sustainable changes in society

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Published by

FORTYTWO BOOKZ GALAXY

Mumbai

www.42bookz.com

FIRST EDITION 2015

ISBN

978-93-81770-13-9

Cover & Page Design

Gajanan Adhav

Printed In

Surekha Press, Mumbai

Price

Rs. 295

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*Dedicated to the Almighty
for providing me with the wisdom and courage
to follow my heart and achieve my dreams*

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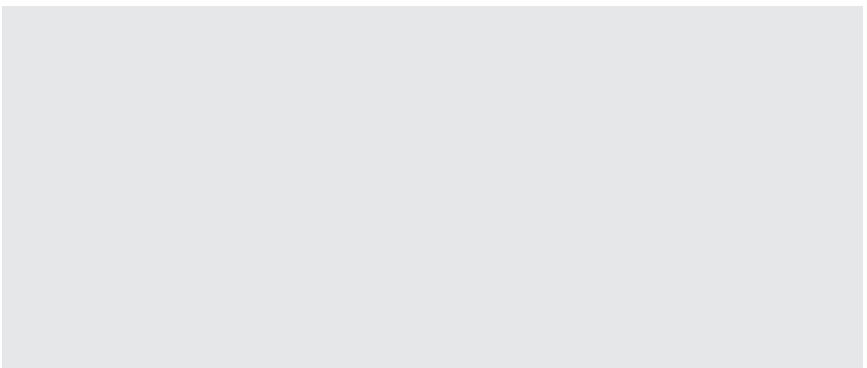
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LAYING THE FOUNDATION



BUILDING BLOCKS OF DESTINY



Sometimes in the stillness of the early morning, when the sun is yet to streak its way across the sky, I lie awake in the quiet that envelops the world still cocooned in sleep and my mind goes back to Dongarkini, the tiny hamlet in the western India state of Maharashtra, where I was born on August 15 in 1954. The first few years of my life were spent in a modest house which sat alongside a meandering river, even though it was dry most of the time.

My father, Gulabchand Muttha, earned his livelihood running a small grocery store just a stone's throw away from our home. I still remember our house and the lazy river that gave me so many joyous moments with friends. Dongarkini was full of snakes that roamed unfettered, getting into homes, curling up in the cool of the verandah and generally making themselves comfortable with the denizens of the village, who took little notice of them. They were as much part of the landscape as the people, and the mountains at the foothill of which our village lay, where the villagers believed in the motto of 'live and let live'.

There was nothing even remotely noteworthy about the village. It was just a nondescript village of some 500 residents, most of who had nothing to do because it was, and continues to be, a chronically drought-prone area. There was a single narrow street besides which our low-slung stone and mud houses sat, their front sides doubling up as small shops that sold grocery, textiles, and other utility things



The barren landscape of the nondescript village of Dongarkini.

to the villagers. The rest of the house usually consisted of a spartan drawing room where guests were entertained, a small bedroom directly behind it, and the innermost room was usually a dark and not very comfortable kitchen where the women cooked, cleaned, and gossiped while the men were away at work.

The highlight of the day for us kids and even for a lot of adults was the arrival of the couple of state transport buses from Beed, which would pass through our village. I remember how my friends

and I would patiently wait to see the bus making its way down the ghats, appearing as a tiny blip on the horizon at first and gradually taking shape till we could make out its dirty, dusty outline snaking its way down the mountainside. Groups of men from the village would hang around the few tea stalls that hawked watery tea and *bhajias* (a fried snack) to those who could afford it—travel-weary passengers who alighted from the bus to stretch their legs and relieve themselves before embarking on the rest of their journey. For the villagers who hung around the bus-stop all day, playing cards and gossiping, watching the people from big towns and cities was the high point of the day. Since there was nothing else to do, the activity at the bus-stop relieved boredom. As a child, I remember wondering where the people in those buses were from and what their lives were



(Late) Smt Sakkarbai Muttha.

like in the world in which they lived. I had no idea then that my own destiny would take me away from Dongarkini and into the world of big cities bustling with people and activities that would be so disconnected from my initial years.

Though I have no recollection at all of my mother, I have been told she was a loving woman who doted on me and my brother Rajmal, who was some 15 years elder to me. She had always been frail, and family lore says that one day she simply collapsed and

died with me in her arms, just minutes after she had bowed her head to the deity at Chausala near Tuljapur, a nearby town. I'm told my father picked up the tiny infant who lay beside the body of his dead mother and made his way back home. Maybe it was a blessing that I was oblivious to the magnitude of my loss and the impact her death would have on my life in later years. From then on I grew up in the care of my father who I remember as a stern, joyless man with a stoic attitude towards life and a deadening indifference to his children.

Shorn of the love of a mother, I grew up in our all-male household, learning the nuances of housekeeping from my brother, when my friends in the neighbouring homes were still being pampered as kids. The only connection the household had with the female gender was when an aunt or distant relative would drop in occasionally to check on us. Then we would get treated to a delicious meal made and served with love, and the household would resemble the other families in the village, where women hustled and bustled about in the kitchen. But it was temporary, and the household would go back to its largely colourless life, eating simple fare and living almost hand to mouth, just as soon as the female relative went away.

At five years of age, I had already started cooking quick meals, effortlessly picking up tips from my brother to run a fuss-free home. His idea of food was to keep it simple, and often ours would be an easy, one-pot meal of *dal khichdi*—rice and lentils cooked together with a simple tempering of cumin and chillies. Another of my brother's staples was *dal phal*—spicy lentils, into which dumplings of raw flour were dropped. It was a popular dish in the house along with *pithla bhakri* (flat breads made from millet flour), largely because it was a simple, two-step cooking that involved almost no chopping or making tedious masalas that women spend so much time sweating over.

In some ways I think that my early initiation into the kitchen

prepared me for life in later years when I lived alone in a big city and had to cook my own meals. Even today I can work like a professional in the kitchen and dish out simple, delicious fare that my family relishes.

Without a mother's gaze to keep me on the straight and narrow path, I soon discovered freedom and spent most of my days roaming the narrow streets and alleys, exploring the village, its markets, and observing the way people went about their lives.

On Saturdays, the village would come alive with the open marketplace where people from some 50-odd villages surrounding ours arrived and traded all manners of wares from grains and homemade pickles to poultry, cattle, and farming equipment to use on their small farm holdings. There were homemade goodies to be bought, and villagers spent hard-earned money buying bright pink and orange bon-bons and other embellishments that they lovingly tied on the horns and necks of their cattle. I loved the haggling, the bargaining, and often the barter deals that were cleverly struck by the villagers. Evenings were spent loitering around the elders who congregated by the village temple, gossiping and discussing the day's happenings.

As we grew up, father became increasingly distant, and I took shelter from his continued ill-temper, finding warmth and comfort in the care of my elder brother who stepped in as a substitute, trying to give me a mother's affection.

Since ours was a drought-prone area, there were few or no jobs. The residents would wait for the *mukadam* (contractor) to get his advance from the large sugar factory at nearby Pravranagar so that he could recruit villagers for cutting sugarcane in the endless acres of sugarcane plantations of rich farmers. I remember we went a couple of times to Pravranagar, in a large procession of bullock carts. Those bullock cart journeys remain, to this day, one of the most memorable parts of my childhood and seemed like great adventures at that age. Even today, road journeys are a source of

great fascination for me. Sometimes the entire village would travel to Pravranagar, where they would set up home for 3-6 months, living in make-shift shanties around the fields, cutting sugarcane for the factory, working through the night. When the village shifted, my father too shut his shop and moved with them so that the villagers had somewhere to buy their everyday needs from.

In those days, Pravranagar was the only sugar factory between the other big towns of Kolhar and Loni. A single road leading to the sugar factory became the hub of life as the factory grew. Shops and ramshackle eateries soon came up on both sides of the road so that the labourers who came in bullock carts could procure their groceries before heading to set up their settlements. Later, workers in the factory started setting up their own chawls near the shops and gradually it became a thriving residential community. During those days it was basic living; homes did not have independent toilets and it was community living at its best and worst. When a community came up permanently at Pravranagar, father decided it was time to set up his grocery shop there. Our trips to Dongarkini gradually dwindled, and Pravranagar soon become home.

Till the age of 13, we lived in the vicinity of the sugar factory in a small house with a verandah. By then my elder brother had got married and brought home my sister-in-law, whose temper and temperament gave good competition to my father's irritability. With two ill-natured people in the house, I became more footloose than before and spent even lesser time indoors. At night too, I took to lying on the verandah outside the house, listening to the clip-clop of the bullock carts bringing in labour from the villages, and sometimes, the stray wails of children cutting through the chill night air. There was a water body right in front of the house and the cool breeze that came in from the water would wash over my body in the night as I lay listening to the rhythmic thump of the *ghungroos* (bells) on the plump necks of bullocks.

The people who were employed with the sugar factory were

hard-working and entire families would slog through the night, cutting sugarcane to crush in the factory. Life was tough for the families and often I would see, in the numbing cold, couples leave toddlers by the side of the fields as they cut the sugarcane or loaded it on trucks/bullock carts lined up all night. Tiny toddlers and newborns slept peacefully in cloth *jholis* (swings) tied on the bullock carts and wailed when the cold crept into their cozy makeshift abodes.

It was in Pravranagar that I came into my own. By then I was grown up enough to make sense of what was happening around me, and even though the situation at home was cheerless, I took to my new life with enthusiasm, attending school, and making new friends by the dozen. Like every other rural town, we had our own sources of entertainment. Ours was the touring talkies that arrived periodically and set up camp in the village, their arrival heralded by the loud blaring of loudspeakers that tempted and lured young and old alike with bawdy Marathi film songs. Even today, when I hear snatches of long-forgotten songs from an old Marathi film, I am taken right back to my childhood.

The arrival of various *tamasha* (folk theatre) companies too brought much excitement. My habit of sleeping in the verandah came handy at this time because I could disappear without anyone in the household knowing that I was missing from home. I spent many nights slipping unnoticed into the makeshift tents where touring *tamasha* artistes entertained labourers and the village gentry. I remember the thrill of being out in the night, watching entranced the gaudily-dressed artistes telling the stories of men and women in love. Dattoba Tambe, Vithabai, Mangaonkar were the *tamasha* companies that arrived often, and it brought much excitement to my young life.

At school, I remember the senior Padmashri Vitthalrao Vikhe Patil, an imposing figure who occasionally visited the school. He always carried his *bhakri* (bread) in his own pocket and we would

see it and wonder why such a rich, well-known person carried a *bhakri* on his body. It was only when I was a young man that I realised that it was part of his effort to ensure his self-reliance. Vitthalrao Vikhe Patil was a respected figure and I remember the late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, once visited him, and to see a man of that stature putting so much emphasis on independence and humility influenced me in some ways.

By the time I was in the fifth standard at school, I was fully trained in running the grocery shop. I was good at measuring out dal, rice, sugar or tea leaves, tying it into paper *pudis* (packets) and I gradually became the *de facto* chief purchaser for the store. That in itself gave me new freedom because soon I was given a bicycle to go about my business efficiently, traveling to Loni and Kolhar to procure supplies for the shop.

Later, as the shop started doing a wee bit better, the family bought a Rajdoot motorcycle and it was as if God had given me wings. It was this vehicle that made me an independent soul who exhilarated in exploring the world around me. On many occasions I would pretend to be off to buy provisions and instead head for the temple town of Shirdi where I roamed around absorbing the air of festivity and observing the religious fervour that took hold of devotees. I would be back by evening and no one at home would be any wiser.

Our father's temper became worse with age. He was a man of mercurial temperament, flaring up without the slightest provocation, and so our life was always a bit uncertain. We never knew what would set him off and so I learnt quickly to live in the shadows, spending my life on the fringes of the family so I could escape his wrath. Life was oppressive, and a story of living in fear of his outbursts. And so, escaping into the outdoors became my way to stay happy, and it did not bother me even if it meant occasionally filching a bit of money from the shop till. I simply did not want to have to ask for pocket money.

When there was nothing to be done at our own shop, I would wander to the bigger grocery shop across the street from us and spend hours there listening to the news on radio and watching people go about their lives. It was a larger store with a lot more merchandise than our own store so everyone working there were too busy to mind my presence. I enjoyed the activity levels in the high-traffic store, and even though the owners knew we were competition, they let me hang around because everyone knew everyone in the village and was cordial to each other. Unlike today, competition was not such a big deal.

People say sometimes that I got my hard demeanour from being in a cheerless, gloomy house where no one laughed or had fun. The only cheer in my young life was the visits to the homes of various aunts who brought love into my otherwise empty life. I spent months with them sometimes, becoming the child that I



(*Late*) **Shri Gulabchand Muttha.** could never be in my own home, and played with their children in the courtyard and they showered me with a sibling's affection. Childhood was full of the other stuff of everyday village life. People were superstitious, talking endlessly about evil eyes and voodoo, and spent days finding various ways to fix the people who were messing with their life through these underhand means.

At the shop I watched my father and brother conducting business and was often uncomfortable and angry when I observed my father short-change the poor, hard-working village folk. It was so easily done—a few grams less of grains or sugar measured out

for their money, or a few additional rupees added to their standing monthly account with the shop. They trusted him and never thought it necessary to watch my father as he measured out and packed their purchase in old newspapers, or paid their bills at the end of the month. I knew he was doing it and sometimes felt very angry about it.

I noticed dishonesty in the community around me too. When sugar came out from the factory in trucks filled with hundreds of sacks, the driver would go into a nearby settlement and get people to unload the sacks, pilfer a couple of kilograms from each of the sacks before loading them back. I realised even then that it was wrong, but I was too young to do anything about it. I think my life-long preoccupation with honesty and my concern for the poor and the needy goes back to those days. That need defines the last three decades of my tenacious work to improve their lot by educating them and giving them the choices that more privileged people in the world take so much for granted.

William Wordsworth once said, 'The child is the father of the man,' but nothing in my own childhood ever told me, or those who knew me, that my life would take me on a journey that was off the beaten track, or that I would end up touching the lives of so many people in a way that would forever change me and them. But there were early prophecies of my extraordinary life, even though no one, not even I, believed it.

At merely 10-12 years of age, I remember a friend of the family, Kantilal Bhandari, who came visiting our house once with a marriage proposal from another town, for my brother. On that occasion he noticed me and beckoned to me to show him my palms. I hesitated, but did so, and he spent a long time studying my palms before telling the guests at our house that I had a very unique destiny and that I would carve out a distinct life for myself. Nobody paid any heed at that point because what were the chances that a motherless child growing up on his own resources would make

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anything out of his life, leave alone distinguish himself in anything? Later, as I came to Pune city, about 160 kilometres from Mumbai, and built my life, brick by brick, prospering and then giving up on all that to take up my heart's calling, he still kept in touch with me. He is an astrologer. He is still alive and I know he is watching over my work even now. In 1983, he gave me a document in which he had predicted what my destiny held for me. What is extraordinary is that my life has panned out exactly the way he had predicted!

BREAKING FREE



Often I am asked what have been the turning points of my life, and there have been many of them, but I would like to think that moving away from the oppressive atmosphere at home was one of the earliest ones. My early independence, the fact that I was allowed to roam free on my bike to procure groceries for the store, allowed me to see the world. I realise now that lying was a way of life for me those days because it allowed me to spice up my life by getting away from home.

I was never a good student in school, but even that changed from the time I left home. My elder brother's wife turned out to be almost, if not more ill-tempered than my father, so escaping from the house to go live in a boarding school at Kada, a few kilometres away, at the age of 13 was a welcome choice, a blessing in fact. At Kada, the Jain boarding had 150 children and I became a resident there from standard 8th till 11th.

I lived in a dormitory at the boarding school. Each room had 15-20 children and we lived there, sleeping on mattresses lined up on the floor, separated only by a metal box in which our meagre

belongings were kept. It was a strange existence, but it changed my life forever. Looking back, I think my years there as a free-spirited young boy shaped the person that I eventually became.

Kada was a much bigger village than Dongarkini. Alone, disconnected from my family and with very few restrictions from them, I often convinced a few of the boys from school to sneak out from the boarding at 10 p.m. to hang about the deserted village roads, sometimes planning a dinner under the starlight, preparing and relishing my famed *khichdi*. Often we would be caught by the teachers and this invited severe caning till my hands were swollen and red, but I was young and rebellious and would be back to my pranks the very next day. Sometimes, when the fear of an imminent caning made me run back home, they brooked none of it and my brother promptly dragged me right back to school.

At Kada, I became interested in studies, but was an argumentative boy, which earned me the sobriquet of *vakil sahib*, a lawyer. To this day there are few who can win an argument with me, and often I am told I have a streak of stubbornness. I'm sure there is, because my father himself was a very stubborn man and I grew up watching him.

The boarding school at Kada was the sourcing point for rich people from the Marwari community who came looking for cheap labour. Often they would pay around Rs. 500 to the boarding school to get cheap labour for their weddings and other functions. The boarding would send 25–30 students to go to the venue as servers. A teacher would accompany us and train us in the work—serving *puranpolis* and *jalebis* (sweet dishes) to the guests. In return we got three meals and the opportunity to see yet another town or city, while the boarding got a donation. It is a matter of amusement in the family that I was once even a server at the wedding of a family member of the woman who later became my wife!

Every year during *chaturmaas* (holy period of four months), we students would be handed a list of patrons and we would go door

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to door in the nearby towns, soliciting donations for the boarding school. I remember coming to Pune for collecting donations, and as part of the teams that became servers at weddings, and both of these gave me a deep understanding of human beings and society. At a very young age I learnt about life—how the rich sometimes



The boarding school at Kada village.

balked at giving money in charity, how the middle-class gave with generosity. Being a server at weddings made me keenly aware of the inequities in society, the huge pressure on the families of brides to splurge huge amounts of money on the ceremonies and the wedding feast, among other things. I was privy to the way domestic help in these rich households cribbed about it, furious that they lived such impoverished lives while the employers lived up life, shamelessly flaunting their wealth to gain status in society.

That was the main reason why I started the movement for community weddings. I was disturbed by the inequities in our society and somewhere, I think, the idea of my life-long campaign against lavish weddings and for low-cost, mass marriages

germinated while I watched the rich blow away their money senselessly on lavish ceremonies. My early experiences also gave me the opportunity to meet a variety of people, learn the intricacies of communication, and gave me a life-long ability to fit into every group of people that I met.

In those days there was never any expectation from me that I would study and make something of myself. There was never any tradition of studies in the family; my brother had joined my father's grocery shop business without any discussion. In the villages and to a large extent wherever they lived, Marwari boys were expected to finish schooling and join the family business and often that meant running a small trading enterprise. By the time we finished 11th standard, my friends and I knew this would be our fate too, but one day a group of us at the boarding school decided we would have some fun in life before reconciling to our destiny and spending life selling grocery at our shops.

To my great happiness, my brother helped me when he heard my dream. He was kind and supportive and helped me get admission to the Sarda College in Ahmednagar, a rather rich and, to our inexperienced eyes, a glamorous town when compared to our very rural existence. He knew it was just a ploy to have some fun, but maybe because it was inexpensive—accommodation at the local Jain community boarding was subsidized for us—he helped me get to Ahmednagar.

We got down to the business of having fun right away and spent entire days in the dilapidated, run-down *zhopadi* canteen, a ramshackle tea shop run by a local politician, consuming great quantities of tea, *wada*, *missal*, *pav* (local savouries), whiling away time. I had taken admission for B.Com, but do not remember stepping inside class even once during our stint there.

Before we knew, it was the end of the year and we had exams staring us in the face. Since we had never attended any lecture, we were sure to fail, but we knew that any chance of having another

shot at some more fun would disappear if we flunked. And so, the five of us went into a huddle, retreating into our hostel rooms and staying put for an entire month, studying 20 hours at a stretch, sleeping for only four hours, and going out just so that we could eat and keep alive. The hard work paid off, and we managed to scrape through! Having passed the first year, we were bolder now and decided to push our luck further, begging to be allowed to go to Pune for further studies. Miraculously, this worked too, and before I could get over the shock of being allowed to go chase another dream, I found myself at the Firodia boarding in Pune in 1974.

This was an altogether new experience. I was the quintessential boy from the village and had no experience with life in a big city, other than the few times I had come to serve lunch at the big weddings in the homes of rich industrialists such as Mohanseth Lunkad. But that was very different from this, as then I had little to do there than hang out with the servants and the minions of the rich. There we stayed in poor lodgings and were thankful for the free meals. Suddenly, I found myself having to hold my own against people who lived differently, dressed differently—we rural folk wore pajamas while young men in the city wore trousers and smart shirts—spoke differently (our Marathi was spoken with a very rural slang that the city-bred scoffed at), and had an altogether different way of living and attitude towards life. I floundered for a while, felt miserable, but one day, after one of these low moods, I decided that moping would not help me. If I were to survive in this place, I had to stop pitying myself and get accustomed to the ways of the big city.

This was when I discovered myself and started making many friends. I made friends in college, at the hostel, and participated in most of the events—religious or social—that the Jain community organized in Pune till I became a well-recognized young member of the community. Many in the community knew me as the young man who went on extreme fasts without drinking even water for

days on end during our *chaturmaas*. I was happy doing that and it was not a big deal for me because I learnt that at the boarding school where all of us had to observe the fast.

Being footloose and fancy-free also made me very bold. Once, a group of us decided that we wanted to go to Mumbai which, at that point, had the ultimate promise of a fast, very tempting life that we rural youth had only heard of. We knew, of course, that (late) Mr. Hastimal Firodia (founder of the Kinetic Engineering group which made the famous gearless scooters), in whose hostel we lived, would not allow a pleasure trip of this sort. We, therefore, built up an elaborate story to make the trip more acceptable. When we finally got the story right, we mustered up the courage to go to his house to get permission to organize a trip. It was a formidable task because he was a stern man and a great industrialist, and it was unheard of for hostel inmates to land up at his door for anything; but we were young and knew no fear and so we took on that task too. Mr. Firodia asked us why we wanted to go to Mumbai, and poker-faced we said we had a great desire to visit one of our *acharyas* (religious head) who lived there. We got the permission, but then woke up to the reality that we had no money to carry the plan forward. Someone told us that the State Transport Corporation gave concessional travel rates to students and since we had to book an entire bus to take the lot of us to Mumbai, we thought we would get a great rate from them. On arriving at the ST office we were told that the concessional rates only applied for an official college trip. I got the letter from college saying the class was going to Mumbai when actually not even five per cent of the class students were going. Most of the aspirant travelers to Mumbai were from the hostel. The college issued the letter without a clue that I was pulling a fast one on them, and that success gave me confidence that thinking ahead and pre-empting situations would help.

I never looked back after that day, and sometimes I think it was the survival lessons of self-reliance that I learnt in my early years

which helped me cope with the first few months in Pune. In fact, I think, being left to my own means so early in life made me so fiercely independent that to this day, while I love mingling with people, I am emotionally a very self-sustaining sort of a person.

One of my earliest lessons in managing people and organisations came from my life in the hostel. Maybe it was fate, or maybe I was ever-willing to take on new roles, but I managed the canteen at the hostel for many years, procuring the raw material, keeping the accounts, and deciding the menus for 100 boarders. I was already an old hat at cooking from my days at the Kada boarding, and soon our hostel had established the



Shantilal Muttha, in his younger days.

reputation for laying out the best Sunday lunch spread amongst all the Jain hostels in Pune. Students from other hostels came to partake of the feast, and the eating competitions on Sundays became legendary. None of my friends were surprised that I was always the winner in these competitions, downing 20-25 plates of *gulab jamuns*, *puranpolis* (sweetmeats), or huge amounts of fruit salad (I had the excuse that I was from a drought-prone area). The competitions soon became a major attraction of Sundays with more people gawking than eating at the table.

In those days, I had befriended Kishorebhai, the proprietor of Chetna restaurant in the inner part of the city. Kishorebhai would often wait for me and my cronies to arrive at his restaurant and watch in fascination as we demolished everything on the plates.

He could hardly afford it, but generous soul that he was, he insisted on feeding us till we could not put a single more morsel down our throats!

Running the hostel kitchen also helped because it taught me some vital things about management. Later, the same experience proved crucial when we had to manage meals for thousands of people every day, when we went on rescue missions to Latur and Kutch, in the aftermath of the earthquakes. I already knew the logistics involved and managed to provide fresh, nutritious food to the traumatized and broken people in so many places where disaster had struck.

From my earliest days, building relationships was important for me. Often I would go with a friend to attend the Rotary, Jaycees, or Lion's club meetings in Pune even though I knew no one there and was clueless what I was doing there. But being seen helped in the long run, and soon I built up a network of acquaintances that helped me when I set up the Promoters Builders Association of Pune many years later. Those relationships also came handy when I sought to get an LPG gas agency in the open general category many years later, and also helped when I later went on to form the city's first Gas Dealers Agency in the open category.

In the late seventies, when I was still at the hostel in Pune, well-known industrialist Rasiklalseth Dhariwal's second daughter was getting married. I had been to the first daughter's wedding too five years ago, that time as a server at the wedding feast, and had seen the flagrant flaunting of wealth. Then I was a little boy with no say in anything. I lived in a hostel, was pretty much on my own, and had to do menial chores to make sure I continued staying at the boarding at Kada.

Now, it was different. I was a commerce student, was a young man who was already making a mark in the community with my involvement in its activities, and I presumed I was in a position to show my displeasure at yet another wedding and another show of

money power. We had endless discussions in the hostel; a group of young men who wanted to reform society and change the way the community continued to spend heavily on marriages. With some moral support from community elders who remained in the background, I went to his house one morning, leading a team of some 22 young men, all of us wanting to show our displeasure at the vulgar expenditure on the wedding by picketing the house. Rasiklal Dhariwal met us at his house, but with a single sentence he dismissed us and our premise that wanton spending on weddings was putting pressure on other parents of modest means. "It is my money and I reserve the right to do what I please with it. If you don't like it, just too bad." Needless to say, we returned home with our tail between our legs, but it was a lesson well learnt.

I thought it was logical, what he said, but that day I decided that I would find an alternative to the tradition. There was no point in protesting against the tradition which was so well-entrenched in our community. Most people organised these weddings to earn the praise of the community, and I figured it was actually the society's fault. I thought to myself that instead of criticizing the tradition, it would be better to come up with an alternative which would also earn the praise of the community. That lesson taught me to never go down the path of criticising anybody or anything. Flaunting of wealth was a statement of personal prestige in the Marwari community, and I would spend the next few years of my life breaking down the mindsets of people in this regard.

At the hostel, my ability to strike relationships quickly made me a sort of a leader, the guy who knew everyone and soon it got me into a completely unexpected line of activity: match-making. In those days, parents with eligible daughters of marriageable age would come to Pune to look for eligible grooms. Most of these parents wanted educated, well-to-do grooms for their daughters and obviously such men were in the cities. Most young Jain men who came to Pune stayed in Jain hostels to study, and I knew

dozens of engineers, lawyers, doctors who stayed in my hostel. Predictably, the parents would arrive at the hostel and would promptly be directed to my hostel room because I was the guy who knew everyone. Dozens of well-to-do Jain men in the city, in fact, were fixed up with their future brides after I put them in touch with the parents. Many of these parents then recommended me to other parents who were looking out for their daughters and soon I was a favourite match-maker for the Jain community.

My own marriage happened quite accidentally, much to my surprise. Raichand Kunkulol, the brother of a girl seeking a groom for his sister, arrived at the hostel one fine day along with his relative, Bhagwandas Nahar. The duo was from Jamkhed and predictably they were brought to meet me. As I was wont to do in those days, I took them to several prospective grooms but none of them appealed to them and they went back, mission unaccomplished. To my consternation, the two turned up at the hostel a few days later, this time with a proposition that left me slack-jawed in shock and surprise. They wanted me to be the groom to the sister!

I was only about 24 years of age and it never struck me that I could be a groom too. My aunt and her husband convinced me that the girl came from a good family, and so I ended up getting married in 1978, at the age of 25, to the first girl I was 'shown'.

HARD WORK & INGENUITY

My early life adventures and experiences taught me many things, instilled many qualities in me that have stood me in good stead all these years. Risk-taking, experimenting with new things, and getting involved in things that others would never dream of venturing into became second nature to me.

My wife's arrival changed the course of my life forever. She came from a well-to-do family from Ambejogai (Beed), and after our engagement her brother came to Pune and started a construction



3rd March 1978: The young bride and groom at their wedding.

business in the city with a friend who was a civil engineer. When he saw my struggle with jobs, he employed me to work for his firm. I was, after all, his future brother-in-law. But that never worked out because I was so incensed by my brother-in-law's failure to pay me a single rupee in salary for months together that I walked off in a huff one day. I was a hot-headed young fellow and was so angry at the slight that I stayed away from the engagement ceremony of my wife's younger sister, which was held during that period; I was always a man of principles and I refused to be exploited.

Since my financial condition was nothing to write home about, I took up full-time employment at Navlakha Agro Industries, a small family-run enterprise, for the grand salary of Rs. 225 every month. But that did not discourage me or keep me from doing my job with great commitment. I was the youngest employee of the company, which was owned by a family acquaintance. I quickly noticed that their business was getting affected because they had no idea of how to keep track of their inventory. Their pumps had

some 55 parts, and if even one of them was not available the pump never got made on time. Orders got delayed and soon customers started dropping them in favour of more reliable suppliers. As I got familiar with the systems and the operations at the factory, I started working for over 12 hours every day, putting together a seamless system where we could keep track of the parts in stock and their procurement.

Three months later, I left the job. The father of the owner, Popatseth Navlakha, was so upset that he came home, urging me to change my decision and offered me a Luna moped and a house to stay. I had grown up on a steady diet of different experiences in life at Dongarkini, Ahmednagar, Pravranagar, and I was yearning for some newness in life. I was young and there was nothing more I could have learnt at Navlakha Agro, and so I decided to forgo the comforts that a Luna and a house would give me for the thrill of chasing another opportunity, somewhere else. The Navlakhas, however, continue to be my friends to this day.

I then took up a job in a readymade garment factory owned by Kantilal Lunkad on Laxmi Road. It was not a great job, but I was always ready to learn from even the smallest, humblest experience. Working with the Jain community organisations in Pune meant that I came into contact with any number of people of repute and had no trouble getting a job. I worked at the garment factory for only 3-4 months before moving on to other opportunities, but in that span of time I had forged a bond with him and his family that continues to this day. It is not often that a rich businessman becomes a friend of his own employee, but Kantilal Lunkad and his family became close family friends and I have fond memories of so many shared family vacations with his family and mine. He soon came to be one of my dearest friends, and when he passed away in 2012 after a long struggle with cancer, it was not just his family who had lost him. My family felt the loss and pain too, and continues to miss his presence in our lives.

Around that time, my community set up Anand Prathishthan, a social organisation to celebrate the *Amrutmahotsav* (platinum jubilee) of Acharya Shri Anand Rishiji Maharaj. I wanted a job in the NGO, but I never got it. It was run by a group of businessmen, and looking back I think they were worried that I might take away their credit. Mohanseth Lunkad, the heavyweight businessman who headed it, had very little formal education, but had great business acumen, and might not have liked sharing any success.

The disappointment of not getting a job in that NGO became a lifelong lesson. I decided I would never do any work in the social field with someone else's money, and that I would not work with rich people and their organizations. I observed that they formed cliques and did what they pleased. They were equals and they wanted the rest to only work for them, and do only what they directed. There was no place in these organizations for someone else's vision or thought. I decided I would do no social work till I had the money to fund it. I put a full stop to my dreams, and got after making money so that I could follow my heart later in life. This was in the eighties, and I decided never to be beholden to anyone. I learnt that I would make my work talk for me and not compete with any other organization working in the community.

I realised early on in life that it was important to be proactive and always work a little more and deliver a little more than what people expected. I was already used to hard work and adapting myself to constantly changing circumstances around me. I had grown up facing innumerable hardships, and facing up to challenges was second nature to me. At each stage I had realised that knowing people and building relationships are as crucial to life as going to school and getting an education. Every time I moved locations, from my village till I reached Pune, I built new relationships with simple rural folk, rich businessmen, people from all sorts of backgrounds, and sustained them.

I am convinced that my early experiences combined with the

others that I have gone through while on this journey of effecting social change has given me an education that no university or business management school could have. I learnt to always expect a little more from myself and have always worked to make myself indispensable, both of which have worked in my favour many times. I learnt that nothing is more powerful than a positive attitude to everything and the power of self-belief. Every time I hit rock-bottom and struggled to survive, I pushed myself a little more, and miraculously, something else happened in my life that brought fresh hope. I learnt that there are no shortcuts to get to our goals and that there is no substitute to hard work and passion about our chosen goals. I believe that by the age of 25, I had gained the kind of life experiences that very few people get through a lifetime.

When I was engaged to be married to Sarla, I straightaway ran into a rather vexing problem, largely because I was on a weak wicket where finances were concerned. Sarla's family lived together in Ambejogai, but my own family was scattered, with me in Pune and my father and elder brother in Pravranagar. There was no way I could afford to take two *baraats* (wedding processions), one from Pune and the other from Pravranagar, to the bride's house. So we decided the *baraat* would leave from Jamkhed where my aunts lived. Jamkhed was also nearer to Ambejogai than Pune and Pravranagar, so it was a good way to cut costs. The marriage itself, on 3rd March 1978, was a simple ceremony after which we spent a few days at Jamkhed and returned to Pune, where we set up house in a humble one-bedroom apartment in Model Colony.

They say that the arrival of a wife into the house is like Goddess *Lakshmi* (Hindu goddess of wealth) stepping into your life. When Sarla entered my life, my long years of struggle started tapering off and my luck turned. My added responsibilities made me think of setting up an enterprise of my own instead of being somebody's employee. I decided to become an estate agent, and though the initial period was tough, one day, finally, God decided I had passed all the tests he had put me through and gave me my first real break.



*"I am happy to be in the background,
just supporting him whole-heartedly"*

SARLA MUTTHA

Wife

“ *I never knew that I would one day end up getting married to the boy who my family had hired to serve food and wait on our guests. My future husband, even if I did not know it then, was part of a group of boys who had been sent by the boarding school in Kada for this purpose. Strange are the ways of destiny.*

When my mother sent my brother off to Pune to look for a suitable boy for me, he met Shantilal Muttha at the Jain boarding and went around meeting a lot of boys who Shantilal introduced him to. But after he had met many boys, my brother insisted that he only wanted Shantilal to marry his sister (me).

My family was already familiar with his family because one of his cousins is married to my elder brother, so my mother was happy to get me married to him.

I was 21 when I got married, and after a short stay at Jamkhed, where his aunt who raised him lived, I joined him in Pune. A couple of months later, my father-in-law came from the village and settled down with us. The initial year was tough because my husband was in and out of several small jobs, but I had no complaints. Our luck turned when I became pregnant. Around that time, with much difficulty, he bought himself a plot of land on which he constructed. The project launched the day our son was born and I consider him our lucky charm.

We started our life together in a tiny apartment and today I live in a big bungalow – this is the fourth house I have lived in during the time we have been married.

In 1986, my husband started his social work. Then he put one of his cousins in charge of the business and started focusing on his social work. The mass marriage project actually took off with him getting his niece married through such an event. It took a long time for him

to convince his family to break the girl's engagement when her fiancé and his family backtracked on their promise of getting married in a community wedding.

Social work was not a strange concept for me when I got married. I had seen my mother always helping the poor and the needy in our village. My grandfather too was reputed for his work for the underprivileged. But we had never seen anything like the great obsession that my husband had for social issues, but I thought that it was not right to stop him from doing a good thing. I believe that each of us will get what is destined, and if he gave away or utilized our money on his social welfare projects, I was never threatened or insecure about it. It helped that I had come from a well-off family.

I remember the first years of my marriage were very difficult because I had come into a city where I was all alone. My father-in-law was a very stern man, very strict, but I had been trained to keep silent and never be disrespectful to my elders. I used to wonder what I had got into, but my husband is a good man. His friends used to visit him and spent hours at home, and I always served up whatever I could as a meal. I had been taught to keep home with joy, and not as a chore.

There was no one to look after my children and I did not expect anyone to look after them. So I remained largely cut off from his activities. I believed that both parents can't be away from home if the children have to be raised well. Also, he never insisted that I be part of his activities. When the kids were small, he would be away from home, sometimes for a couple of months like when he was away on his padayatra. Sometimes I would take the kids and join him on weekends in the village where he was halting.

His friends were like him, all were involved with his work; they were all simple people who had come up the hard way. By the time my father-in-law came to us, he had seen a lot of life, he had a difficult relationship with his other daughter-in-law, and was happy to come here. My husband had never taken anything from him, no favours at all, and so there was no question of his objecting to his son's activities.



With wife Sarla

My husband too was a quick-tempered man. He had not known family attachment because he had spent his life in boarding schools. I had to painstakingly teach him social habits, the nuances of staying with other members of a family. Only a woman can teach her family these things, but he never had that opportunity to grow up under his mother's supervision. I learnt to adjust, and tolerate. Slowly, especially now that the children are grown up and married, he has become a more tolerant man and involved with his family.

When his niece got married in a mass marriage, I knew my children would also get married the same way. Sometimes I worried if we would get the right family who would agree to a mass wedding, but we were lucky that the first proposal itself worked out. I have taught my daughter the value of hard work, of integrating with her husband's family, of keeping her feet always on the ground.

I remember we all went to Germany to meet our prospective son-in-law. When we went there, we were convinced he was the right boy for our daughter. We wanted a well-established family, culturally sound, and someone who would care for our daughter. We got just

Blessed to Serve

that person for her. My daughter loved the idea of a joint family where she would have plenty of company.

I have found the life I wanted with my husband. He loves being with his friends, but today, even though he is so involved in his social work, he still finds time for us when we require him to be with us.

I never had any expectations from him. I am now used to the fact that his life will be dedicated to larger causes. I have learnt to keep myself busy and be content with the children, my home. I have the support of my extended family and often take time off to travel when I am not with my grand-children. Even today, when I attend one of his events, I am happy to be in the background, just supporting him whole-heartedly.

”

GROWING CAPITAL



When the business bug bit me, I was fully aware of the fact that I had no money to start and sustain an enterprise of my own. I decided that I would become a real estate agent because that business needed no capital other than a network of contacts, good persuasion skills, and lots of goodwill, all of which I knew I had in plenty. In those days, plot owners in Pune were keen to sell their land to builders for developing, but the irony was that the builders themselves were wary of taking over these plots. The Urban Land Ceiling Act (ULCA) had come into force in 1976, and most builders feared these plots would be acquired by the government and they did not want to risk losing their money.

Vithaldas Bajaj, a gentleman in Kothrud who had a seven-acre plot of land to sell, commissioned me for the sale. I took the proposal to several Pune builders for a possible sale at the rate of a mere Rs. 3 per square feet, but to no avail! It was a plot with good potential for development and slowly, as my efforts to broker a deal for the plot started failing, the thought came into my mind

that I could buy the plot myself. Without thinking too much, I spoke to Bajaj about my desire, telling him I could give him an advance and pay the rest of the money over a period of three years. Maybe it was the fact that he gauged my sincerity and honesty, but, even to my own surprise, Bajaj agreed to my proposition and I started scrambling to make this dream a reality.

The price of the land was Rs 7,50,000, for which an upfront amount of Rs 5,000 had to be paid, with the balance to be paid in installments over three years. Even though it was an astounding sum, I was bitten by the entrepreneurship bug and was determined to buy it. I was working for the Jaycees Club at that point and the president of the club, Hasmukhbhai Patel, was a friend. I approached him for a loan of Rs. 5,000, telling him the reason why I needed it. He understood my point and immediately issued me a cheque for that amount. I was one step closer to my dream, but realized that I had no office, no staff, not even a chair or a telephone to help me become a businessman.

A friend of mine, Shyam Bhutada, a chartered accountant by profession, had an office on Laxmi Road. I asked him if he wanted to be my partner for the land project in Kothrud. He agreed, and in return I got the use of his office. Finally, I was in business! It was an audacious, almost foolish thing to do in those days because I had no money, no prospects, and had a wife to look after. Having borrowed more money than I had ever seen in my life, I was now worried that the land would be acquired by the government under the Land Ceiling Act, and that put the fear of God into me. I already knew that the Urban Land Ceiling Act gave concessions to landlords who would develop their land for weaker sections of society. With this in mind, I started the work of figuring out how to get my land listed under that category. I bought myself a season pass on the Deccan Queen train for innumerable trips from Pune to the Mantralaya in Mumbai where I met officials from the various departments concerned with the ULCA. Soon I had made friends there too and

one fine day, after months of hard work and persistent efforts, I got the exemption order and seal of approval from the government to develop my land for the weaker sections of society. My triumph reiterated my belief that in the end, no matter what, hard work, persistence, self-belief, and passion will bear fruit.

I soon realised that getting the required clearance from the government was just the beginning of a long journey. I knew nothing about the business and had no idea how to go about constructing the promised homes on my plot of land. I decided to spend my time visiting the construction sites of other builders who were putting up similar projects for low income families. Simultaneously, I also started searching for the names and contact numbers of the architects and contractors who undertook such projects and started negotiating with them. Many of them agreed to work with me, and before long we had a master plan ready to build over 250 apartments and a few row houses on my 7-acre property. I had not even got the municipal corporation's clearance for the plans, but I decided to go ahead and announce the project in the newspapers. To my great surprise and delight, all the 24 row houses that were to be built in the first phase were sold out within just 2-3 days of the announcement.

My first construction project with a total layout of 250 small flats/row houses took off on the Kothrud plot on the auspicious day of *Akshay Trutiya* in 1978, and that very same day my son, Sameer, was born, bringing along with him luck and prosperity. But I am convinced that my luck turned before that when Sarla had entered my life—I believe that she came into my life as the proverbial '*Lakshmi*', and brought prosperity and stability to the humble one-bedroom apartment that we then had at Deep Bungalow Chowk.

In 1980, the real estate market went up exponentially, but while other builders hiked the price of their apartments after customers had booked at a certain rate earlier, and made big profits, I refused to do so. I had made a commitment to my buyers

and I was not ready to go back on my promise to these middle-class buyers. In those days people had little money to splurge on houses unlike today, and most people had to avail of a loan from the Housing Development Finance Corporation (HDFC). I remember traveling to Mumbai with my buyers on different occasions to help the buyers get a loan for the purchase of their dream house. I had very little capital of my own, but my word of honour, and by God's grace, my buyers talking about my honesty ensured that soon my construction firm was being viewed as an entity that ordinary folks could depend on. The result was that my next few schemes sold out almost as soon as I opened for bookings. Slowly and steadily I grew my business till I was a name to reckon with in the construction community.

My partnership with Shyam Bhutada also came to an end with this scheme and I set out on my own, buying my first office, a 220-square feet space, on Ferguson College Road. Having made a good reputation for myself, I soon found plot owners approaching me so that I could buy them out, instead of the other way round! I was soon the owner of several good plots on which I started construction in various corners of the city. When my increasing prosperity made it possible for me to expand my own office to a 1,000-sq ft property, it was a proud moment for me and my family.

As business expanded, I also started getting connected with other players in the business such as Ramkumar Rathi, Kumar Gera, A.V. Apte, Omprakash Arora, P. A. Inamdar, and Kumar Builders. Ramkumar Rathi was a senior in the business who I admire a lot, and when he expressed his intention of forming an association of Pune's promoters and builders, I was prompt in supporting him, along with others like Omprakash Arora, Vimal Jain, P. A. Inamdar, and Kumar Gera. Rathi himself was a very busy man at that point, but when others and I extended our support and volunteered help, he was happy to form the Promoters Builders Association of Pune (PBAP). My joy knew no bounds when I became the first General

Secretary of the PBAP. Years later, the same body has today spread its wings all over the country under the umbrella of CREDAI and I draw pride that I had a small but significant role in its origin.

During the initial years in the city, I wanted to do something to improve the prospects of my family. We had seen a tough life



Striking the right work-life balance from early on with the family.

back in the village where we came from and now that I was in a position to do something for them, I wanted to do it fast. I knew that I could never change their lives by going back to the village and had gradually brought my family to Pune where I set up small businesses for them. As my business grew, I decided to bring my brother and his family to Pune and got him an LPG gas distribution agency for a livelihood. My brother had a truck which I wanted to rent out to B.G. Shirke, who had a manufacturing plant, Siporex, at Mundhwa. After a lot of effort on my part, and to my brother's utter delight, I managed to get it listed as a contract vehicle there. In due course, I purchased five trucks for my brother to do his business. Years later, five of our trucks were on contract to the Siporex plant

and eventually I came to know Mr. Shirke himself very well, as word of my social work got around.

My father came and stayed with me for many years. It was a very difficult time, but Sarla was a picture of patience, never once giving up on him or me because that was how she was brought up. She believed that it was her duty to look after her elders and she did it to the best of her ability. She is a simple woman even today.

Newly-married, when I worked my estate business out of a small corner in the office of Bhutada, on Laxmi Road, she would ride pillion on my Luna and later on a Lambretta, to assist me as best as she could. I knew Bhutada from the Jaycees club and later I would run into him at Murlidhar Bhojanalaya, a rambling mess-type eatery where people who worked on Laxmi Road and thereabouts came for cheap, economical meals. That friendship was what led him to give me space to work at his tiny office, and in return I made him a 50 per cent partner in my first construction scheme in order to acknowledge his contribution to my initial career.

Life was not easy for us those days. We were not financially secure, but Sarla never complained even once. I was used to being insecure, but she was from a well-to-do family. When I was still building up my business, I was consumed with a need to do something for the community around me.

From the initial couple of projects, my construction business grew quickly as middle class landowners in Pune approached me with their land so that I could develop it. I soon had a land bank and projects started taking off in different parts of the city. At each point I would call upon some relative back in the village so he could take over some responsibility and find himself meaningful, remunerative occupation. I had proved my mettle with the residential scheme in Kothrud and it had given me great credibility. Business grew slowly and steadily, and eventually I set up Muttha Associates. As I grew busy with my work, my family grew too. On 10th December 1980, my daughter Sonali was born,

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

and my wife Sarla started getting busy with her home and hearth. Knowing how busy I was with work, Sarla slowly took over a lot of responsibilities: raising the children, attending to our relatives and meeting our other social commitments. But for her tolerance, her patience and her selflessness, I would never have managed to achieve my dreams and pursue social change with all my energy.

The period between 1978–85 were great years where I soaked up life experiences. I was young, intelligent, quick-witted, sharp, and hungry for experiences. I was restless and did not want to wait for things to happen. Instead, I wanted to go out and make things happen and this I often did by networking and seeking out connections across all walks of life. With neither a strong academic background nor a professional degree and without any financial backing, it was on the strength of my entrepreneurial skills that I



Muttha Chambers I & II, on Senapati Bapat Road in Pune.

managed to take calculated risks, rope in good technical expertise, take sound decisions and ultimately complete all the big projects successfully from 1978 onwards.

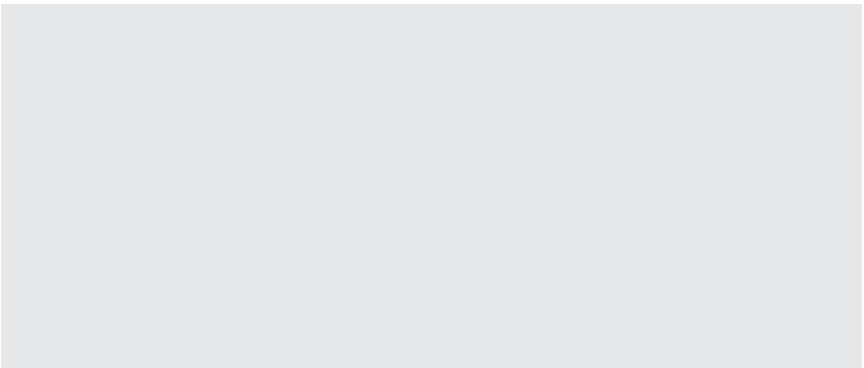
By 1985 I had a thriving business which was almost running

on auto pilot. There was a healthy demand for residential accommodation and I never had to try hard to grow business. By then I was a well-known figure in Pune, had a wide network of friends and even followers, and my life experiences had given me a world view and an opinion of my own. I had all the trappings that an ordinary middle-class man would want for himself and yet I was consumed by a great restlessness.

I was haunted by the fact that I had not been able to do anything significant for the community. I was caught in a dilemma. On the one hand my business was flourishing and there was huge potential for growth. On the other, I was eating my heart out that I had been unable to do anything for the community. In the end I decided to follow my heart. I knew the challenges of growing up in rural India, I knew how it was to grow up without a mother, and I knew how it was to survive on eating just *pav* (bun) and watery, spicy *misal* (curry that the *pav* is dipped in) while the world ate sumptuous meals.

Within a span of just seven years, my business grew by leaps and bounds. The journey from a village boy to a reputed builder in a big city had been adventurous, uplifting, and enriching, but I had the desire to do more with my life.

EMBRACING THE LARGER GOOD



FOLLOWING THE HEART



In 1985, at the age of 31, I started looking for answers within myself. I had started out in business with the intention of earning myself enough money so that I could undertake the work of social change that I wanted to do, without having to beg for funds. Having reached a position where funds were now at my disposal, I was ready to go back to the original purpose of my life: social work.

But that was easier said than done. By now the business had grown to such a proportion that there was no way I could walk away without a backward glance. The projects that I had in progress at that point itself would take 7-8 years to finish. Besides, there was pressure from family and friends to continue in the business and to avoid foolhardy decisions to give up. I decided to take the middle path and devote 50 per cent of my time to business and use the rest for social work. That way, I figured that I would be in a position to fulfill my professional obligations in the next 7-8 years and finally be able to devote my life to my heart's calling. It was an unusual and difficult decision to take for anyone. My children were still

in school and not yet able to take over my business. So I called on Dhanraj Katariya, my nephew, to take on more responsibility at work. I was just 31 and in a very enviable position in life with wealth, a great reputation, and all the trappings of a successful life.

My family, especially my wife, stood by my decision, unquestioningly, but the community around me sneered and laughed, saying I was throwing up a dream life in the pursuit of some fantasy. But they did not know how stubborn I can be about the things that I have set my heart on. With complete confidence in myself and my decision, I set out on a journey that would take me down paths that I never thought I would tread on.

At 32, I made up my mind that instead of making myself richer, I would stop pushing for more growth in my business and do something for the larger good of society. I started thinking of a business model that would give me the necessary funds to look after my family and to also help me serve the community. Thankfully for me, commercial activity was picking up in Pune and so I decided that instead of building and selling residential accommodation, I would focus on building commercial projects for lease and use the rent for the family's requirements and that of my own social work. In retrospect, this proved to be the best thing I did.

TYING THE KNOTS



When I was ready to finally get down to my obsession with social work, I decided to start with mass marriages and a campaign against unreasonable spending on weddings. The initial period was not very encouraging because most people did not buy into my concept. Even my friends said it was a far-fetched and radical idea, and would never find takers within the community.

I decided to start selling the concept in the villages of Maharashtra, seeking out Marwari homes, visiting their shops and talking to them about mass marriages. They turned out to be from the poorest families and soon they started connecting me with the families of girls and boys from needy families. It was hard work, physically daunting, and emotionally challenging because people would just not see my point. I went to all corners of the state, including Marathwada, Khandesh, and North Maharashtra. I spent an increasing amount of time on building a network of supporters and volunteers throughout the state.

To prove my concept, I had set out with a target of getting at least five couples married at a mass marriage event. In the community, I was being dismissed as a guy out to get publicity or status, and often I was told I should practice what I was preaching by getting such a marriage solemnized in my family before convincing others to do something so radical. People also thought I was a rich man who had a political agenda or wanted to gain respect in society with this work.

Luckily for me, destiny kicked in. My brother's daughter, Sheela, was of marriageable age and we soon got her betrothed to a boy in Nashik; my only condition at that time was that the ceremony would be in a mass wedding. The boy's family said they had no problem with that as long as we could conduct the wedding within six months, failing which, they would organise the wedding as per their wish. I was confident I could get four other couples together for a mass marriage, but to my disappointment, when that finally happened, my niece's prospective in-laws refused to participate in the mass marriage.

I was angry, outraged that they had given me a false assurance, and I convinced my family that we had to break off the engagement. It was a big step to take at that time, but my family knew how committed I was to the cause and they stood by me, all of them, including my niece. Each of them knew I was completely obsessed with the idea of mass marriages, and decided that they would let me have my way. Thankfully for her and for me, we soon got her another eligible young man—a relative of one of my closest friends—and we soon had that much-delayed mass marriage with great pomp and show!

CHANGE CATALYST



On the 25th of May, 1986, when Sheela Muttha got married, she set in motion a small change in the Marwari community.

As all weddings, this one too was an occasion of great joy. She was the first daughter of the family to get married and the entire family and a large number of guests had gathered to celebrate the marriage, but none of them could possibly have imagined how the simple reposition of faith by a young niece in her uncle's decision could prove to be the catalyst for a movement that would change the way marriages are made and celebrated in their traditional Marwari community.

When the young girl set foot in the wedding mandap, she was not alone. Twenty-four other couples and their families waited for the mass wedding ceremony to start, all of them part of an eventful journey that I had undertaken.

The successful execution of the mass wedding on May 25, 1986 encouraged me to such an extent that I promised myself that I would conduct many of these events on a much larger scale. In a

few months, I pulled off what few people cannot imagine even now. A whopping 625 marriages, all conducted simultaneously, on one platform at the SP College Ground in Pune, with all the pomp and gaiety that marriages usually have. In remote corners of the country today, and even in bigger cities, mass marriages are conducted regularly by citizens who believe it is not necessary to blow their life savings on a wedding.

In the beginning, the mass marriages were completely funded by me because I was very determined to demonstrate that the concept would work. It was a period of roller-coaster emotions, marked with great joy, when I managed to get a few families to agree to get their daughter or son married in a mass ceremony, but there were also times when I was in despair when the very same families would back out, with little regard for their promises.

Thankfully for me, when I got my own niece married in a mass marriage event, the penny finally seemed to drop. The first mass marriage that I organised was a grand affair at Sakal Nagar in Pune, one of the very first construction projects I had floated. I had spent lavishly because till then it was believed that only those with disabilities or very poor people got married in mass marriages and I had to get rid of that myth.

The event went off with great style—the food, the arrangements for the guests were perfect—and a mandap was set up to conduct the rituals with ease for the couples. In my speech, addressing the thousands of people who had arrived at the wedding to witness the event, I talked about my struggle in getting the weddings organised. I had talked to hundreds of other prospective couples before these 25 couples actually agreed to participate in my dream project. I told them I had decided that I wanted to change the way in which weddings are finalized and organized in India and requested them to partner me in that movement. It was exhilarating to have accomplished what I had so desperately wanted to do for such a long time. I had orchestrated the kind of marriage that the community

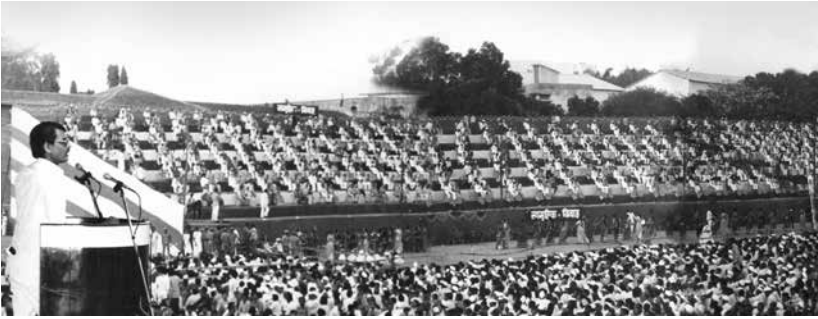


25th May, 1986: Niece Sheela Muttha at her wedding in the first mass marriage ceremony of 25 couples.

had never seen before and my critics were left speechless. But for me it was only the beginning of the journey. I had many more miles to go.

Three months later, I extended my vision of mass marriages by organizing the first *vadhuvar melava*, a common platform where 100 families of prospective brides and grooms met each other and chose their life partners. On 17th August 1986, I myself interviewed the prospective brides and grooms who had gathered at the Tilak Smarak Mandir in Pune. To my disappointment, 80 per cent of those who turned up were either those with disability or people who were well past the traditional age for marriage. It was not their fault; at that point in time only those with no takers in the marriage market participated in mass marriages. So I decided to hold another such *melava* two months later.

Eight months later, on 25th January 1987, I finalised the marriage of 51 couples in another mass marriage event and all 51 couples had found each other through the *vadhuvar melava*. Providentially for me, the media at that point was completely gripped by the



Shantilal Muttha addressing the huge crowd gathered for the mass marriage of 625 couples in Pune.

concept and their support and wide coverage helped it to gain momentum and credibility across the state of Maharashtra.

And yet I was restless. I felt I needed to do more with this concept, that it had more potential than just being confined to the Jain community. I wanted to broadbase the idea, take it to a larger audience because I saw it as a solution to one of the biggest social ills of our society—expensive weddings that broke the backs of parents of young daughters and often led them to financial ruin.

On 7th January 1988, that dream came true when I organised the wedding of 625 couples in what was one of the grandest wedding events that the city had ever seen. Moreover, this time it was an event with a difference because brides and grooms from different religions (Hindus, Muslims, Christians), and the downtrodden sections of society such as adivasis came from all over the state to get married at this event.

Looking back, I sometimes wonder how I managed all that. I was only 34 years of age, and today it seems like a miracle had helped me make this dream come true. So many things could have gone wrong, but they did not because I was bitten by a missionary zeal and had the unflinching support of an incredible group of people who believed in my dream and worked tirelessly to help me fulfill my vision. It was a gargantuan event for which we criss-crossed the

state, visiting villages in the remotest corners, looking for young people waiting to get married. I took on the task so I could prove to people that they could all adopt this concept in their own villages, getting started with mass marriages of a few couples.

Along the way, I went and met the eminent social activist Anutai Wagh, who was doing commendable work amongst the adivasis in the tribal belts of Maharashtra. I told her about my dream to have a mass marriage ceremony for couples from multiple religions. She loved the idea and told me it would be a blessing in disguise for a lot of adivasi men and women. She explained to me that young men and women in that community often started living together when they were of marriageable age, and even had children together, but got married only when they could put money together for the ceremony. This often left the women in these relationships vulnerable because there was no legal sanctity to their relationships, and gave them no claim to any of the man's property in the case of his untimely death or if they separated.

Anutai sent some 300 adivasi couples from Thane and Kosbad,



The perfect camaraderie: With Dr. Kantilal Sancheti.

one of the largest tribal belts in India, for the wedding. To this I added couples from the Mali community, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Agarwals, Maheshwaris, till the figure added up to 625 couples. I had booked the SP College grounds six months in advance, but when I realised this was going to be a huge wedding with 625 couples, I decided this would be an event on a scale that was larger than that I had imagined.

The stage for the wedding itself was a huge challenge because it would have to take the weight of at least 2,500 people (625 couples, their families, priests, and volunteers who would make sure the rituals went off smoothly) at the same time. I summoned local mandap experts who organised weddings and built stages for large events, but it was my friend, Dr. K H Sancheti, who eventually designed the stage for the unprecedented event.

He had been by my side from the first wedding and knew the logistics involved, and the sheer number of people who arrived for the weddings. Most people only know him as a great doctor, but he is also a keen designer, strategist, and planner, and used his skills to come up with a master plan for the stage for the wedding. When it was ready, it was a 600-foot long stage built on 11 levels, a marvelous structure that impressed anyone at first sight itself. Working with engineers and other teams, Dr. Sancheti made sure that the foundation would take the weight of at least 3,000 people. Work on the stage started three months in advance.

The next step was to organise the meals and accommodation for all the guests who would arrive for the wedding. Thankfully for me, the owners of every last *mangal karyalaya* (marriage hall) in Pune came forward and hosted the wedding guests free of cost because they were so proud such an extraordinary event was being held in the city. My friends such as Lalit Jain, a builder, chipped in generously. Lalit personally went to Thane to bring in the adivasi couples. The state government also helped by not stopping a single truck that came in with the wedding guests. All along the

way villagers gladly served tea and refreshments to the *varhaads* (wedding party). Volunteers were at all the entry points to the city, taking them to the nearest *mangal karyalaya* where they stayed till the next day when the mega event was to be held.

What an event it turned out to be! Over three lakh people arrived in the city from all over the state. The weddings took place simultaneously in just 10-15 minutes, with the priests of every religion conducting their rituals simultaneously. Priests, maulavis, and the religious heads who were to solemnize the weddings were escorted to the stage so that the rituals were held seamlessly. The air reverberated with the auspicious sounds of religious hymns from half a dozen different sects and religions.

The scale of the operations and the tremendous publicity the event got also meant that a line-up of political heavyweights arrived to witness the event. Former Chief Minister, Shri Sharad Pawar, and then Industry Minister of the Government of India, Shri NKP Salve, participated whole-heartedly, exhorting the gathering to make mass weddings a norm rather than an exception. Anutai Wagh was a guest, and so were a lot of other social change activists.

The then (late) Prime Minister, Shri Rajiv Gandhi, was visiting Pune for the Indian Science Congress, which was being held in the city, and he conveyed a message to me through the then Home Minister, Shri Buta Singh, that he was keen to attend the wedding since he had heard and read a lot about the event. Teams of his security personnel visited the venue several times to figure out if there was any way he could attend, but in the end he never made it because his security team did not give him the required go-ahead. They feared compromising his safety because of the sheer number of people who would be attending the event, and we simply did not have the type of arrangements that would be needed for a VVIP like him! It was, after all, a wedding ceremony of common folks...

In the end, the 625-couple mega community wedding that had taken six months to plan got done in just half an hour. A long queue

Blessed to Serve

of prospective brides and grooms waited patiently in the sidelines for the event to start and made their way in a disciplined manner to the stage as the volunteers called out their names and priests carried out the marriage rituals. For me it was a great milestone because it honed my organizational skills further and re-affirmed my belief that almost anything is possible if you have a deep inner conviction about it.

SPREADING THE MESSAGE



Putting the mega wedding event together with 625 couples, was a huge management challenge, one which involved months of planning, strategizing, and calling on my network of supporters in the community. Similarly, organizing and providing timely assistance during disasters requires tremendous coordination and a team which works seamlessly. I have been fortunate to be blessed with an organization and its members who work tirelessly to admirably complete any task given to them. During this period, I also found an unlikely admirer in Sharad Joshi, the firebrand Shetkari Sanghatana leader.

One day I got a message from my friend, Motilal Sakla of Chakan, near Joshi's stronghold. Joshi had told my friend he wanted to simply come and observe how I could manage such big events without a hitch, and confessed that the sheer size that his own organization had grown to had made it unwieldy and a challenge for him to manage. From the mass marriages to my meetings with volunteers and organization's cadre, he wanted to know how I ran them all smoothly. I was taken aback by the request, but agreed to

have him come in and watch the planning meetings of the group. Often I would catch him arrive and settle quietly into the last row at Tilak Smarak Mandir, observing our meetings.

It was awkward for me because here I was, a novice with almost no big experience in public life, in front of this political heavyweight who had the backing of the entire farmer community. Unable to bear the embarrassment, I once asked him to come join me on the stage as I held yet another meeting, but he refused and said he preferred to be at the back just watching me. He was eventually so impressed with my ability to organise people and bring people to rally around me that he would talk about me wherever he held rallies and farmer meets. One day he told me that I was one of the three people he respected in the world, and he wanted to observe my organizational skills so he could use it in his own party, which was at its zenith at that point and had grown to unwieldy proportions.

Joshi later went on to be one of my closest friends, so much so that once, during his famed agitation against the Reliance business group at their Patalganga facility, the big man, Mr Dhirubhai Ambani himself sent me a message through a trusted aide that he wanted my help in meeting with Joshi. I was busy on that day, but I met this aide later and he told me that since I was seen as a close confidante of Joshi, only I could organize this meeting between him and Mr. Ambani. I asked the aide, Mr. Chaini, why Mr. Ambani wanted to meet Joshi and was told that Reliance wanted to set up an agriculture vertical in its business and that Joshi could give the group the right direction in the agricultural space.

I contacted Joshi and told him about the message. Joshi, of course, declined promptly and it took all my persuasive skills to get him into the same room with Mr. Ambani. I explained to him that if Reliance was serious about being in agriculture and was banking on him to take their plan ahead, he should then be able to leverage that to take forward some of his own agenda for farmers'

development during the same interaction. In the end Joshi agreed, and we met at Reliance's Worli office, Mr Ambani flanked by his sons Mukesh and Anil, and many of his top executives.

There have been innumerable other meetings with people, some of them known, some unknown, many people of great influence, some just ordinary people like you and me, all of which have left a great impression on my mind.

But more important than these have been the multiple projects and activities that we undertook and activated, in the process bettering the lives of many people across the country.

WALKING THE TALK



When the mega community wedding was over, I did not rest on its laurels. A year later, in 1989, I set out on a three-month *padayatra* (walk), taking the message of mass marriages to the length and breadth of the state. My message of simple, community marriages had struck a chord in the hearts of many people and was being practiced in pockets across the states, but the challenge for me was to spread the word amongst the masses. I wanted to tell them that the lavish weddings that we had adopted for ourselves was a waste of national wealth and that the resources could be used to improve our situation by investing in education and employment generation, among other things.

I began preparations for the *padayatra* some eight months in advance, slowly building up my strength, walking and running progressively, beginning with 5, 10, 15, and then 20 kilometres every day till finally, when I commenced on the *padayatra*, I was able to put in over 30 kms every day, for three months at a stretch, without once getting into a vehicle. I covered 3,000 kms in three months, and each day I would hold 2-3 public meetings where I

would speak about the ills that were gnawing at our innards.

My research had shown me that the community and, indeed, some other parts of the country had a rapidly declining population of women, largely because the huge cost of getting a daughter married off meant that parents often never even allowed a female child to be born. At public meetings in villages, I cautioned the gathering that if we did not quickly change the way we looked at our daughters, a time would come when they would have no girls to get their sons married to. Twenty-five years later, my words, unfortunately, seem to have come true—today there are pockets in this country where men truly don't have women in their villages to get married to, and often have to travel to other parts of their state to find a bride.

The *padayatra* itself was a novelty for most people who heard of it. Prior to this only actor (late) Sunil Dutt had undertaken such an exercise, but it was in far-off Punjab, and hence many were unaware of it. Former Prime Minister, (late) Shri Chandra Shekhar, too had undertaken one, but it was the first time an ordinary citizen had undertaken such a project and that by itself generated huge interest.

I walked through Shirur, Ahmednagar, Kada, Ashti, Beed, Jalna, Aurangabad, Buldhana, Malkapur, Dhule, Manmad, Kopargaon, Sangamner, Narayangaon, Junnar, Manchar, among other towns and villages, from January to March 1989, and wherever I went I spoke about the problems that were threatening to break up families in our community. I told the patriarchs of families in villages to treat the women in the family with respect and give their daughters the freedom to make choices; often the repressive and authoritarian set-up in families resulted in young girls rebelling and leaving their homes. Inter-caste and inter-community weddings were severely discouraged in our community but they happened anyways, because young people rebelled against the authoritarian ways of family elders.



Padayatra: From village to village, Shantil Muttha went on a 3,000-km padayatra across Maharashtra, accompanied by prominent personalities from society and thousands of volunteers.

Along the way, groups of 500–1,000 people would walk with me from one village to the other. It was then, at the age of 35, that I understood the reality of life in rural India. It was a voyage of understanding the real people of India and the issues that they faced. That *padayatra* was the turning point of my life and changed my life, connecting me with the soil of rural India irretrievably. I wanted to offer solutions for the problems that families faced. Putting together marriages had brought me face to face with the problems that people deal with when trying to bring two people together in wedlock.

I got to know about the issue of education and the issues that come up during marriages. In those days, people in our trading community did not educate our boys because they wanted them to only work in their shops or small business, but strangely enough the girls were sent to school and college because they had nothing

to do at home! This had a great impact on the marriage decisions because educated girls then would only settle for educated boys.

The *padayatra* was a crucial part of my own journey because I knew that if I wanted to spend the rest of my life in social work, I would need a deep understanding of the ground realities of the country. My three-month long walk through the tiniest of villages helped me understand the issues, the people, their concerns and the resources. I knew also that as I took my social work mission ahead I would need volunteers and future resources for my movement, and I could never find people by sitting in the comfort of my home. My network would grow only when I was on the ground, and could identify good people only when I met lots of people.

During the entire period, I managed with few hours of sleep, stayed away from my children and family for the entire duration, but came back richer with the love they showered on me. Not once did I fall ill or become demoralized; I had a god-given strength to keep me moving forward.

But most importantly, people finally realised I was not in it for publicity or political mileage.

Today, it is one of the most satisfying things in my life to see how the concept of mass marriages has caught on slowly and steadily. What was a mere trickle has turned into a big ocean. Mass marriages are now held successfully in every part of the country with even the government providing financial aid for these events.

In Maharashtra, many families in Junnar, Ambegaon, Narayangaon happily get together to solemnize the weddings of their children and some 70-80 per cent of the weddings in these regions are through this method. Instead of selling their land or taking loans, families can now marry off their children in about Rs. 3,000 – 4,000.

Well-to-do families of farmers in Junnar, who have flourishing vegetable businesses in Mumbai, are now participating in it. In order to show my continued solidarity with this concept, I too

EMBRACING THE LARGER GOOD



9th Dec 2001: Daughter Sonali and groom Vaibhav at their wedding in a mass marriage ceremony in Pune.

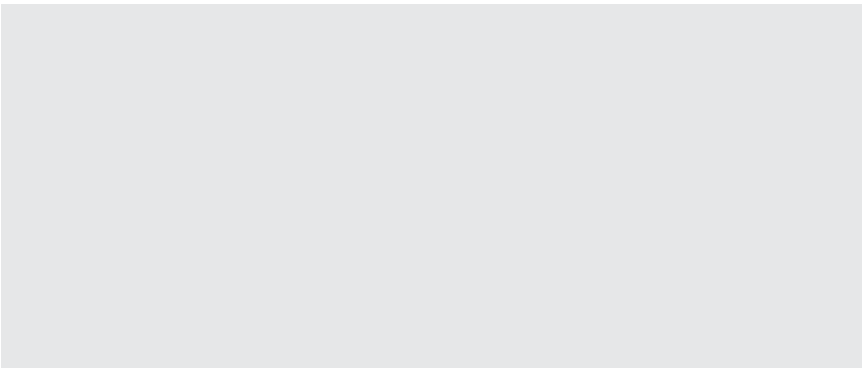


10th May 2003: Son Sameer and bride Neha at their wedding in a mass marriage ceremony in Pune. Seen with Mr Sharad Pawar.

married off my daughter and my son in mass marriage ceremonies in 2001 and 2003 respectively.

This was an important factor for me, because to reach this milestone I had to negotiate many a twist and turn, beginning from the tiny lanes of Dongarkini.

DISASTER RESPONSE & MANAGEMENT



MARCHING FOR PEACE



People often ask me where I get the endless reserves of energy and focus to carry on with my projects for almost three decades now, without expectation of any reward. I tell them that my early years made me a tough, self-reliant person who depended on my own wits to keep me afloat. Even today I only do the things that my conscience allows me to. From my childhood I have never ever given up on anything that I wanted to. When the horrific Babri Masjid incident happened and brought in its wake so much violence and communal strife, I wanted to do my bit to bring about reconciliation and peace.

In December 1992, when the Babri Masjid was demolished, huge fissures appeared on the secular face of our social fabric, disrupting religious harmony in a way that seemed hard to bridge. The communal riots, deaths, and the barbarism that I read about in the media disturbed me. It was unthinkable for me that a man-made disaster could bring the country down to a halt. Businesses and schools remained shut, and violence and bloodshed paralyzed the nation.

I refused to wait till the government did something and called for a meeting of the volunteers who helped with my social projects and told them we should at least do something in the state, even if we were unable to take any action on the national level. Even my volunteers dithered, but I reminded them that the Jain community's Tirthankar, Lord Mahavir, preached non-violence and peace and we could not just remain mute witnesses to the killings.

The *Shanti Yatra* (peace walk) was to be held from Pune to Nagpur, and my plan was to include religious leaders who would address people along the way and try to calm down simmering emotions. My joy knew no bounds when Jain Acharya Sushil Muni, the Hindu religious head from Haridwar, Swami Chidanand, Muslim leader Maulana Wahidudeen Khan, Padma Vibhushan Anna Hazare, Padma Bhushan Govindbhai Shroff, and High Court Justice Dharmadhikari joined the peace march organized by us. It was only after I approached the then Defence Minister, Mr Sharad Pawar, and he convinced, Mr Sudhakar Rao Naik, the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra, that I had no other agenda than trying to bring about peace that I got permission for the *yatra*. At each place that the *yatra* went, we had decided who would speak to the public and the media, what subjects we would speak on and what subjects we would avoid. We were very careful so that there would be no miscommunication that would worsen the situation. Part of the success of the *yatra* was also the songs of peace that we got written for the occasion by Jain sadhvis, Mahasati Preetisudhaji Maharaj and Madhusmitaji Maharaj. The songs brought tears to the eyes of those who heard them.

The *shanti yatra* started at Shaniwarwada, Pune and went into small villages. At Sangamner, the government had given a respite from curfew in villages when the *shanti yatra* reached there and it lightened the atmosphere there visibly. Television telecast of the *yatra* and its message meant that the public looked forward to our arrival in different places. By the time we reached the communally

sensitive Malegaon, it had become so popular that police vans actually announced our arrival on their public address systems!

To bring various religious leaders together on a common platform at such a communally charged time in our history, I think, was a master-stroke. Some 50,000 people attended the meeting in Malegaon, which is otherwise a cauldron of communal sentiments. That was a turning point for us because from then on till the time it culminated at Nagpur, we got the full support of the government machinery. I was only 38 years old and I had proved that with the right intent and attitude even the toughest task is not impossible to pull off.

The *shanti yatra* got me noticed by the powers that be in the Centre, thanks to the 30-minute capsules about it telecast by television channels. I was on cloud nine, but it proved to be a temporary victory. Within just a month after that Maharashtra burst into flames, rocked by communal violence. But this time, the



Shanti Yatra, 1992: A coming together of different religious and social leaders in a peace rally of 1,000 kms, spreading the message of non-violence and communal harmony.

state did not suffer as much. Celebrated editor, Madhav Gadkari, said in a column that the reason why it did not scar Maharashtra so much was because of the *shanti yatra* and the message of peace that it had left in the minds of people. I felt vindicated and recharged.

LATUR TRAGEDY



The 30th of September, 1993 would have been a normal day for me if I had not got an early morning call from my colleague G.M. Bothra, about an earthquake in Latur and Osmanabad districts. Bothra said that the news was not clear about the extent of damage, but that there was talk of huge loss of lives and property. Three hours later, when I realised the magnitude of the disaster—70 villages in the region were reduced to rubble and countless lives lost—I knew we would have to do something to bring some relief to those who had been affected. When I called a meeting of our volunteers, even my closest confidantes felt we should stick to our work in promoting and organizing mass marriages and not dilute the work by striking out in a totally different direction. I was not convinced. The news that was emerging from the quake-affected region shook me up and I told them we had to do this.

One of our associates in Osmanabad, Vijay Bedmuttha, kept updating us about the developments and I realized that rushing food and basic essentials to the victims was critical. It was soon evident that we would have to provide meals for at least 10–15,000

people every day. Our volunteers were immediately working on a war-footing mode, drawing up a list of things we would need in Latur and Osmanabad. Top of our list were procuring cooks, large vessels for community cooking, hired generators, diesel in trucks to run the generators, and tin sheets for setting up temporary shelters for the victims. Within hours, our entourage set off towards Barshi, where we were supposed to set up base.

When I reached there, I was completely distraught by the sights at the scene of devastation. Thousands of dead bodies, homes that had been reduced to piles of rubble, and the heart-breaking wails of the survivors grieving the loss of their loved ones numbed me and my volunteers, many of them young people who had not much experience of life. We got to work quickly, adopting few of the villages that seemed to have borne much of the brunt of nature's calamity—Sastur, Holi, Holithanda, Rajegaon, Rebi, Cinchoi, among others. To serve them, we decided to set up camp at Sastur, armed with the most important essentials such as generators, wireless communication sets, and tents to protect us from the rain which beat down relentlessly. Our foresight in carrying generators helped other relief volunteers who had arrived at the site of the disaster. One of the first things we did was to light up Sastur and the surroundings with some 200 halogen bulbs, thus facilitating speedy relief and rescue work by NGOs and government volunteers.

Simultaneously, after discussions with the then Chief Minister, Mr Sharad Pawar, and others, we started the gargantuan task of preparing daily meals, twice a day, for the victims in nine villages, a task that we carried on for 15 days. We then expanded the scope of the food supply, shifting the preparation of food to Aurangabad and Barshi so that it could be cooked in hygienic conditions, away from the rotting bodies and the stench that pervaded the air in the disaster-struck villages. Some 30,000 victims survived on the meals that we provided for over a month and it continues to be a matter of pride to us that when U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican, Mr. Raymond

Flynn, visited our community kitchen he congratulated us on the level of hygiene we maintained, despite the huge pressure on our volunteers.

Simultaneously, we also brought in teams of doctors into the villages to attend to the injured and distributed necessary medicines. When we realised that the victims had no hope of ever picking up the broken pieces of their lives because they had nothing at all to call their own, we distributed cooking utensils, sarees, sweaters, blankets, lamps, storage containers, and other basics so they could restart their lives all over again. Along the way, we also realised that most of the villagers did not like the idea of waiting for food that volunteers were distributing, and so we set up flour mills in each of the villages we had adopted, so that they could cook their own meals and the rehabilitation work was speedier.

One of the most challenging tasks that we undertook during the relief work was taking care of those who died in the earthquake. Heavy rains and lack of adequate and speedy rescue and retrieval work meant that countless bodies lay rotting under the debris, even as their grieving families searched for them. We decided to give the dead a dignified departure and soon the volunteers were on the job, recovering bodies, getting them identified by the next of kin, and cremating them. It was a difficult task because the rain would not let up, and there was no wood to cremate the bodies. Eventually we used wood retrieved from window and door frames of homes that had been flattened in the earthquake.

From the time I had landed at the disaster site, I had been struck by the plight of children in the villages. Many of them had lost their parents, their homes, and were traumatized by the tragedy. My heart went out to them when I saw small children begging for food packets that were being distributed, sometimes fighting for them because hunger had driven them to that plight. Bereft with grief, the children had no emotional anchor because

their families had either been killed or were pre-occupied with the worries of surviving the disaster. Days into the earthquake, the kids were witnessing gory sights of rescue volunteers pulling out and laying out bodies to be identified, and I feared they would carry the emotional damage with them for the rest of their lives.

Since entire villages had been flattened by the earthquake, I knew it would be a long time before they went to school. It was then that the idea first came to me: if they had no schools in their villages, we could take up the responsibility of raising and educating the kids in Pune, I wondered. It was an audacious idea and, as I suspected, it met with stiff resistance from not just our volunteers but also my own community. They thought it a foolhardy idea and one which would bankrupt me. I stuck to my guns though, and soon the volunteers had drawn up a list of some 1,200 children whose lives were destroyed in the natural calamity. It was a huge task convincing the families to let their kids go so that they could have a good future; they were scared having lost everything else that they would lose their children too. Eventually, we decided that the kids would be accompanied by a few teachers from the village and a handful of village elders who would look after them while in Pune. That set their minds at rest.

When I discussed it with Mr. Pawar, he was intrigued by the plan, but said it would need clearances from various government departments. When I applied for the necessary permission, the Woman and Child Welfare and other relevant state government departments said it would be a difficult task and become problematic for me if the kids ran away from school. I decided to do it anyway; encouraged by Mr. Pawar who said he would do his best to help me. I approached well-known child psychologists like Dr. Mohan Agashe, Vijay Kuvalekar, and others who gave the project the green signal. I knew I was taking up something significant when the consent forms from the parents of the kids were signed and handed over to me.

DISASTER RESPONSE & MANAGEMENT



Fleet of buses to bring the disaster-affected children to Pune from Latur.



Children getting ready for departure to Pune as villagers look on with anguish, but also hope.

When 26 buses with 1,200 children set out from Latur to Pune on the auspicious day of *Dusshera* (Hindu festival), flagged off by Mr. Pawar, and the then Governor of Maharashtra, Mr. PC Alexander, I knew I was embarking on a journey which would keep me connected to their lives forever.

The children were to spend the next few years at Atmanagar, Pimpri, where I had a residential building which I had readied for sale, but would now be their home till we built a rehabilitation centre for them. The journey of a lifetime, truly, begins with a few hopeful steps.

BIRTH OF A FORCE



While I had stoutly refused to put a name on the humanitarian and social change work that I was doing along with the hundreds and thousands of members of the community who were supporting me in my journey, I had to change that stand in 1993. I realised that if I had to start a school and hostel to accommodate the kids, I would have to put a name to the organization I was leading. I decided to register the organization as the Bharatiya Jain Sanghatana (BJS). In doing so, I was also reaching out to the Jain community, which is known as a peace-loving community with a long-standing tradition of service, and I wanted their help in making our world a better place. I had many ideas of bettering our lot and I thought to myself that I would first involve the community in these pilot projects before taking it to the rest of society.

The Jains in India have set up over 2,500 educational institutions, temples, social work trusts and hospitals, not to forget innumerable *ghoshalas* (shelters) for animals.

At Latur they had opened their hearts and their purses, and

provided free grocery for thousands of meals, just with a single appeal for help from me. I did not want to risk my reputation on people I did not know or could not back up and so decided my organization would be centered around them. My long-time friend, Prakashchand Surana, was nominated Vice-President, while I took over as President.

I have always dreamt of big things and then followed it up right till those dreams fructified. Throughout the last three decades of my life, I have been driven by just one motive: I want to give back to the community that gave so much to me when I most needed it. I have learnt to always work without expectation of success, and that success will always follow if we work hard towards our goal.

While we had managed to get permission for a school for the earthquake-hit kids, I had this vision of starting a permanent educational rehabilitation centre where children from any disaster-hit region in the country could be housed so that they could continue their education without disruption. I knew I had the option of approaching the government for allotment of land, but I also knew that the project was likely to run into bureaucratic red-tape and I did not want that. I was 40 years old, and a man who had little patience. I, therefore, bought a 10-acre piece of land at Wagholi, way beyond the Pune Municipal Corporation limits, where the kids could grow up in relative peace, and decided to forge ahead with my dream.

Thankfully for me, the project caught the imagination of the state government. On its recommendation, the World Bank, which chips in with aid for NGOs, schools, announced that it would aid us in setting up the infrastructure for what was to become the Wagholi Educational Rehabilitation Centre (WERC). The completion of the sprawling centre, a state-of-the-art, 3-lakh sq ft space with modern classrooms, computer labs, accommodation for a 1,000 students, laboratories and libraries was a dream come true for me. As it turned out, the centre was completed just in time in November

1996, because in the years since then the centre has come in very handy while providing shelter and rehabilitation for children from any number of disaster-struck zones, including Kashmir.



WERC: *The Wagholi Educational Rehabilitation Centre in Pune.*

The 10-acre campus of the centre has a hostel building that can house 1,000 children, a kitchen-cum-dining hall, a school (Std V to XII) for 2,700 students, an Arts, Science and Commerce college, and residential facilities for staff. A resident doctor provides medical care and is supported by a visiting psychologist and medical specialists. A strict daily routine is followed, beginning from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., with time slots for rest and recreation. Nutritious meals prescribed by a professional dietician are provided.

The resident children attend the school in the premises along with about 2,400 children from the neighbouring community. Special tuitions, computer classes, study tours, weekly screenings of films, and activities for public speaking and personality development are conducted. The centre has a total staff of 220, including 68 teachers.

For me, the satisfaction comes from knowing that thousands of students have studied since then at the WERC, completing their graduation while simultaneously getting opportunities



Children at the Wagholi Educational Rehabilitation Centre (WERC), Pune.



30th November 2002: Former President, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, meeting the children during his visit to WERC, Pune.

for all-round development of their personality as our teachers taught them arts, inculcated in them a love for competitive sport, and developed their public speaking skills. As the students from various disaster zones completed their studies and left the WERC, we started getting kids from other disaster situations to the place, in order to give them a better life. It is in keeping with this spirit that every year we bring groups of children from Melghat, Maharashtra's poorest tribal belts; children who have little to eat, leave alone access to nutrition. It is a matter of joy that by the time

they leave us after their education, they have caught up with the growth lag that they suffered due to malnourishment during their early years. What is even more joyful is that these kids go back and become teachers, sarpanchs, and thought leaders in their villages, helping the residents of their villages to improve their lot. Often, many of them, armed with information, thanks to their education, approach government agencies and bring schemes and benefits to their villages that would otherwise have been siphoned off by unscrupulous middlemen.

Today, many of the children who spent almost a decade at the WERC are professionals—teachers, lecturers, bankers, doctors—and to me it is a great matter of pride that each of them have taken the responsibility of other children in their villages whose lives will improve, like theirs did, with education, and other early intervention and mentoring. And most of them continue to volunteer with BJS every time there is a disaster and we want to undertake relief and rehab projects. In September 2013, the 20th anniversary of the earthquake in Latur, the BJS organised a get-together of all the children who came to Pune with them, to study and become citizens of the world. The day was marked with a memorial to the people who lost their lives, but it also marked the beginning of a new journey when 2,500 ex-students of the WERC came together to form an alumni organization that will help people in disaster situations in the future. For the BJS it was a reiteration of our belief that we have to give back to the society that has given us so much.

The WERC is focused on providing education and residential care to needy children. Since 1993, it has provided these services free of charge to over 3,000 children. Currently, it houses 400 children, including orphans from various parts of Maharashtra, tribal children from Melghat, and children from remote tribal parts of Thane district, who are all offered residential education from Std V to XII.



*“We now work with the BJS to return
back to society all that we got from it
with so much generosity”*

BABASAHEB DOODHBHATE

*Retd. Asst. Professor, Department of History,
Pune University*

“ *Before the earthquake hit my village, Hasalgan, in Latur’s Ausa taluka, we were simple village folk who lived in a very modest home where my parents worked in our field to grow lentils and pulses for our own needs. We had a few goats and sheep and the income was always inadequate. Aai (mother) worked as a labourer in other people’s fields too, to supplement the family income. The village itself was not very big; just 2,500 people lived there and we were amongst the worst-affected in the earthquake, along with Umerga taluka.*

There was no culture of education in our village and we didn’t have anyone who motivated us to study. Till we came with Muttha Sir to Pune, we didn’t even know what a school bag was. It is only a miracle that brought me in contact with him, helped me complete my graduation, follow it up with my M. Phil in History, and become an Asst. Professor in the Department of History, Pune University.

Finishing my education and leaving WERC has not meant the end of my association with the BJS, which continues to keep us under their benevolent shade. While the organization continues to treat us with the same kindness they showed to us when we were children under their care, we now work with them to return back to society all that we got from it with so much generosity.

Today we have a BJS alumni group that I am heading, and also a group called the Marathwada Bhumiputra Sangathana which works in the villages. Every year, around Diwali, 200–400 of us from the group meet up, and in gratitude of what we got from society we try to return something back to the place we came from. Most of us are employed, from guards in various companies to teachers, doctors,

ESTABLISHED 1858

THE TIMES OF INDIA

2 WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7, 2001

PUNE

Latur quake-hit youths give of their best in Gujarat

By Manjit Dandia

PUNE: They know what it is to lose one's parents and see more than one body burning on a single pyre. They know how it feels when one wants to cry but not a tear comes out of the eyes. And they have learnt the value of a helping hand when a calamity like an earthquake strikes. They, the children affected by the earthquake of Latur, knew that they had to go to Gujarat and offer help to the victims of the earthquake there.

Now rising college-going lads, they were children when they were rehabilitated at Wagholi by the Bharatiya Jan Sanghastana, headed by Shantilal Meetha, after the Latur earthquake. The recovery from the devastating experience was relatively quick, thanks to the foresight displayed by Mr Meetha, who brought over 1,200 earthquake-affected children to the city and started a residential school for them.

"Shantilal has should be called a psychologist; he knew how to help," says Umakant Kulkarni, a first year science student. "Going back to school almost immediately after the Latur earthquake helped us a lot. We became involved with studies, sports and other activities and the change in atmosphere seemed like a gift from God," he recalls. He is confident that Mr Meetha's initiative in starting a school four days after the Gujarat earthquake will help the children in particular because they had no other occupation but to sit and watch the burning of dead bodies.

The Latur experience equipped them better in helping Gujarat's people. "We know that people who are affected the most never come forward to ask for food or help. They sit at home mourning the loss and the

children go hungry. So when we went to Bhachasa, we formed teams which would take food four times a day to such people. During one of the trips, we found three children who had not eaten for three days. The experience brought tears to our eyes," explains Shaikh Menna, another science student. "When the Gujarati people knew

that we had come from Latur, they started cooking for us, told us that instead of cooking food for them, we should give them the raw material. This will feed the womenfolk

who didn't stop at their homes during the period of mourning," he adds. Swami Mahadev, another college student, recalls how people came to him seeking his

help to dig out their valuables from the house that had collapsed in the earthquake. "They were scared to do it themselves. So I went inside the broken house and retrieved whatever I could. I also brought out their dead cow and a calf."

Baliram Shinde, who lost his father in Osmambad recently, feels that helping the Gujarat quake victims was therapeutic for him. "I was shattered and did not know what to do. I decided to go to Bhachasa for relief work. The first scene that I saw was the head of a half-burnt body and got scared. Some people came to me for help to burn bodies of their relatives and somehow I started collecting wood... I don't know how many bodies I helped burn."

For Gautam Sontakke, the Gujarat experience was more gratifying because he helped save the life of a woman. "While in Bhachasa, I came across four children who were refusing to eat. I insisted that they ate something and started asking about their relatives. The children told me that their father was injured and was taken to a hospital while their mother was still buried under the rubble. I rushed to the army personnel who had reached the site and requested them to rescue their mother," he recalls.

Besides helping in relief and rescue in Bhachasa, the students also convinced the parents to send their children to school, built by the Bharatiya Jan Sanghastana. "We told them our experiences and narrated how going to school helped them in recovering. The parents listened because they felt that we shared this unique emotional tie... I know this move is going to help them," remarks Umakant Kulkarni.

RELIEF MISSION



These youths, who were rehabilitated at Wagholi, near Pune, in the aftermath of the Latur earthquake, lent a helping hand to the quake-affected victims in Gujarat recently.

Payback time: Latur earthquake rehabilitated students on a relief mission during the 2001 Gujarat earthquake

professors, village sarpanchs, and we try to use our knowledge and our areas of influence to improve the lives of others in the village. One of us, Ajit Jadhav from Holi taluka, who attended school with me in Pimpri, has won the Nirmal Gram Puraskar (cleanest village award) from the President of India, while others have gone on to establish their own businesses. ”



*“Bhau is a great believer in the all-round
development of children”*

ASHOK PAWAR

*Faculty, BJS Secondary and Higher School,
Wagholi*

“ *When the horrific earthquake destroyed Latur and the nearby places in 1993, I was a 19-year-old boy studying for my 2nd year Master of Science (M.Sc) in organic chemistry. Hours after I got the news of the event, I was back in my tiny village, Naichapur, to help my family and neighbours. What I saw was unbelievable. I was happy that we had not lost any lives in the earthquake, but within a matter of seconds Naichapur had gone from a sleepy hamlet of farmers to a mass of rubble. The village was completely destructed, and such was the level of our loss that the next day we could not even retrieve vessels to salvage drinking water for ourselves! With our homes flattened and nowhere to take shelter, we headed to the field and took refuge under trees so we could protect ourselves from the rain that lashed on us mercilessly. My own family, which was relatively well off – we could effortlessly host a feast for 200 people without any problem – became paupers, along with the rest of the village.*

In the days following the tragedy, I happened to be there at the meeting between the villagers and the volunteers of the BJS who wanted to take the traumatized quake-affected kids to Pune. To my astonishment, I was asked by the village elders to accompany the children to their new home. Without any thought about my own future, I agreed – at that moment the only thing on my mind was to make sure the children would be safe in Pune and would have a future if they could find good education. With just the clothes I had on my body, I got on the bus that was to carry the children to Pune. I never imagined that the journey would be the turning point of my life and that I would never look upon life as I had, till then.

When I came to Pune, my mind was clear that I would return to the village once I had settled the children in. I am glad I stayed on because if I had gone back I would possibly have become a researcher sitting in an office, doing average work, but nothing of consequence for anyone. Instead, I came in contact with Bhau, whose vision, generosity and commitment to his cause transformed my life.

Over the last two decades, I have felt myself change as a person into someone who is not looking at just his own personal development, but someone who wants to be part of the process of improving the lives of people around him. When I look at Bhau, I see a man who has everything in life, but still cares enough to have immersed himself in social work for the better part of his life. I also feel that having benefitted from the goodness of the community during my bad times, I should in my own way help others who find themselves in predicaments and misfortune.

As the children from Latur completed their education after a few years – nearly 350 children left within 3–4 years – Bhau decided we were now ready to utilize the premises for the benefit of other children. Around that time, the issue of malnourishment amidst the tribal children in Melghat was very much being discussed and so the BJS conducted a survey there to figure out the reality. To our astonishment, we realised that some 283 NGOs were already working there and we thought that it doesn't make sense if we work there as the 284th NGO. Instead, Bhau said our intervention should be the kind which will change their future. We zeroed in on Dharni tehsil, which had about 90 communities of tribals, and decided to help them.

It was a great learning experience. The tribals live cut off from the rest of the world because it rains almost six months every year; getting to their villages was a huge problem for us. Also, they were almost scared of coming into contact with the world and when they spotted our volunteers they would run away into the jungles. Eventually, we sought the help of Shevantatai Chavan who was running the Mahatma Gandhi Trust there, and we managed to reach the colonies with her help. When we did get there, we found them untouched by any signs of

FIRST PERSON

development. Their kids went to school where teachers attended once or twice a week, and so we decided it would help if we could shift their kids to our rehabilitation centre. It was one of the most difficult tasks for us to undertake. These tribals believed that if any of them walked across the boundaries of their communities they would die and so our work began with eradicating that superstition. We did this by organizing a procession of elephants with the kids perched on them. We told them that even if the superstition was true, it was the elephant which would die and not their kids. And when that did not happen, they were happy to let their kids go in search of a better future. But it had taken us almost six months for the entire process, from surveying the area to bringing the children to Pune.

At WERC, kids who fitted in grade 5–10 in their schools back home were woefully behind their new class. Back home the medium of education in school was Marathi, but they conversed at home in their native language, Korku, but spoke with the outside world in Hindi. The result was that they knew none of the languages well! Our volunteers sat with their teachers and prepared a Korku and Marathi dictionary. We translated different words of Marathi language in Korku, learnt a bit of the latter ourselves and slowly started getting them mainstreamed into the rest of the class. I still remember how committed the kids were. They sat up half the night most of the days till they had got the alphabets, spellings, and sentences right and would come beaming to class the next day.

The kids were physically very fit and soon they were competing and winning in National and State-level games and competitions. In games such as boxing and kabaddi, our children came home with trophies even from National Championships.

Bhau is a great believer in the all-round development of children and so we took the kids to elocution and singing competitions, and took pride when we saw them blossom in those fields too. The shy, under-developed children who came to the WERC were soon outgoing, social and sturdy kids who were confident enough to rub shoulders

with their peers in the city. Today it is a source of joy to the BJS that so many of these children have gone back to their villages where they are teachers and thought leaders.

Also, because they are from the Scheduled Tribe category, which has special reservation under current regulations, many of them get jobs with the government. Even today there is a huge backlog of vacant positions in government offices because it is difficult getting qualified people from certain categories with the result that these tribal youth from BJS got their jobs easily.

These youth are now transforming the way they live in their tribal communities. They bring awareness to these societies about the ills of alcohol and of the dangers of child marriages, and both of these are now reducing in their communities. The percentage of women having children at a very young age is now significantly reduced in the villages where BJS alumni are heads of villages or hold positions of influence. These young men also make sure that government aid and schemes meant for their development reaches their villages, unlike in the past when these were siphoned off or diverted by unscrupulous elements. The best part of this experiment has been that most of these youth have now taken 5–6 kids from their villages under their wings to mentor and educate. The ripple effect is what will eventually transform the face of these villages.

Till today, the BJS continues to get over 40 children from there and another 30 children from Thane's tribal belt, but today we no longer have to convince them of the merit of sending their children to our centre. In fact, word has spread about our work and the parents themselves are keen to send their children with us.

What has worked wonders is Bhau's idea that the children should not miss their home so much that they can't focus on their work. With this in mind, we make sure that there are always some teachers from the schools where the kids studied before coming here. The children should always have a mother figure with whom they can relate to and so WERC has female teachers too with whom the children form deep

FIRST PERSON

bonds, talking about their fears, insecurities, and sometimes sharing their dreams as well.

When I set out with the earthquake-affected children so many years ago, I never dreamt that I would be part of a process that changed the lives of so many thousands of people. Nor that some 350 of the kids that I accompanied from Latur would work selflessly for the relief and rehabilitation work that the BJS undertook during the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat's Kutch region. We worked with the affected children in Gujarat for six months and each stage, for all of us, was a process of repaying the kindness from strangers who had helped us during our darkest hours. ”



“I thank Bhau for inculcating an independent spirit and never-say-die attitude in me”

PRABHAKAR MORE

Coaching Class Owner

“ *When I left my earthquake-affected village along with my friends, I never thought that my life would bring me so far. For a boy from the village with almost no interest in studies, to a man who runs tutorials for almost 600 children, my life has taken many twists and turns. And I know none of this would have happened without Bhau’s generosity.*

When I came to Pimpri with the BJS, I was enrolled in the 11th grade, but I did not even know the alphabets properly and so I was taught all over again in the same grade! Miraculously, I and others like me were entrusted to teachers who were completely committed to us and kept us studying through the night so that we cleared our exams with good marks and were ready for the rest of our lives.

I decided to start my own coaching class. I began in a small way, and today I teach students from the 5th to the 12th grade. I have a team of 18 teachers who teach with me and sometimes, looking back, I can’t imagine it is the same unlettered boy who came to this city so many years ago.

My parents visit me occasionally in Pune, but they prefer to go back to the village where they feel at home. When I could fund their Kashi yatra (pilgrimage) a couple of years ago, it was a dream come true for them and a great sense of achievement for me. None of this would have been possible without Bhau’s vision in giving us good education. Sometimes, when I am on my own, my mind goes back to my beginnings and then I thank Bhau for inculcating an independent spirit and never-say-die attitude in me.

I have a dream that when I touch the 1,000-student mark at my tutorial, I will invite Bhau to a function so that he can bless me and see for himself how he has improved the destiny of a village boy.”

JABALPUR PROJECT



On May 22, 1997, a powerful earthquake—6.2 degrees on the Richter scale—ripped apart the city of Jabalpur in the central India state of Madhya Pradesh, and its outskirts, destroying over 25,000 homes in Jabalpur alone and claiming precious lives. While the loss of lives was very limited, the earthquake left 6,000 people homeless and wrecked some 2,739 villages across Jabalpur, Mandla, Chhindwara, and Seoni districts. Extensive damage to property and loss of their cattle left thousands of villagers without any prospects. With the rainy season around the corner, it was imperative that help reach the victims speedily.

BJS was one of the many NGOs who arrived in the disaster-struck region earliest, setting up rescue and relief operations, distributing medicines, food and other necessities to the victims. After a BJS team of Mahendra Surana, Dilip Gandhi, Prafulla Parakh, and Madanlal Jain visited some of the affected villages, I suggested that we attend to the children in the areas who were the most affected by the calamity. I had already witnessed the mental trauma that children went through in Latur and wanted to

save the children in Jabalpur from the pain. We decided that we would adopt some of the kids orphaned in the calamity and take them to Pune along with a few other kids who wanted to continue their education in Pune. As usual, BJS volunteers went from door to door, convincing families, and then sarpanchs and village elders about the merit in sending their children with us so that they could continue their education and be saved from the emotional scars of rebuilding their lives from scratch.

In July 1997, BJS volunteers arrived at our WERC facilities with 44 bright young children. The first challenge was to get the children, who studied in Hindi medium schools back home, admitted to a Hindi school so they could immediately re-start their education. Having found them admission at the SM Joshi Vidyalaya in Pune, the kids commuted there and back in a bus.

For reasons that seemed more cultural than anything else, the children could not cope with their new surroundings in Pune nor integrate with the other children at WERC. Even in school they were not able to find comfort with their classmates, and by the time the next academic year started their numbers had dwindled to a mere 19; they simply did not return after they went back to their villages. Next year that number fell to a dismal nine students and we realised that we had to discontinue that project after that particular academic year.

INSTANT SCHOOLING IN GUJARAT



Sometimes I think each one of us comes to this earth with a pre-ordained task that we will undertake, no matter whatever else takes up our time and attention. I can think of no other reason but destiny that a boy from a forgotten village in rural Maharashtra would reach a position where he can command the loyalty and friendship of so many sterling people in various parts of the country, who will gladly walk away from their everyday lives and come to me on just one phone call. There are so many of them who have done that, and but for them I could never have steered the work of saving so many lives, bringing succor to so many souls in distress, and given hope and a future to so many thousands of children.

On January 26, 2001, when the country was celebrating its 52nd Republic Day, fate played a cruel trick on the people of Gujarat when an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale ripped open the bowels of the earth in the northern provinces of the state. When the first reports of the death and devastation started trickling in, I called an emergency meeting of BJS volunteers

and called key people in other parts of the country with just one message: “We have to make it to Gujarat at the earliest because our experience with handling disasters has taught us that a lot of lives can be saved if rescue and relief operations reach the disaster site speedily.” It was sad to hear about 200 children who had been killed during the *prabhat pheri* (early morning rounds) at Anjar. When I got there, I realised the magnitude of the tragedy and decided the only way I could keep up the morale of my team was to stay there in their midst. We put up a huge tent where I stayed for what seemed like endless days and nights when we worked round the clock to alleviate the condition of those who were spared by the disaster, but had been left with nothing to stay alive for. How could I stay elsewhere but with my volunteers? There were hundreds of volunteers who arrived there gladly and were happy to work their bones off, and come back to share the tent with me and recount their day’s experiences.



Current National President and the then National Secretary, BJS, Prafulla Parakh, with Shri Anna Hazare at the relief camp.

DISASTER RESPONSE & MANAGEMENT



Relief supplies for the earthquake-affected being loaded into trucks.



Relief supplies for the earthquake-affected.



Shantilal Muttha with Mr Sharad Pawar, Vice Chairman of the National Disaster Task Force of Government of India, and Mr Sureshdada Jain, the then MLA from Jalgaon.



Medical relief being provided by the BJS volunteers.

Over a 1,000 BJS volunteers from across Maharashtra worked in a total of 12 talukas and 3 districts, including Bachau, Bhuj, Rajkot, Malia, and Morvi in the aftermath of the earthquake in Gujarat. They did everything from cooking meals for 30,000 people every day to helping aid agencies protect the trucks full of supplies, including food and clothes that arrived for them. In the midst of all the chaos, we realized that the supplies meant for the victims were being robbed by marauders who had arrived there, and soon we were helping the government and NGOs to unload the trucks, and also helping them load the stuff into smaller tempos and delivering them to the victims in the smallest villages in the disaster-hit zone.

We took turns, working in various parts of Kutch for six months so that we could give back their lives to thousands of unfortunates who had lost everything in the disaster. We received the whole-hearted support of the then MLA



With close friend and then Union Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs, Mr Sunil Dutt, at the relief camp.

from Jalgaon, Shri Sureshdada Jain, and the Jalgaon-Khandesh Earthquake Rehabilitation Trust in this endeavour. We were witness to the saddest stories—in one village a group of relatives who had come for the final rites of their entire family who had been killed in the quake met the same fate, when an after-quake brought the remaining part of their family home crashing down on them! We saw the aged and the young bereft with grief and

paralyzed with hopelessness from the magnitude of the event that had happened in their lives, but we also saw how a helping hand and a generous heart can change lives of those who had given up hope.

Along the way, we fashioned a basic ration card for the survivor families so that they could get the supplies that were meant for them. Every time they got supplies, the government or NGO officials recorded that on the ration card so that greed did not make anyone grab more than what they were eligible for, nor could anybody rob them of their portion of supplies. BJS volunteers also scouted and found two functional hospitals near Rajkot, owned by the Ajmera group of Mumbai, and soon made sure that a steady stream of doctors, nurses and volunteers attended to the needy in these hospitals.

When we realised the extent of damage to schools in the region, we knew that the kids would be deprived of education for a long time. We decided that we would do our bit to make sure that the kids in the devastated areas had to go back to school at the earliest.

When I decided that the BJS would take up the task of rebuilding schools in the earthquake-devastated areas of Gujarat, I was very clear that I wanted those structures to be earthquake and cyclone-resistant. Our team immediately started collecting information about building such structures. According to our information, we would need to build 1,468 classrooms that would house 1,32,339 students from 414 primary and secondary schools.

Looking at the huge number of victimized children, it was next to impossible for the BJS to get them to WERC, Pune. Hence the BJS was instead deeply inclined towards building as many schools as possible in Gujarat itself; semi-permanent structures so that the construction could be completed speedily and it would also be easy to dismantle and recycle them for future use in any other disaster.

With this goal in mind, we decided to reach out for donors for rebuilding the schools. For Rs. 1 lakh for each classroom, the

donors could have their name on the school and also inaugurate it themselves.

BJS trustee, Bhawarlal Jain, got down to designing the schools: single-storied pre-fabricated structures with concrete plinth, lightweight walls, and polycarbonate sheets for roofing, designed to last at least 40–50 years.

With this strategy, when the first school began functioning on the 13th day after the tragedy, 500 children turned up for class and it seemed like a reiteration of our belief that children need meaningful activity to keep them occupied.

The children from the earthquake-struck region were tired and fatigued from chasing trucks that came with food and supplies and were ready to pick up the broken threads of their lives. We were overwhelmed by how many people came forward to donate. Many, including the relief funds from newspapers such as *Lokmat*, *Sakal*, and *Samna*, directed their aid for the Gujarat earthquake through the BJS.

Mr Sharad Pawar toured the region more than a couple of times, and was so impressed with the work carried out by the BJS



School reconstruction by BJS: Within 90 days, 368 such structures were erected with a total of 1,004 teaching rooms.

that he got the construction of a few schools funded through the Garware Club. It was a dream come true for all of us when 1,20,000 children went back to their studies because we could rebuild 368 schools in mere 90 days.

The then Education Minister and now Chief Minister of Gujarat, Smt. Anandiben Patel, who was touring the area, was so impressed with our concept of the pre-fab schools that she spent a lot of time with us in our ramshackle tent, wanting to know more about our project. By the time she left, she had admitted that the decision to close the schools for six months and to promote the children to the next class could have been a mistake and said she would reverse the decision.

All the 368 semi-permanent school structures were handed over to the Gujarat government at the hands of the then Prime Minister, Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee, and Shri L.K. Advaniji in Bhuj.

Even as the schools were being set up, I insisted that local authorities sign consent forms that would allow the BJS to reclaim



Schooling resumed within 13 days of the earthquake.

10 THE SUNDAY TIMES OF INDIA, APRIL 15, 2001

POLITICALLY INCORRECT

SHOBHA DE

Citizen Shantilal

SHANTILAL Mutha isn't on anybody's A-list — at least, not in our metros. Page Three ignores the man completely, mainly because Page Three is not aware of his existence. Which may be why Shantilal Mutha was not present at Bill Clinton's banquets in either Mumbai or Delhi. Bill Clinton, therefore didn't pump his hand and draw: "Let's do a picture together."

And Shantilal Mutha didn't have to push past Raveena Tandon, or Hrithik Roshan to get into the frame. Bill Clinton's minders didn't think of including Shantilal Mutha's name on their Mission Gujarat junket. They preferred movie stars and rent-a-cause socialites. Which automatically means that Shantilal**hai** didn't get to board their chartered plane. Or have Billy-boy tell him, "I feel your pain", through an interpreter.

Social service organisations that meet at swanky five-star venues did not invite Shantilal to address their members (between soup and the main course). It could be because Shantilal**hai** does not have a readymade road show on Gujarat's tragedy. A road show so slickly put together, that audiences forget the earthquake and ask the name of the ad agency that's put it together.

Shantilal**hai** hasn't done the NRI circuit asking richie rich overseas *desis* for money over glamorous fund-raisers. Neither has he approached retired movie stars to help pump up the cause. People may have advised Shantilal**hai** to stage a grand fashion show and give a piddly amount to the earthquake relief. Chances are, fashion designers wouldn't have taken the man's calls — remember, he's just Shantilal**hai** from Gujarat and not a ravishing Water Baby. Or the American ambassador's wife.

This man hasn't organised an art auction for Gujarat, for pretty much the same reasons. Manjit Bawa wouldn't play the dhol for him. Nor would connoisseurs show up in fine clothes to bid absurd

amounts for a favourite Laloo Prasad show. Auction houses haven't bothered with Shantilal**hai** so far — what's the point in conducting an event minus hi-voltage glamour and publicity?

Shantilal**hai** hasn't had to cancel any cocktail parties (and issue a press release about the cancellation), mainly because he doesn't throw parties (with or without cocktails) or attend them. He hasn't had to wipe away his tears at conveniently staged photo-ops (perfectly pitched, beautifully handled by canny PR agents). Nor has he convened round table discussions with high-profile do-gooders to "find long-term solutions" to the crisis in Gujarat. Why bother? When the people involved have such short-term memories?

Shantilal**hai** hasn't announced grandiose plans stating he has adopted this village or that village. Or taken over this programme or that programme. Or given so many crores and distributed so many blankets.

Poor Shantilal**hai**. The reason he hasn't done any of the things listed above, is because he simply hasn't found the time. He has been far too busy. Busy feeding 25,000 people a day. Busy putting up 600 schools. Busy making sure there are enough rations, enough water, enough blankets for the needy. Busy busy, busy. Working night and day with volunteers from the Akhil Bharatiya Jain Sanghatna. He doesn't know he's supposed to pose for photographs with out-of-job presidents. Or dance with film-stars. Or participate in auctions. Or stage cultural extravaganzas. Or flog paintings. Or host fashion shows. Or participate in talk shows. Or attend charity polo/ golf/ tennis/ cricket matches. Or organise premieres. Or do anything other than what he does so well — look after the needy. People call Shantilal**hai** a fool for not capitalising on his good work. They said that even after Latur. He was there then. And he's here now. Working tirelessly. Because he wants to. Because he has to. And sorry folks, Shantilal Mutha really and truly does not have the time of day for Bill Clinton. You can have the ex-prez Raveena Tandon.

Well-known writer Shobhaa De's column in The Sunday Times talks about Shantilal Mutha's selfless activities.



June 3, 2001: *The then Prime Minister, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, dedicated 368 schools to the public.*

the collapsible structures for other purposes, once their original schools were reconstructed by the government. I wanted to make sure that we would be in a position to quickly provide temporary shelters to those affected by disasters of any kind in the future, anywhere in the country.

My vision about this proved very useful when we could use the very same classrooms to provide shelter to large numbers of people when a massive earthquake brought devastation to the J&K valley, in 2005.

REBUILDING LIVES ON THE ISLANDS



On 26 December 2004, the coasts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were devastated by a 10-metre high tsunami that took more than 2,000 lives and orphaned 4,000 children. The tsunami inflicted massive damage in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Pondicherry too.

When I heard of the death and destruction in the region, I was in a dilemma. On the one hand we were faced with the huge tragedy, the loss of so many thousands of lives and the destruction of property and livelihoods, while on the other hand we knew that these were unfamiliar, distant places where we had almost no presence. With so many odds against us it was unlikely that we could do much to help, but I got in touch with the Jain community there to figure out what activities the community was doing there. When I realised that as many hands as possible would be needed to bring life back to some normalcy in those regions, the BJS despatched a team to Tamil Nadu to get a grip on the situation. Later, I too went there and toured the area. I returned shaken by the magnitude of the calamity and awed by the amount of

humanitarian work that was already being undertaken by the Jain community in the region. What troubled me was that it was being delivered by different groups of Jains, but since they were warring groups of the community no one knew what work the other group was doing. I immediately got the entire work documented in the form of a booklet so that the public would become aware of the extent of work that was being done there.



At the disaster site on the Tamil Nadu coastline.

When I appealed to them, however, they agreed to unite and work together. We put up camps where we provided relief and rehabilitation in the form of food, medicine, and shelter to people who had been hit by the calamity. When I saw the situation in Tamil Nadu, I wanted to put up an educational rehabilitation project along the lines of the one we had set up at Wagholi. My very old friends Kailash Dugad, Gautam Vaid, Gautam Surana and others steered the work, and soon we got a prime piece of land that belonged to the community earmarked for the project. I did not know then, but that project was never to be.

Back from Chennai, I appealed to Mr Sharad Pawar to approach Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister, Ms. Jayalithaa, to give the BJS the necessary clearances for the project so that we could start off at the earliest. Mr. Pawar moved quickly and not only set up a meeting with her, but also attended it with me. I explained to Ms. Jayalithaa the scope of work we proposed to undertake and was sorely disappointed when the government declined us the necessary permission for the educational rehabilitation project! Outraged, I filed a writ petition in court challenging the government's decision, but eventually realised it would be a time-consuming process and decided to focus on taking our resources where people needed help.

Mr Pawar, who already knew my ability to get work done on a large scale, then decided to use the BJS' resourcefulness in Andaman & Nicobar, which was far away, but desperately in need of rehabilitation projects after the tsunami. Then, as it is today too, Andaman & Nicobar remains a region that is so removed from our memory that many still don't know if it is a part of our country. Mr. Pawar took me to Andaman & Nicobar to introduce me to the then Lieutenant Governor of the Union Territory, Prof. Ram Kapse. The Lt. Governor immediately realised the value of what we were offering and requested us to undertake the task of rebuilding the schools, and the primary and sub-primary health centres that had been wrecked by the force of the tsunami.

When we undertook that work, we never realised what a challenging one it would turn out to be. We started off by committing to build 20 schools and all the primary health centres and sub-centres in Nicobar Islands, but ended up with the BJS team devoting three years of their life in the union territory.

We had no idea, till we actually got down to work, how difficult it would be undertaking reconstruction work in such a complex geography. Port Blair, the capital city and the 37 islands that make up the Union Territory is a complex maze with some of the islands



Children entering the newly reconstructed school in the Andaman & Nicobar islands.



Newly reconstructed Primary Health Sub-Centre by BJS in A&N.



Hon. Governor of Tamil Nadu, Mr Surjit Singh Barnala, handing over the Primary Health Sub-Centres reconstructed by BJS to Dr N. Sadasivan, Director-Health Services, A&N on 8th October 2005 at Chennai. Also present at the function was Ms Ann Maxwell, Partnership and Outreach Officer, Office of the Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, UN and Chief of Staff, Direct Relief International.

requiring special government permits for a visit because they are home to ancient and dwindling tribes.

In many places the boats could not go since many jetties had been destroyed and sometimes it took 8 days to get to some of the islands. Travelling to Nicobar needed special permits. The Adivasi communities had to give permissions for outsiders to arrive there. Transporting construction material for the public health centres was a big challenge. They had to be transported from Hyderabad to Vishakapatnam or Chennai, and from there to Port Blair. The consignments remained there for a few days for sorting and were then sent to various islands; sometimes the equipment had to be loaded and unloaded repeatedly at various points before it got to the final destination.

It took 18 months of hard work, a lot of strategic thinking and planning, and great human resources management skills to make sure the project got completed as per our vision. By the time it was over we had built 11 school buildings, 34 primary health centres and sub-centres, managed to get two ambulances and huge amounts of medicines, worth over Rs. 10 crores, to the community. It took a lot out of us, but our goodwill, earned with our work in other parts of the country, got us the unconditional support of a lot of people. Money for our work came in from the Sakal Relief Fund and Garware Club, which helped set up schools there. The head of Karnataka's Dharamasthal temple, Virendraji Hegde, contacted us so that we could build a school there on their behalf and soon a lot of individuals came forward to help us build schools which were then named after them. When the locals saw the quality of our work and our commitment towards rehabilitating their children's education and health facilities, they co-operated to the fullest. Our work in the union territory remains one of the most challenging but fulfilling ones that we have undertaken.

I was well aware of the sheer scope and magnitude of this project and realized that it would be a Herculean challenge to bring this project to fruition. I needed someone who could efficiently manage the execution of this project, which is when I identified Mr. Prafulla Parakh, who was then an office-bearer of the BJS located in Nagpur, as the man who I deemed fit to lead this project from Andaman. I requested him to relocate to A&N for an entire year to oversee the execution of the project. He agreed, and it was under his leadership that the BJS team could successfully complete the A&N project. Mr. Parakh eventually shifted to Pune and has been the CEO of BJS since 2007.

SAVING LIVES IN THE VALLEY



Just months before the Kashmir earthquake occurred in 2005, the government had set up the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), of which the Prime Minister was the Chairman, while General NC Vij was the Vice Chairman. Vinod Menon, who worked closely with me and the BJS during our stint at Andamans and the Latur earthquake, was a founder member of that body. He called on 8th October to say the NDMA wanted to meet me in Delhi. I had got information of the J&K earthquake while I was at an event to hand over the schools and hospitals that BJS had built in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Surjeetsingh Barnala, the then Governor of Tamil Nadu was with me on the dais when there was a telephone call about the Kashmir earthquake.

I flew straight away to the NDMA office where all the members were present. It was already cold in Kashmir in October and all of them expressed concern that the valley would be cut off when snow started falling in December. They feared that more people would die of exposure to the cold than the 10,000 that had already died in the earthquake. Therefore, it was imperative that we put up

temporary housing for the earthquake-affected on a war footing. From the NDMA office they took me to the office of the then Home Minister, Mr. Shivraj Patil, insisting that I had to get across the urgency of the situation to him and give the NDMA a solution to the problem.



In a meeting with NDMA officials, Gen Vij, and BJS representatives, the then Home Minister, Mr Shivraj Patil, assuring government support.

At Mr. Patil's office it struck me that we could use the semi-permanent school rooms that we had built after the quake in Gujarat as homes for the victims of the Kashmir disaster. New schools had been built by the government of Gujarat, and since I had already got written agreements from the sarpanchs of the villages that I would be able to claim the construction material after they got their *pucca* (permanent) schools, it would not be difficult to dismantle and use them. I got immediate sanction from the NDMA for shifting the existing material used for the Gujarat schools, but I said I had a few conditions if I were to help them.

Long years of dealing with people has taught me that it is

best to keep things clear right at the beginning so that there are no misunderstandings later. I said I wanted a team of engineers from J&K to visit the schools in Gujarat to certify their usability, and I wanted 5-6 special trains that would get the school rooms to Jammu within the month. The state would have to give me the labour for the erection of the structures, while I would give them the expertise and the supervisory staff.

I insisted that I wanted a meeting with the then Chief Minister of the state, Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad, and he agreed to all my conditions as soon as he heard me out. He immediately called Mr Lalu Prasad Yadav, who was then Railway Minister, to provide me the trains, and a team from J&K visited Gujarat where they found the schools to be in good condition and suitable for being recycled. Within the month the schools in Gujarat were dismantled, shifted



The then Chief Minister of J&K, Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad, with Shantilal Muttha and Prafulla Parakh at a media briefing.

Blessed to Serve



The material was coded, dismantled, and transported from Gandhidham, Gujarat to Jammu in three trains.



BJS volunteers flagging off the goods train to Jammu.



Reconstructed shelters by BJS in the Valley for more than 15,000 people, protecting them from the harsh winter.

in trains to Jammu, from where a cavalcade of 200 trucks took them to the disaster-affected places. It was an unforgettable sight to see those trucks inch forward slowly amidst the rubble that had been left behind in place of roads. If our people had not been able to erect those homes in those remote places, the aftermath of the earthquake in Kashmir would have been much worse than the earthquake itself. So many hundreds of people used those school rooms as their homes during the biting cold of that terrible winter in 2005.

I was given the status of a state guest during that time in J&K, and a helicopter was at my disposal to visit the sites where the personnel from the PWD of J&K worked with the rehab project. I saw with my own eyes the devastation on both our side of the border and across the border in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, and it brought tears to my eyes. Human beings truly are insignificant,



Dec 10, 2005: *A fleet of buses carrying 500 students was flagged off from Srinagar by Ms Sonia Gandhi in the presence of Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad.* who can do little when nature decides to unleash her fury.

The proposal to bring the children from Kashmir to Pune came during a discussion with Mr. Gulam Nabi Azad and we looked at it as another opportunity to give the children a better future. After a series of meetings with the local authorities, we realized that it was next to impossible to put up makeshift schools for the kids since it would take a long time for the process. The earthquakes had wrought so much damage over a period of three weeks that there were no roads, no infrastructure, and the morale of the victims was totally destroyed. In addition, people living in high altitude locations would be exposed to the severe winter that was advancing fast, and we simply could not divert our makeshift rooms for schools when people's lives were at stake.

After much discussion we decided that the kids, 500 of them, would come back to Pune where they would attend school at WERC. This time though, we decided to let the kids follow their



The students of J&K after being brought to WERC, Pune.

own curriculum, and also decided we would take a few of their school teachers along so that the process of teaching them in their language was seamless. Once in WERC, the kids settled back into school, attending their classes, taking moral and value education classes, attending counseling sessions to deal with the trauma of the earthquake, and making friends with the other children who lived and studied at WERC.

But the seemingly perfect picture cracked when the kids went back to Kashmir for their annual exams there and summer break. Much to our astonishment and disappointment, a group of people/local NGOs moved the court, challenging the kids' stay with us in Pune. They were against these children being so far away from their location, and once the High Court ruled in their favour we had no choice but to discontinue the rehabilitation process of the children.

For me, the takeaway from the entire incident, however, was that no matter what the adults did or thought, the kids themselves

kept in touch with their friends back at WERC, writing letters to them and forging ties that cut across age, social status, and religious divisions.

The schools that were homes to the victims are still standing in the area, a reminder to the time when a group of people from Maharashtra took on a humanitarian task in faraway Kashmir.

RAJEEV GANDHI FOUNDATION



In the aftermath of the Latur earthquake, there was huge coverage on the thousands of children who had been orphaned in the calamity. The Rajeev Gandhi Foundation, set up by his widow and Congress party leader, Smt. Sonia Gandhi, was keen to adopt a few children from the villages so that they could take care of their future. When K.S. Siddhu, the state's then Earthquake Commissioner got word from the Foundation, he wrote back to them saying that the orphaned children had been adopted by the BJS and that they were now studying in Pune. I was pleasantly surprised when a team from the Foundation contacted us soon thereafter and arrived in Pune to spend time at the Pimpri hostel and school, and video record a day in the lives of the children. When they left, the team congratulated me on the work that I had chosen for myself. Almost immediately after that I got a call one day from Sonijaji's secretary, Mr. Vincent George, saying she was keen to meet me and my wife and wondering if I could go to Delhi and meet her.

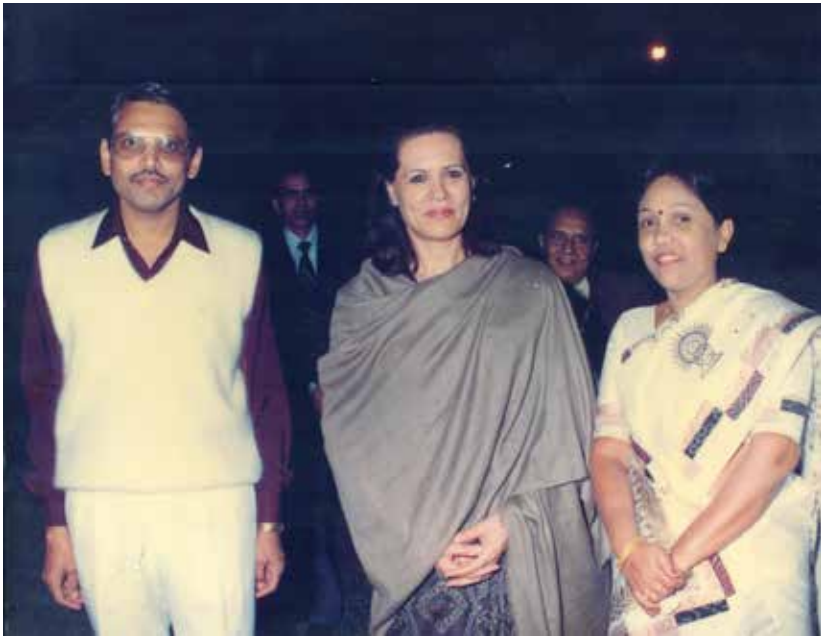
I was delighted and intrigued too. What would such a lady of

influence want of an ordinary citizen of this country? I decided to go, of course, and because I was to go with Sarla, we decided we would take a short holiday in Darjeeling before heading to Delhi. That meeting was never meant to be, because days after we landed in Darjeeling I had a fall and fractured my leg, with the result that we had to rush back to Pune where my good friend, Dr. Sancheti, treated my poor leg. I told you, people come into our lives for a special reason!

Mrs. Gandhi's office called again to say she still wanted to meet me, once I was on my feet. Months after that we did meet Mrs. Gandhi at 10 Janpath, and she spent 45 minutes with us understanding the scope of our work and showing a deep interest in BJS and my work with disasters and children. At the end of our meeting, I was touched when she said she was interested in funding the education and stay of 75 children in our hostel and kept her word for many years. Even though I have been against taking money for my work, I said yes because I did not know how to reject an offer from a woman of her stature. She said the Foundation's chief, Mr. Pulok Chatterji, would be in touch with me.

The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation's association with us continued for many years after that. When the issue of malnutrition amongst the tribal children in Melghat hit the media, Mr. Chatterji contacted me when Soniaji wanted to visit the place to take a personal survey. He later called me to discuss what could be done for the rehabilitation of the children. The BJS was already working in this space and I gave him my opinion on how we could address the problem in a comprehensive and integrated manner.

In 1995, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation held a three-day conclave at the Tata Institute in Pune where the team was to discuss what the Foundation's agenda for the next few years was to be. I received an invitation to attend the event on all three days, and in the evenings Sarla and I attended the dinners. I was one of the only three people from Maharashtra, along with (late) Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh and



Shantilal Muttha and wife Sarla with Ms Sonia Gandhi at Raj Bhavan in Pune for the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation meet.

Mr Suresh Kalmadi, both political heavyweights, who were at that conference. Each night, at dinner, she personally introduced Sarla and me to the other guests and spoke about the work that our organisation, the BJS, was doing. Congress party leaders, Ms. Sheila Dixit, Ms. Ambika Soni, Mr. Natwar Singh, and others were part of her entourage during the event. The few meetings with her made us realise what a humble and simple person she is.

My association with her continued even if we were not in regular touch. When the earthquake happened in Kashmir and the BJS went there to help in the rehabilitation process, our paths crossed again. When the proposal came from the then Chief Minister, Mr. Azad, that we were to take the affected children to Pune, he was keen that the event be flagged off by Mrs. Gandhi. On 9th December 2005, also her birthday, an emotional Mrs. Gandhi flagged off the

bus that carried the children from Srinagar to Jammu, from where they travelled by a train to Pune. Every time I have met her, I have been impressed by her keen interest and sensitivity towards the plight of women, children, and the disabled in our country.

PRECIOUS LESSONS



One of the biggest learnings from my personal journey has been that often our best-laid plans go up in smoke. Things don't always work out the way we want them to or as we visualized, and I have learnt to not dwell on setbacks but to move ahead, regardless.

With our vast experience in rescue and rehabilitation during the horrific Latur earthquake, and having successfully rehabilitated over a 1,000 children from that area far away in Pune, I had thought that the model could be replicated seamlessly with kids from other states. My experiences with the children from Jabalpur taught me otherwise and it remains a lesson well learnt.

From the Jabalpur incident we learnt precious lessons and made a policy decision that in the future we would make sure that students who came into the WERC from other states would be taught by their own teacher, in their own language, and follow the syllabus that they had in their home state. While they could have the comfort of a secure and peaceful place to live, they would go back to their state to attend their examinations. We applied it when



Alumni pledge: WERC alumni meet after 20 years of the Latur tragedy

we had to bring students from the J&K valley after the earthquake there.

Many times I am asked why I chose to displace children in the disaster-struck areas and bring them away to Pune when popular opinion in this connection says it is unwise to remove children away from their natural and familiar surroundings. I chose to do this because I had seen the devastation in those places and I was convinced that seeing the scenes of destruction around them on an everyday basis would traumatize the children and keep them away from achieving any normalcy in their lives.

When I look at the young men who came and grew up at the WERC and see the progress they have made in their lives, I am more than convinced I was right in bringing them away from the horror of the disasters that they had witnessed.

Blessed to Serve



"We are here to do what is impossible"

ASHOK PAWAR

*Faculty, BJS Secondary and Higher School,
Wagholi*

“ *One of the things about Bhau that I find completely inspiring is the fact that the word ‘impossible’ does not exist in his lexicon. Faced with the most challenging circumstances, he will never walk away from it, but will instead focus on finding innovative solutions for it. When the J&K earthquake occurred in 2005 and the NDMA reached out to the BJS for help in relief work, Bhau said we would provide the temporary school rooms that had been set up by us in the aftermath of the Gujarat earthquake. Thousands of people in the remotest regions of the state had been rendered homeless, and with winter round the corner the fatalities would be much higher if we were not able to set up the homes as soon as possible.*

Speedy dismantling and loading of the shelters onto specially allocated wagon trains was crucial and I was entrusted with the job. On the 29th of October, we started the dismantling, but it was like working with our hands tied behind us because November 1–6 was Diwali and there was no labour available to help us in the back-breaking work. We had 30 wagons full of material to send to J&K; each wagon could take 8 truck-loads of stuff and I had no clue how we were going to do it. Dismantling the rooms, loading it in trucks, getting it to the railway station and loading it onto wagons was not an easy job with just 40 young people from the BJS to help me. The night before the wagons were supposed to leave for J&K, I was so frustrated and tired, I simply gave up. There was one more wagon to be filled and I and my team simply did not have the energy. We went off to sleep, but in the middle of the night Bhau called to check on the progress, and to my chagrin, when I told him I had not loaded the 30th wagon, he simply disconnected the line. I was devastated. In the years that

I have known him, he had never cut the line on me and I was not ready to let that happen. I woke up my team, went back to the villages, loaded all the trucks in the night, and reached the railway station at 8 a.m. There was a bigger shock awaiting me there because there were no labourers to help me load the wagon. I called Bhau, who was happy we had reached the station with all the material. He promptly spoke to the Gujarat Builders Association, and in half an hour 70 labourers reached the railway platform to help us load the wagon, despite the fact that it was the 4th day of Diwali. The train left for Jammu at 11 a.m. in the morning, as scheduled.

Bhau's constant refrain to us is: "We are here to do what is impossible." That day I realised what he meant when he kept dinning into us that becoming independent and doing things on your own gives an altogether different kind of happiness.

That thought kept us moving ahead inch by inch when we later reached Jammu, to supervise the setting up of the shelters. The earthquake and heavy snow had resulted in roads sinking in the sludge or being completely destroyed. Not a single truck with the shelters had managed to reach the disaster site when we reached Jammu, but Bhau said we had to make sure they reached the place before severe weather conditions killed more people. The BJS truck was the first to reach the remote Kandahar region and we had put our lives at great risk in doing so. All along the route militants are very active and we expected to be targeted by them. We reached the disaster-hit region eventually and helped the government contractors to put up the temporary rooms that were to be home to 10,000 people who had been rendered homeless by the tragedy.

It was not without reason that the then Home Minister, Mr. Shivraj Patil, appreciated our work in a Parliament session, saying our efforts had helped save so many lives in J&K. ”

CHALLENGING & DEEP ENGAGEMENTS



When unprecedented floods swept through the eastern India state of Bihar in August 2008 due to a breach in the Kosi river embankment, it caused death, destruction, and displacement on a scale that was much larger than that was caused by the deadly tsunami of 2004. Millions of people in India's most populous state were left homeless, with everything they had swept away by the raging waters of the Kosi river. The BJS volunteers were some of the first to reach the devastated areas and used their previous experience with handling disaster situations to provide relief. In addition to providing food packets, clothes and medicines, volunteers went that extra length, assisting some 25,000 people stranded in some 20 villages to move to safer places, away from the swirling menace of the water. The incessant rains that lashed the state made it difficult to get relief across to many places as vital bridges were swept away by the floods.

BJS volunteers set up a Help Centre near the Nepal border to distribute relief material to thousands of people and also set up kitchens that provided fresh food to them. Later, they sent out an

Blessed to Serve



Large number of people were forced to take refuge on embankments, highways or rooftops to escape the floods.



Ambulance donated by the Keshargulab Munot Trust to BJS for providing ambulatory medical care.



Responding instantly to the call of flood victims, BJS volunteers reached the most difficult-to-reach areas as fast as possible.



Every boat reaching the 20,000-odd villagers in Kusava brought hope in the form of food and essentials.



Distribution of supplies by BJS in collaboration with Sakal Relief Fund, Pune.



BJS volunteer Ashok Pawar explaining the BJS report on Bihar Floods to the Chief Minister, Mr Nitish Kumar.

appeal for clothes and other relief material and soon distributed kits containing clothes, candles, snacks, and other things that would help families to slowly start their life, all over again. Simultaneously, they arranged for ambulances, doctors and medical support staff, and had a mobile hospital traveling across the affected areas, providing help to those who needed medical attention. Each day, some 1,000 people availed of the services provided at a medical camp that the volunteers set up in September 2008. Such was the demand for the camp that it continued to be in operation till February 2009.

Our work in the Bihar floods was one of the most challenging assignments and one of our deepest engagements with a disaster situation.

LONG-TERM RELIEF FOR KONKAN



Between July 2005 to 2008, and sporadically since then, large parts of Maharashtra witnessed huge loss of life, limb and property due to incessant rains and the resultant flooding. The fury of the flooding was especially felt in the Konkan belt where the effect was much more than in other parts of the state. Thousands of people lost their crops and livelihood in the deluge. BJS volunteers used their experience from other disaster areas to rescue stranded people and rehabilitate them, providing them the household necessities that helped them put their lives together after the tragedy and put them back on their feet by assisting them in getting their livelihoods back. As in other times, they were helped in their work by organisations such as the *Sakal* media group who diverted the donations that they collected through the Sakal Relief Fund to the BJS so that aid reached the disaster-affected on time.

After a few years of helping out by sending our volunteers during the floods at Konkan, I began to think that instead of doing this the BJS could actually help by finding the reason why floods were recurring in the region. I wanted to find out a solution so that



Distribution of supplies by BJS in collaboration with Sakal Relief Fund, Pune.

we could put an end to the annual misery of the people. After a lot of scouting, I tracked down an expert in this field, Dr. P. Basak, who lived in Kolkata. After much convincing, Dr. Basak agreed to lead a study on the phenomenon of flooding in the region and in 2007 we took up the mission, with teams of people working under him in various parts of Konkan. A couple of years later, Dr. Basak was ready with a disaster mitigation plan for the region, and the BJS set up a committee that included luminaries such as former Chief Secretary, Mr. D.N. Sukhtankar, to deliberate on that plan. A few months later, the committee had finalized the report and we handed it over to the minister in whose constituency the flood-prone areas lay.

Unfortunately for the people of that region, the government is yet to act on any of the findings and recommendations of our report. It is our hope that some day someone will realise the significance of our plan and act upon it so that there will be some remedial action that will bring to an end the needless loss of life and property in the Konkan region.

CATTLE CARE



In 2013, Maharashtra faced one of the worst droughts in the last 40 years, affecting nearly 12,000 villages in 16 districts. Water levels in big dams dropped down to less than 7 per cent in the worst-hit region of Marathwada by April, and majority of the lakes, wells, and local water bodies had gone dry. About 2 crore people and over 10 lakh animals faced the wrath of drought.

Faced with large-scale loss of crop and the resultant loss of income, thousands of villagers migrated to cities in search of employment. In the villages, the arrival of water tankers saw fights break out among the villagers as they competed for a bucket of water for the household. For many of the villagers the trauma was compounded as they had to see their beloved cattle drop dead due to lack of fodder and water. The farmer and his family could do little but wring their hands in helplessness as they themselves waited, anxiously scanning the horizon for a sight of the water tanker which would help them pull along for another couple of days.

While government machinery swung into action as the

situation worsened, BJS decided it was our duty to do something to lessen the misery of the people in the region.

In early January and February 2013, as news of the horrific drought situation in Maharashtra started filtering in, I decided to visit Beed district where the situation was grim. Meeting several local administrative officers as I toured the region to monitor the progress of our education initiatives, I got a close look at the ground realities of the drought and immediately started chalking out an action plan to address the issue.

I had seen during the tour that almost all the water bodies, lakes, rivers, and dams that provide water to the village communities had run dry. I decided to tackle the situation from two angles. Large numbers of cattle were dropping dead in these regions and it was a heart-rending sight. After meeting several leaders, including Mr. Sharad Pawar, who advised me to focus on getting shelters for the animals ready on a war footing, I decided it was time for the BJS to get down to work.

Immediately after this conversation, I convened a meeting of the managements of around 350 animal shelters run by the Jain community in various parts of the state. Realising that the management of such shelters required a lot of technical knowledge, the BJS reached out to the experts in the field, including professors of agriculture colleges, NGOs, and government departments such as animal husbandry. BJS volunteers then went through a one-day training programme to handle cattle, and armed with a ready-reference booklet that we prepared on the subject, they spread out to take on the task of running animal shelters in various drought-hit villages.

In March, I summoned a meeting of all my volunteers in Marathwada so that I could start the project. We decided to build at least 30 cattle shelters in Aurangabad, Jalna, Beed, Latur, Solapur, Osmanabad, and Pune. And because it was all pre-planned and our staff was trained in advance, we were able to take care of 10,000

cattle without any problems; I did not have to visit a single shelter to tackle an emergency. It is a sad situation that in a drought situation farmers are forced to sell off cattle, who are actually like their family members and helps them earn their livelihood. Putting up the shelters on time helped avert this situation.

It was a challenging task that called for detailed planning and supervised execution and for this the BJS called on its state, district, and village-level volunteers who remained involved in the project for almost four months, working selflessly in conditions that were far from pleasant. We were helped a lot by the Promoters and Builders Association of Pune/CREDAI, Maharashtra in this mission.



Cattle shelters erected by BJS with the help of CREDAI.

We had to make sure that the camps came up in locations that were accessible, such as near main roads or central locations in the village, and also near water sources so that the villagers could bring their animals there with ease.

Even before the cattle were in, we had already started working on procuring the huge amount of fodder we would need to feed



Cattle shelters erected by BJS with the help of CREDAI.

the animals. It was a huge task, especially because the drought conditions in the region meant we had to look for fodder in far-flung areas. We finally procured 1,500 metric tonnes of fodder from Ashoknagar in Madhya Pradesh and transported it in two special trains that unloaded in Jalna, Aurangabad, and Pune.



Special trains for the transport of the fodder.



Unloading of nutrient-reinforced cattle fodder from special trains.

While cattle in the region normally get fodder made from sugarcane waste, at the BJS cattle shelters we decided that we had to provide better nutrition so that the animals would produce more milk and be in better health so that they could be of more help to farmers once back in the field. Also, we had noticed that the sugarcane-based fodder was making them prone to diabetes. The fodder that we brought in eventually was high-quality, lab-tested fodder which was supplemented with feed manufactured by Godrej Agrovet Ltd and ‘mineral mixture’ made by BAIF Agrovet and Biotechnology Ltd. Suffice it to say that the cattle relished the new fodder that they were fed and by the time they went back to their owners in June when the first rains arrived, they were in much better health than before.

At the cattle shelters we had a team of veterinarians continuously monitoring their well-being. In addition, we also introduced cattle insurance, for the first time ever, so that the farmers would not suffer any loss in case some untoward incident

occured, such as death of their animal in the shelter. Going the extra mile, we also got fire extinguishers installed so that in the event of a fire we were prepared.

When the first showers came calling, the farmers were happy to take their cattle back home. Such is the farmer's love for their animals that some of them even came along with their animals and spend days at the cattle shelter, taking care of them.

For the BJS, the entire project was also a challenge in raising funds. In keeping with our policy of not seeking government assistance, we reached out to business houses, philanthropic Indian and international organizations, Jain-run organizations, and individuals for contributing to this relief operation, and also pooled in our own resources. We were humbled by the generosity of the support we received from all quarters, including media houses such as *Sakal* and *Lokmat*.

The government already had shelter for 4-5 lakh animals, but to us it was important to do this and supplement their effort by setting up 30 additional shelters at our own cost.

RESTORING GROUND WATER



In end-April 2013, one of my associates in Mumbai, Girishbhai Shah, President of the Samastha Mahajan Sanstha, visited Beed at my request and came back with the news that almost all the water bodies in the region needed de-silting. I visited the place on his request and what I discovered was that not one of the water bodies, some of them dating back to 60 years, had ever been de-silted, with the result that rain water that could collect in it just flowed away. I decided then I would de-silt and rejuvenate some 100 water bodies in the five talukas of Ashti, Patoda, Beed, Gevrai, and Shirur, and accordingly appointed a Pune-based consultancy firm to draw out an action plan after surveying the situation there.

I decided that since time was running out—I wanted the de-silting to be done before the rains came—I would shift to Dongarkini for an entire month so that work would be done speedily. It was the first time in decades that I was going back to stay at my village.

Dongarkini and the region around it is beautiful countryside. Rolling hills, a luminous sky that looks like it has been swept clean by an invisible hand, and acres and acres of farmlands. But those

who know the place also know what a fragile, deceptive beauty it is. The region is chronically drought-prone. With rainfall such a scarce thing, life is not easy for the people who live there. The hard, unyielding earth only allows the farmer to grow two crops: an abundance of cotton and a single harvest of jowar that is not enough to keep the family fed and clothed. Which is why a few days after Diwali in October-November, almost entire villages pack up their meagre belongings and head out to the sugarcane belt of the state where dozens of sugar factories work round the clock, taking in tonnes of cut sugarcane and producing the sugar that we consume in the cities.

If you visit the small villages in this region during the period from Diwali till high summer time around May, they resemble ghost towns, with only the old, the frail and the feeble guarding the houses. Men and women who can work head out to the sugarcane fields, labouring hard through the night so that the factories are kept busy with the required sugarcane. Life is tough; most couples leave their children back so that they can continue their schooling. Sometimes the school teachers take in the students and put them up in their premises. In other cases, the kids simply drop out of school and accompany their parents to the sugar factories. Migration is a frightening reality in this region and I know the sense of displacement that comes from the constant relocating to and from the sugar factories, having lived that life myself for many years.

Which is why, once I shifted base to Dongarkini, on 10th May 2013, I decided we could do much more on the de-silting front. The goal was to de-silt 100 water bodies in that period. It was a huge effort with more than 100 JCB and 35 Poclair excavators brought in to handle the work efficiently and on time. When the work commenced and I saw the amount of silt that was being taken out, I suddenly realised that it could be used as high quality nutrient for the parched soil of the land. My idea could be a possible solution to reverse the phenomenon of migration into cities. Now my mission

of de-silting had taken on even more meaning.

Once the idea took root in my mind, I got to work, convening meetings in various villages and telling the small farmers and land-owners about it. I got them enrolled in the mission, telling them they had the opportunity to get nourishment that was worth its weight in gold, for their farms. The BJS would do the work of de-silting 115 water bodies and the farmers could then transport the silt to their farms. All they had to do was to spread it in their farms and wait for the rains so that the nutrients could sink deep into the bowels of the earth and nourish it.

The farmers bought into my idea instantly, and before I knew it, almost all the landowners and villagers had thrown their weight behind me, lining up at the sites at daybreak so that they could get the maximum work done. By the end of my stay there, 20 lakh cubic meters of nutrient-rich silt was deposited on the farms and after sowing their fields, everyone waited with bated breath for their crops that season. By the end of the monsoon, most of the 115 water bodies had filled up and they will have enough water



Poclains and JCBs mobilized for the ground water restoration and desilting project in Beed.



Poclains and JCBs at work for depositing 20 lakh cubic metres of silt.

to sustain the villages for some time to come. De-silting the water bodies also meant that the ground water levels have been recharged and so have the wells and water bodies even at a distance from them.

For me there is no greater satisfaction than the feeling that the BJS has been able to address the water shortage issue in a region which has been chronically drought-prone. Next year, they will not live in the fear of another drought and of having to fight for water when the tankers come in with the precious commodity. We all have the right to live with dignity and having to fight for a bucket of water does not give those people the promised life of dignity.

When we realized that the fight to get to the water tanker first was getting aggressive and resulting in wastage of water, the BJS also provided 65 water storage tanks of 5,000, 3,000, and 2,000 litre capacities for the drought-hit areas. In other places we donated generators so that villagers could pump water from bore wells even when there was a power outage, which is a regular thing in rural outposts of the state. It is a tragedy that villages in this region

and, indeed, across the state, have to go without power for over 12 hours every day.

What is miraculous about the BJS drought project is also the fact that we managed to involve the people of the villages completely in it. While we got a number of earth-movers and excavators for the de-silting, in ten villages the entire process of de-silting was done by the villagers themselves. At each village that I went, I addressed the villagers and explained the benefits of de-silting, the nutrient-rich quality of the silt, and the benefit it would bring to their land. It was amazing how the act of coming together with a common purpose raised the spirit of the villagers who had been morose because of their plight. They set about the task with single-mindedness, and when the rains finally came and the water bodies filled up, the joy and excitement amongst the people was incomparable. To me they resembled people who had got independence for the first time.

The successful tackling of the spectre of drought was a reiteration of my belief that it is possible to think an idea or a



A lake with its water retention restored.

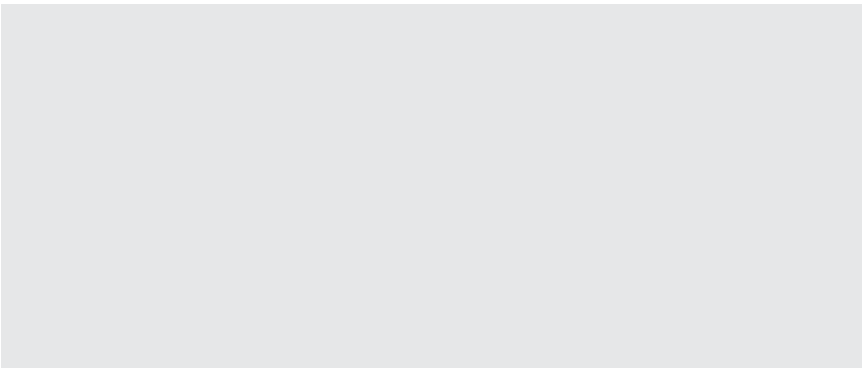


Rich land: Nutrient-rich silt which transformed the farmlands following the desilting of water bodies in Dongarkini, Beed during June 2013

concept and follow it up right up to its successful implementation. You just have to have a dream and be passionate about making it come true. At Beed, my entire team of volunteers, including the teachers who work in 500 schools steering our education project, jumped in enthusiastically to help this dream come true.

The entire campaign has reiterated a very important lesson: challenges can be overcome, however difficult they are, with will, passion, perseverance, and solidarity. When the villagers toiled all day de-silting the water bodies, they also brought down the barriers of caste, religion, and political interests to work towards bettering their lives. The project life cycle, right from conceptualization to its successful completion, spanned a mere 40 days, but its coverage and impact were huge, and for many years.

REINVENTING EDUCATION



FOCUS ON SCHOOL



After doing about 17 years of social work, I felt a nagging sense of restlessness. My work had brought me close to a wide cross-section of people and their problems across the length and breadth of the country. I had also undertaken a 3,000-km *padayatra* in 1989 across Maharashtra, to get first-hand information about the range and level of problems in rural situations. Reflecting on all that I had observed, heard and discussed with others, I realised that the sheer range of critical issues and problems facing the country is so vast that any effort by any individual or organization, or even government, was not going to address all the problems in a systematic and time-bound way. Whatever the government was doing, or whatever different NGOs, including the BJS were doing, was in the form of piecemeal solutions. Basically we were looking at problems in isolation and trying to find solutions. In some cases, ready solutions are available that can be implemented quickly. But in many cases, the solutions have to be devised. Then, to effectively implement the solution, you have to put in years of focused and concentrated

effort and even after all this, the solution may be applicable only to the particular geographical area in which you have been working and would not be a universal solution.

This then was one big concern for me: how could I undertake effective social work on a large scale to address a range of problems simultaneously, with reasonable time-frame and action plans? While this question was one side of the coin, the other side of the coin was the enormous experience, expertise, and capacity BJS had built up over the years. The capacity to draw out strategies and translate them into plans and effective field-level actions within the constraints of our systems; the capacity to do rigorous monitoring; capacity to motivate and guide volunteers and staff working at all levels. Plus, we had a huge network, we had earned a vast amount of goodwill, and most importantly, we had gained the confidence to work on a large scale, with a national outlook.

There was hence a huge reserve of strengths that could be leveraged for doing work on a large scale, with a view to addressing a host of issues at the same time.

The question that came to my mind was: how should I best leverage our strengths for the interests of our country? What is the strategy we should adopt to make best use of BJS' strengths to make the maximum change in society on a large scale, with long-term impact?

It is very obvious that if we have to address a range of problems simultaneously, we have to go to the root of the issues to identify and eliminate the roadblocks to resolving the problems. And one of the main roots, of course, is education, especially school education.

Everybody will agree that school education plays a critical part in the development of an individual and the development of society. School education can prepare one to take on all the challenges of the world in a constructive and positive manner. It can equip us with the knowledge and skills required to become productive citizens, who can handle challenges at work, at home, and in society at large.

That, at any rate, is the purpose of school education, and also its potential. In India, we have somehow reduced school education to the level of ‘literacy’ and sidestepped its human development potential, an issue I will come to shortly. This shift in emphasis has terrible implications for the development of the country, because experience across the world tells us that when school education is weak, the entire country is weak.

With these thoughts, I decided to take a big turn in my personal life and in the life of BJS. I decided that henceforth, till the time I have capacity and energy to work, I will work whole-heartedly in the area of school education.

Through the Wagholi Educational Rehabilitation Centre (WERC) set up in 1996, we had direct experience with school education and we could have built on that experience by building more schools and expanding our network. But though some friends suggested this strategy, I was not tempted to take it up as I was clear in my mind that I do not want to invest my time, energy, and resources in making changes at a small scale. To me, life is too short and precious, and I had always wanted to work with a large vision, a large outlook. When we talk of introducing change in the school education system in India, we have to necessarily think big, both in terms of numbers and quantum of change; there are some 13 lakh schools in the country and most of them are following an education pattern that was established over a 100 years back by the British.

The foundation of this pattern is laid in the elementary level and this foundation is largely owned, run, and managed by the government—over 80 per cent of the elementary-level schools in the country are run by zilla parishads (district councils), municipal corporations, central or state governments. Hence, I decided I will focus on initiating change in elementary education in government schools, keeping in mind that private schools are mushrooming very fast, and cannot be ignored if we want to introduce change for

the benefit of an entire generation of young learners.

While it may be relatively easy to introduce some changes in private schools, introducing change in government schools is a very challenging task. In fact, it raises a basic question: why should an NGO/individual worry about improving the government system? Is that not the job of the government, and does it not have all the resources and staff to do so? The questions are, of course, valid, and to understand the answer we must get a realistic picture of the way the government school education system works.

In each state there is a separate education department with its own staff, budget, and systems. The whole system is headed by a minister, who is supposed to take policy decisions with the approval of the cabinet; he may also have to take certain other important operational decisions. There is a top-level education department bureaucracy that works for him, and they are in charge of running the whole system.

In a very simplistic manner, this is the organizational framework of the school education system in the government. Now let us see this organizational framework's ability to take concrete decisions and actions. In the first place, it is not necessary that the person appointed to the post of education minister has all the qualifications or experience required for initiating and managing change in education. The person can be from any field and may not even have deep interest in education. Likewise, the top officials need not have PhDs or even a Masters degree in education. Thus, it is likely, and also often the case, that those in charge of the organizational framework of school education themselves do not have the required knowledge or expertise to think of initiating far-reaching changes in the system.

Now let us look at the process for making policy-level changes. Government cannot work like a private organization where a CEO can issue a diktat that everyone has to follow. Government has to take into view the perceptions and concerns of a number

of stakeholders, experts, educationists, psychologists, political interests. Sometimes objections are raised only for political reasons. The whole process of arriving at a satisfactory policy-document and getting it approved from all concerned can take years. Throughout this time, there has to be consistency in the political leadership and top-level bureaucracy. But in our political system, this rarely happens.

Let us assume that despite all these constraints, some decisions to make important changes have been made; let us come to the implementation stage. We know well that to introduce far-reaching changes in any organizational setup, we need to have a strong, focused, and consistent leadership that works round the clock for a long period of time, perhaps many years. I have already mentioned that in our political system this condition is rarely met. Portfolios of ministers are frequently changed, and top officials are frequently transferred. That apart, any person holding any top post in education has a whole lot of routine and day-to-day things to attend to, and even in this routine there are breaks. For example, an education minister has to attend to matters in his own constituency, attend state assembly sessions, address various grievances, and attend a whole lot of functions. Officials have to also attend several workshops and meetings. So, basically, the conditions for initiating and rigorously implementing far-reaching changes are not usually present. It is from this angle that I am arguing that civil society organizations should develop solutions for integration in the government system. Civil society organizations can provide models, guidelines, and procedures for introducing change within the framework of government systems and policy. Civil society can do this well because it stands outside the constraints of the government system. It has the freedom to experiment and innovate; it can try out various approaches and offer the most suitable one.

I also firmly believe that civil society has the responsibility

to work on these lines. It is no use criticizing the government for its failures, though one has every right to do so in a democratic country. We must also think of ways in which the failures can be overcome.

It is also necessary to study the need for change in our school education system. Since independence there has been a sea change in the way various systems in the country have started functioning, either because of advent of technology or, more importantly, due to changes at the policy level, which eventually translated into successful action. But sadly, even six decades after Independence, and despite numerous education commissions and reports, school education practice in India has remained rooted in the pre-independence British era. Some curriculum changes have been made, some new subjects have been introduced, but the teaching and learning emphasis continues to be on rote and passive learning. Also, the broader objectives of school education have remained largely on paper.

This brings me to the topic I mentioned briefly earlier. The objective of school education is clearly not to provide only information in some specific knowledge domains; we don't need this huge existing educational infrastructure for that. School education is supposed to promote the whole gamut of intellectual, social, moral, emotional, and physical development of a child.

That is a huge baggage of expectations on schools, and at least within the government system we have not worked out deeply the ways in which schools can be equipped to carry and deliver this baggage. In our educational planning we have focused on setting up schools and appointing teachers, with or without some training. We have not focused on building the capacity of schools to independently handle the huge load of responsibilities on them, with self-monitoring, self-improvement, and self-correction systems. Without following this quality-driven 'process approach,' we have emphasized on some targets such as enrolment and

attendance, minimum number of periods to be taken in a week, and completion of prescribed syllabus within a specific time frame. The most tragic part is that even these basic targets are not properly fulfilled, with the result that many children do not know to write their own names even after four years of schooling.

This is the challenge before us: how to reorient the focus of our school education system from basic targets to fundamental processes and how to build capacities of people in the system to manage those processes, so that there is overall improvement in the quality of education. By quality, I mean consistently meeting all the curricular and broader objectives of school education, as per clearly defined parameters and standards.

One important point to note here is that to ensure such transformation, governments do not have to make massive investments. Of course, if school facilities can be improved, it will help. But investment in physical assets is not what is mainly required. What is required is investment in human assets—the existing staff, and the staff to be appointed. What is required is change in their way of thinking, in their mindset about how children learn, and what teachers should do to facilitate that learning. We also require a change in the mindset of policy-makers and decision-makers. They have to stop looking at the huge human resource of our education system as an army of workers who have to be monitored only on basis of attendance and completion of syllabus. They have to start looking at this human resource as agents of change in society.

ENTERING THE SCHOOL SYSTEM



With all these thoughts, in 2002-03, I decided that the BJS would enter the school education system with a basket of initiatives. Through implementation of the basket, we hoped to get a thorough understanding of the system, and all the challenges faced while initiating change. We thought that through this experience we would be able to arrive at the most appropriate strategies and solutions.

Called BJS Educational Quality Improvement Program (BJS-EDUQIP), our basket covered School Assessment and Support Program (SASP), teacher training, student assessments, and empowerment of principals, trustees/school managements. The programme also addressed value concerns through ad-hoc sessions with students. With this basket, we hoped to make a first step towards building capacities of schools to meet all their enormous responsibilities.

As getting permissions from governments for introducing BJS-EDUQIP in their schools would have been time-consuming, we decided to launch the programme in schools run by the Jain

community across the country. With great effort, we managed to contact all the 2,500 such schools out of which 1,700 agreed to participate in our programme. One outcome of this effort was the formation of an apex body of Jain education institutions called the Federation of Jain Educational Institutions (FJEI), which I initiated in 2003. BJS-EDUQIP was offered to all FJEI member-schools, at our cost, and with our professional manpower, which we had recruited specifically for the programme. As implementation proceeded, we started receiving positive feedback, encouraging us to think of approaching different state governments.

A breakthrough came in 2005, when we got an opportunity to work in around 500 CBSE-affiliated schools of Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) Islands, on the request of its then Lt. Governor, Mr. Ram Kapse, who was encouraged by the success of BJS-EDUQIP in schools across the country. Despite several logistical difficulties, we implemented the project in highly challenging conditions in schools scattered across 37 islands, over a three-year-period with the help of a staff of 60 people. I got a monitoring cell set up over there and I myself made monthly visits to the project area. The impact of our efforts was seen after three years in the Std X CBSE board examination results. According to the authorities, the results were the best in 20 years.

The success in the Andaman & Nicobar islands gave us entry in other geographical areas. Through the interest shown in our work by the then Union Home Minister, Mr. Shivraj Patil, we were invited to implement BJS-EDUQIP in the network of around 500 Navodaya Vidyalala schools across the country. When the then Education Secretary of Andaman & Nicobar, Mr. Udipta Ray, got transferred to Goa for the same role, he asked us to take the programme to the 1,700-odd schools in the state. What was particularly satisfying for us in Goa was that the Christian missionary schools affiliated to the Archdiocesan Board of Education (ABE), who were initially unwilling to work with us, later asked us to work in their schools



The then Gujarat CM and now Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi, and Gujarat Governor, Mr Nawal Kishor Sharma, at an FJEI function.

after seeing the results of our programme in other schools. We extended our three-year programme by one year on the request of Goa's Director of Education, Dr. Selsa Pinto. Again, the impact in Goa was seen in terms of improved academic performance, with 20 per cent improvement reported in board examination results.

After running BJS-EDUQIP for around five years, we did a detailed review of what we had done and what we had learnt about schools' needs. We then revamped the programme's main offering, SAA. Around this time, in 2008, Gujarat's then Chief Minister and now India's Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, asked us to implement our programme across the state. That would have been too big a challenge for us. Also, we had by then come up with a new SAA framework. So we offered to run the old SAA framework in one district and the new framework in another district. By the time we had assessed schools in one district, the state government decided to start its own accreditation programme, and so we withdrew from Gujarat.

In all, in the period 2003-2011, BJS offered EDUQIP to over 4,000 schools across the country, giving them accreditation and some

quality-improvement services, free of cost. The whole experience gave us deep insight into how schools work, what challenges are faced, the strengths and limitations of principals and teachers, and the roles actually played by different stakeholders. With this knowledge and experience, we could think of going deeper into the whole issue of bringing about change in the school system.

QUALITY & VALUE



Strategically, we decided to focus on two areas: (i) quality improvement, using SAA as a diagnostic as well as a corrective tool, and (ii) value education.

There is a clear-cut rationale for both focus areas. Our new, comprehensive SAA tool provides an objective platform for helping schools see where they stand currently in terms of their facilities and processes, and accordingly make plans for improvement. SAA aids the process by generating specific action plans for all stakeholders. This new tool has been piloted in government schools in Meghalaya, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. In a cluster of schools in a rural area of Pune district, we are working on the post-diagnostic measures for improving school processes and ethos.

As for value education, the need has been emphasized by great thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, J Krishnamurthy, and JP Naik. Numerous committees and commissions have also stressed this point. However, very little work has been done on the ground, particularly in government schools. It is not that values are not



School staff participating in the School Accreditation and Support Program (SASP) under EDUQIP.

being inculcated through the schools. Values underlie all school processes, and children would be absorbing values in some way or the other. However, in the absence of a specific, well-defined effort, the transmission of values is happening in a directionless manner. In some cases, even the wrong sort of values may be transmitted. For example, in a school where teachers are themselves very casual about their work ethics, the students may come to the conclusion that work ethics do not matter much in life.

This state of affairs has to be seen against the tremendous changes that have taken place in our social fabric in the last few decades. Our economic structure itself has changed. There has been a change in lifestyles and aspirations. There has been a huge explosion in media and communications technology. Even in villages without a *pucca* (permanent) road, you can watch 80 channels on TV. In many ways, the gap between modern and traditional society, between Indian and Western culture, and between cities and villages, is reducing. People's exposure to the

larger world has increased. But along with this, they are also getting exposed to other values, norms, and beliefs. This will not be a problem if one is able to pick and choose what is good and reject what is bad. Parents and schools can help young minds do this. But even in rural areas, many parents do not have time for children; like parents in urban areas, they are fully engaged in the rat race of earning a living. The joint family system has broken down, so children do not have other elders at home. For a large part of the day they are entirely on their own, with friends, or in front of the TV or computer, without adults around. Children are growing up in an environment of conflicting and negative values, with strong influence of media and peers, and little proactive, corrective measures being taken by schools and parents as a whole. The values that are the base of our wonderful civilization, which has offered so much to humanity, are losing importance in our country itself. Tolerance, non-violence, commitment to truth, compassion, concern for others, responsibility to community, all these have lost importance even as mere words. In their place, we see aggression, violence, and a highly materialistic and individualistic outlook focused only about one's own well-being, without concern for others.

This has grave implications for the future of our country. It means that whatever progress we achieve on the economic front will be negated on the social front. Whatever we do to improve the quality of our school education, it will not produce good citizens.

Hence, we decided to develop specific ways of inculcating values among children through school education.

NURTURING VALUES



We called our value-education initiative Mulyavardhan, which means ‘nurturing values’. We had no specific expertise in this domain, but even before we embarked on Mulyavardhan in 2009 and developed in-house expertise, I had some clear ideas. Firstly, whatever we do in terms of value education should have a secular base. Then, it should focus on fundamental human values that are in our Constitution. I was also clear that value education should not be based on the traditional lecture method. Values cannot be learnt this way. In any case, children of the current generation are not going to be convinced about values through lectures. They want to form their own opinions. They don’t want to be ‘told’ what to do; we have to influence and persuade them through discussion, debate, and by providing actual experiences of living according to values.

With these guidelines, I began surveying for some existing value education programme that we could adopt. Simultaneously, we began to think of how we could pilot it in the government school system. Through my search, I came across a programme

designed by Dr. HTD Rost, a noted educationist who was originally from America, but had spent many decades in India, in Panchgani, working on peace education. I got in touch with Dr. Rost and studied his programme. It seemed suitable, because it was based on secular values, and used an interactive teaching-learning method, based on principles of co-operative learning. I thought of implementing, with contextual modifications, the programme designed by Dr. Rost in zilla parishad schools of Beed district in Maharashtra. It happens to be the district from where I come. But that was not the main criterion for selection. Beed is one of the most backward districts in Maharashtra. I thought that if we could implement a value education programme in remote schools in this backward area and demonstrate success, then we could succeed anywhere.

We got in touch with the Beed zilla parishad authorities and gave our proposal: we would run Mulyavardhan in their rural primary schools, within the regular school schedule, entirely at our cost, with no risk or obligation to the zilla parishad. We held several meetings to orient the officials to what we meant by value education, and why it was needed. I myself addressed large gatherings of principals and officials. In this way, we got the approval of the Beed zilla parishad to conduct one Mulyavardhan period every day in standards I to IV of their rural schools from 2009 onwards.

To conduct the Mulyavardhan periods, we appointed our own teachers. With the help of Dr. Rost we designed a rigorous training programme. It was initially for about two weeks, but eventually it became a 60-day programme, more rigorous and comprehensive than any induction programme conducted for regular school teachers.

By the end of academic year 2010, we had covered around 500 schools with around 35,000 enrolled students, through our own 300-odd teachers across two tehsils of Beed district and schools of Jalgaon municipal corporation. As the schools were in scattered

REINVENTING EDUCATION



Learning with fun: A Mulyavardhan class in action.



Outdoor learning with fun: A Mulyavardhan class in action.

locations, we set up an elaborate system for monitoring, through supervisors at block and tehsil levels, and a specially-designed software package.

When we started implementing Mulyavardhan, some principals and teachers were not sure about the worth of the programme. But when they started seeing the response of children, their attitudes changed. Irrespective of location, age, gender, or socio-economic background, all the children responded overwhelmingly to Mulyavardhan, mainly because it is highly interactive, with lot of activities, games, stories, and songs. Children participate fully in all the activities, and in the process they indirectly pick up the importance of certain values. Parents also started noting changes in children's attitudes and behaviour.

To build a proper evidence base for all these indications of change, we asked Cambridge University Technical Services (CUTS) to do an independent impact-assessment study in 2010-11. In the following year, we got another, more quantitative, study done from a noted American researcher in this field, Dr. Brian Flay of Oregon State University. The studies confirmed what we had been hearing from our teachers: Mulyavardhan has led to significant changes in children's behaviour. Particularly, it has increased what is called 'pro-social' or helping behaviour: children are more co-operative and caring towards each other.

Another thing the studies established is that the government-appointed principals, teachers, and parents had a very positive attitude towards the Mulyavardhan project. In fact, there was a demand from government teachers for the training we were giving to our teachers. Particularly, they were keen on learning our classroom management techniques: how our teachers maintained class discipline, with full cooperation of students, without using physical punishment or shouting at students.

Towards the end of the fourth year of implementation of Mulyavardhan in Beed, we asked NCERT to review our effort.

REINVENTING EDUCATION



February 2013: Impact assessment of Mulyavardhan in Beed by the team from Cambridge University Technical Services consisting of Dr David Whitebread and Dr Sanjana Mehta.



February 2013: Impact assessment of Mulyavardhan in Beed by the team from Cambridge University Technical Services. Dr David Whitebread and Dr Sanjana Mehta with the Mulyavardhan team.

NCERT set up an evaluation process. An expert reviewed all the Mulyavardhan content, made a field visit, observed what happens in class, and talked to many teachers and principals. The report that came out of this process in June 2013 highlighted the many positive aspects about Mulyavardhan. It also gave some important observations and suggestions. One major point raised by NCERT was that our value-education effort was limited to a specific time period in the school. This has an obvious conceptual limitation, as values encompass all school processes. We have to address the entire school ethos, and all its curricular and co-curricular activities, so that the whole school becomes value-driven, and children imbibe values continuously through multiple channels.

We had already begun thinking on these lines, following the release of an 'Education for Values' framework document in September 2012. Our Mulyavardhan team thoroughly studied this document and we had intensive brainstorming sessions on the practical aspects of the 'whole school approach' to the value education recommended in the NCERT document. As we see it, the approach is excellent in principle. But there are a number of practical issues to consider, particularly in the context of government schools which do not have much autonomy. Also, the whole-school approach implies that principals and teachers have to make a fundamental shift in their own attitudes and beliefs about children and their own roles. All the staff from the school have to see themselves not as mere transmitters of knowledge or administrators, but as value educators. This shift is not going to come about through release of policy documents. It will require much orientation and training work to be done on the ground.

STUDENT-CENTRIC TEACHING



While thinking about how we should change attitudes and beliefs of principals and teachers, we looked closely at their teaching and learning approach itself. In school classrooms across the country, except in some experimental and private schools, all learning basically happens through a teacher-driven process. The student's role is passive; the student is not encouraged to think for himself and 'construct' new knowledge, using what s/he has already learnt, seen or experienced. The student is not put on the path of self-learning.

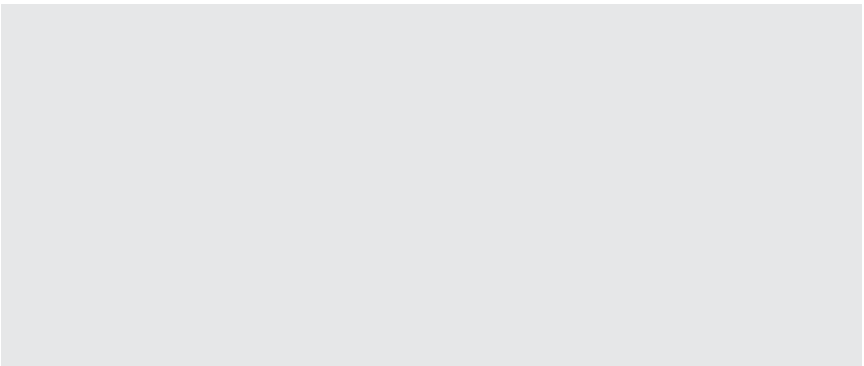
The teacher-driven process is something we have inherited from the times of Lord Macaulay, who introduced the modern education system in our country for the purpose of creating a large pool of people who could be employed as clerks in the British administration. It lays emphasis on memorization of expected answers. There is, in this system, little scope for developing creativity, original thought, own reasoning and judgement.

This has had a grave effect on our development as a nation. We talk about having a huge educated workforce. But what is the

original contribution of this workforce? How many path-breaking scientific discoveries have we made? How many Nobel Prize winners do we have? How many products designed by us are sold across the world? How many of our lakhs of PhD-holders have got their papers published in reputed international journals?

It is a very sad and depressing state of affairs, and our traditional and stagnant teaching method is largely responsible for it. We have to make a radical shift towards a new approach embraced in many parts of the developed world: student-centric teaching and learning based on principles of constructivism.

**NEW
ENERGY**



THE TURNING POINT



Till the end of 2013, my work in the field of social change was marked by two distinct phases. The first phase from 1985 to 2002 in the area of disaster management, mass marriages, and educational rehabilitation led to the second phase (2002 to 2013) which saw me working primarily in the areas of school quality improvement and value education. Over one decade the BJS accumulated vast experience from working in the education space in various geographies across the country, with several stakeholders of the school system, and the government. Close interactions and engagements with them led to a clear understanding of their varying mindsets, their strengths, and their capabilities. However, in the last decade, our offerings to these stakeholders were in the form of piecemeal solutions by way of the BJS School Assessment, Accreditation, and Mulyavardhan. Our learning from these programmes, coupled with an acute understanding of the current school educational scenario in India gave me an increasing sense of urgency to stop looking at piecemeal solutions and instead address the root causes of the

malaise in school education. A picture was beginning to take shape in my mind about the course that the future journey of my life could possibly take.

At the same time, a lot of my wakeful moments also went into contemplating on how I wanted the BJS and FJEI to grow and rise to the next level. These were the two organizations I had so passionately founded, and I wanted them to keep up with the changing times. Hence, in December 2013, after much contemplation, I took some decisions crucial to me and both the organizations that I had founded.

THE BEQUEATHAL



Often, organizations that have been founded by an individual, which have grown and flourished over the years, fuelled by the passion and the watchful eye of its founder, run the risk of being heavily dependent on the strength of that individual. He becomes the face of the organization. People start associating the organization with the persona of that individual and vice versa. In my view, this is highly undesirable as the independent identities of the two entities get blurred and tend to overlap each other in the eyes of the public. An organization should stand the test of time irrespective of that individual's existence and his public image. It is in the interest of the organization to command goodwill, patronage and attract new talent solely on the strength of the quality of its work and its people.

After being founded by me, the BJS and FJEI have been successfully operational in the areas of education, disaster response, and social initiatives over the last 28 years. These are interesting times for both these organizations, especially the BJS. It is a matter of great pride to me that over the years the BJS has

emerged to be a very professional and process-driven organization. It has slowly moved from being a person-centric to a process-centric entity. These shifts, which are for the better, have been planned manoeuvres from my side. So, when I identified Prafulla Parakh as my successor, I brought him to Pune, where he could be groomed by me to take on the mantle one day. I did not want that 'one day' to come at the fag end of my life, but at an opportune moment when I felt that Prafulla was ready to steer the ship on his own. For ten years I took him under my fold and prepared him to drive an organization which would earn credibility by way of its vision, approach, its processes, and its impact, independent of any one individual.

There was another reason that I had in my mind while doing my succession planning: for an organization to stay alive, it has to remain youthful. It has to learn to adapt to the changing times and strive to bring in fresh ideas, emerging technologies, and new-age solutions. There is no doubt that the social landscape 28 years ago is in stark contrast to the one which we see today. People have changed and so have the many issues plaguing them. In such times, every organization must respond to the changing needs and upgrade its own style of functioning and approaching an issue. The old order should give way to the new.

In December 2013, I sensed that the time was now ripe for me to step down as the National President of both the BJS and FJEL. It was a big decision, but not a difficult one. I knew the organization was ready to take the leap forward and that it had a committed group of people who would take it into the future with the same vision and passion with which I had nurtured it. I took the decision on an evening, on an impulse, but I think the process of making that decision had been going on inside my head for a long time.

The next day, when I announced my decision to retire, it came as a jolt to my staff, the office-bearers, and the volunteers of our BJS



Prafulla Parakh: Taking on the mantle as the National President of BJS.

network. Nobody was willing to think of a BJS without my presence and it took every ounce of my reasoning power to convince them and get them aligned with my decision. Here I must acknowledge that the dedication and the trust which my successor, Mr. Parakh, has invoked in the hearts of the entire BJS family over the years was also instrumental in neutralizing the initial resistance that I faced from our office-bearers. In some ways they knew that BJS would continue to be led by a passionate leader with sound principles. I entrust Prafulla with the critical responsibility of taking BJS to greater heights with the support of a younger and vibrant team. The time has come for the older generation in BJS and FJEl to take a back seat and serve in an advisory capacity. This is why even though I've retired from being the National President of the BJS network, I will continue to remain the President of the BJS Trust board. I hope I have set an example and paved the way for the veterans to make the right choice in this regard.



Cherishing the fun moments while being thronged by hundreds of children at WERC, Pune.

As for me, I have my work cut out: to now spearhead a movement on initiating systemic and far-reaching fundamental changes in the processes and structures of school education in our country. My education mission for the rest of my life is to free the country from the clutches of the long-drawn Macaulay system of a bygone era, and systematically plug in the much-needed system of learner-centric and student-friendly education.

Blessed to Serve



*"His courage and risk-taking abilities
awe me"*

PRAFULLA PARAKH

National President, BJS

“ When I first met Bhau, I was 31 years old. In my family, running a traditional business, we had a background of social work at the community level. Being the eldest son in my family, I started supporting my family’s social work from the age of 16 years. Having spent almost 16 such years in typical social work such as fund-raising events, medical camps, charity at hospitals, orphanages, and supporting chaturmas work, getting to spend 12 hours in the very first meeting with Bhau in August 1992 created a long-lasting and life-changing impression on me. For the first time, I found a different leader who was talking about social work in a very clear context of real problems in our community. Not only was he discussing the problems, but he was ready with very innovative solutions too. I remember taking an immediate decision in my mind that I would want to be connected to this person, and learn from him all that I can to fulfill my own urge to do something good for society.

Impressed with his idea and concept, I conducted the very first Parichay Sammelan in Nagpur in October 1992 where Bhau was invited as a chief guest. I was very happy to see that he accepted the invitation. I found his way of connecting with us volunteers, even at such a long distance or in some other cases even in remote and inaccessible locations, very exemplary. The way he talked to us, put his arms around our shoulders, patted us, extended his hands, as if he is being one of us, impressed me a lot, and I learnt from him on how to connect to volunteers and ground workers from every strata of society.

However, the most unforgettable experience that made me take a decision to do everything that I can do to contribute to Bhau’s mission was because of my first major failure in handling the responsibility given by him for one of the most important events in a critical time

that the nation was going through. During the period of post-Babri Masjid riots, in January 1993, Bhau organised a peace march from Pune to Nagpur with eminent personalities from all walks of life and respected gurus from all religions and communities. Bhau gave me the responsibility to organize a function in Nagpur to conclude the Peace March. I failed to ensure the presence of a sizeable audience, thus failing to do justice to the grand purpose of the event. After the function, when I was silently going through the self-guilt over my failure as a local organiser, it was Bhau, who, amongst a group of senior volunteers, put the failure in proper perspective. He cited factors related to local politics, community dynamics, venue, so on and so forth, in a very objective and neutral tone, not only relieving me from the guilt to a great extent, but also imprinting a learning for life: one on how a leader treats his followers during failures, and secondly how comprehensively I should think in future when I need to organize events of such scale. This episode resulted in my life-long commitment to Bhau and his work.

By 2002, I worked my way through volunteering work towards the position of State President of BJS, Maharashtra. It channelized my inner need for helping others in society and my natural leadership through the right type of opportunities and for the right type of work to be eventually mentored by the most suitable leader for my scale, capacity, and taste. Bhau progressively gave me opportunities as National Council Member, as National General Secretary, and then as a Trustee of BJS. The most surprising honour came my way when he announced me as his successor and on 30th March 2014 he formally handed over the baton of BJS to me as the National President. Knowing him and how critically, but objectively, he assesses situations and people, my pleasure on my selection is unbound as he thinks me worthy of the job he has chosen me for.

His mentoring till now, and the way I learn every moment that I get to spend with him, and absorb all the niceties like a sponge, have changed me as a person. His focus, drive, and passion are exemplary.

FIRST PERSON

His courage and risk-taking abilities awe me. I am energized because of his physical and mental rigour in handling workloads for more than 20 hours a day on an average.

I am humbled with his sensitivity towards the commonest of common persons, and easily helping him/her in the busiest of his schedules. I have seen him being 'yaaron ka yaar' in his closest of friend circles, and the lighter, fun-loving side of his personality attracts me. I am fortunate to be with him when he is surrounded by his loving family, and it inspires me in many ways to take care of my own immediate and extended family in a far better way than the way I could have done otherwise. I also at times have seen him very patiently listening to adverse and conflicting opinions, but sailing his way through using his own acumen.

I am amazed with the wide range of his personal connectivity with diverse people ranging from national and international power centres, and elite groups from different areas, to a person from the remotest village. I have been with him for the last 20 years, and the most important learning for me is the way he responds to every situation he encounters, every person he meets, and changes himself with time without being rigid in his opinions, in spite of his own strong capabilities.

When he announced me as his successor almost a decade ago, I felt proud that he bestowed his trust and faith in me. All these years he has taken care to mould me for my current and future role. He diligently prepared me to take up bigger responsibilities by making sure that I participated in all his principal decisions, taking my views and leaving many of his decisions for complete execution to me. Having said that, I must admit I hadn't thought in my wildest dreams that I would be handed over the reins of BJS as a National President so soon.

I am truly humbled and consider this as one of the greatest recognitions that I could possibly receive in my lifetime. Bhau's lion-heartedness in entrusting me with the responsibility of leading this huge organization, which he created and helped grow to the current

proportions, speaks volumes about the man. On 4th of January 2014, when Bhau announced his decision of retiring from BJS and announcing my name for the post of National President in a meeting of senior BJS volunteers – most of whom have been with him from his foundation days – the decision came as a shock. Bhau should continue in some or the other capacity was a common voice, and no one except Bhau was confident about the future of BJS without his active role.

One of the best practices started by Bhau is touring the area in an office-bearer's capacity at his own level to connect with the people for effective work during the tenure of office-bearers. After taking over as National President, I planned a National Tour named as 'Parivartan Yatra – Nayi Pidhi Nayi Soch'. The credit for this most appealing and impactful branding of the national tour again goes to none other than Bhau. Today, having completed my tour and having visited 17 states addressing around 165-plus meetings, connecting with more than 40,000 people – majority of them being from the community and some representing 75-odd educational institutes across India – I can confidently say that a large number of people have now understood Bhau's original mission, the work of BJS, and are willing to participate in their own way to take every step to support me in fulfilling Bhau's dream of social development. This is primarily a victory of all the work Bhau has conceptualized for BJS, looking at the ground realities and real issues from the field. I see people identifying with these issues and their expectations from BJS for solutions are rising.

I feel very honoured for being able to establish the connection of Bhau's work under my newly-bestowed leadership. The fact that I could generate the confidence for BJS' work and its future across masses, elites, academicians, political, and executive authorities and of course the sadhu-sadhvis of different sects leaves me with the mixed feelings of successfully passing the test of Bhau's confidence in me against all adverse voices, and of being aware of the rising expectations from the field for which I will have to do everything to deliver what I am committing. I am aware that with every word and action of mine,

FIRST PERSON

Bhau's decision of selecting me as his heir apparent is at stake. But I am confident that I will make him proud with the way BJS will fulfill the mission he has set for us.

BJS programmes envisaged by Bhau are the need of the hour, and I see my primary role of connecting with the field for maximizing the outcome of all these programmes. My focus will be on optimizing this connection, which was somewhat a drawback of BJS in spite of the huge investment made in designing the most required solutions.

I am also very keen on enhancing the programme outreach through technology. However, going beyond today's programmes, my efforts will be more directed towards changing the organizational profile by connecting younger generation with the organization so that down the line, like Bhau, I will also be able to create a sustaining organization beyond my own leadership. Keeping this in mind, I also aim at creating a very strong process of going beyond programmes and constantly creating opportunities for percolating the contemporary thought process of BJS at every level, where people start thinking on serious subjects, deliberate on the wide-scale concerns, and prepare generations for future sustainability.

If I feel confident today about doing justice to Bhau's expectations, I owe it to the manner in which he has groomed me, and also the fact that he has extended his full support in terms of resources for me to take up this huge responsibility. I have utmost reverence for Bhau, who has instilled his faith in me for fulfilling his dreams for the betterment of society and keeping the long march on.”

THE WAY FORWARD



The decision and the subsequent announcement of my retirement from BJS fuelled my sense of urgency to create a space dedicated solely for addressing the various concerns in school education. Our over-a-decade-long experience of design, development, and implementation of EDUQIP, and especially School Assessment & Accreditation across the length and breadth of the country, along with the ongoing Mulyavardhan pilot project in Maharashtra had helped us attain a level of maturity and understanding of these domains, which comes only from working at the grassroots with various stakeholders of the education system at various levels of the education chain. The colossal work done by BJS in this regard was beckoning me to pursue the critical areas of quality and values (with their evident paucity) in the Indian school education in a more in-depth, holistic manner. I was all set to go ahead with ‘quality’ and ‘values’ as decidedly the two pillars on which my future body of work and the organization that I would newly build, would rest upon. It was a conscious effort to focus on these two issues because they pose a far greater challenge

on account of the sheer number of schools in the country, a vast majority of which are government run. The complexities of scale coupled with many other factors have resulted in very few reforms in these crucial areas since independence. A lot of gap is seen in what the national level policies have recommended versus the ground reality in schools. Acknowledging the fact that there are innumerable constraints of the government machinery like other pressing issues within education, frequent shuffles in the political and bureaucratic set-up, lack of a sustained implementation rigour and acute shortage of skilled resources, it is vital that private institutions and civil society organizations support the government in its efforts to improve school educational quality and promote a value-based education system. I was clear in my mind that the new organization would work towards providing scalable, replicable solutions required for improving the school education system by working closely with the central and state governments at the top level and the local governing institutions at the grassroots. With a good understanding of the strengths as well as bottlenecks within the government system, it made perfect sense to contribute by demonstrating workable models of diagnostic as well as transformative solutions with a clear focus on promoting a child-friendly and child-centred ecosystem, models which could then be scaled up for greater impact.

The entire year of 2014 has thus seen an interesting turn of events and a great flurry of activities within the precincts of my office on Senapati Bapat Road. My retirement from BJS brought in its wake endless discussions and brainstorming sessions on ways and means, on focus areas and priorities, to inch closer to the vision of bringing about a value-based quality education in the country through a model that would be acceptable to any government or private school management.

Thus, after much contemplation and deliberations, the new entity, a fuzzy picture of which had already taken shape in my mind

earlier finally came into being in the form of the Shantilal Muttha Foundation. I appointed McKinsey & Company as the consultant to provide the strategic blueprint for the new organization. I also roped in Leapfrog, a leading branding consultancy in Delhi, for branding of the Foundation. I feel proud to say that Shantilal Muttha Foundation now has an eclectic mix of people with diverse backgrounds and experiences in areas like educational research, philosophy of education, content and curriculum development, documentation, training, assessments, impact and evaluation, systems, knowledge management, project management, media & communications, and other relevant fields. All our team members, young and veterans alike, who have joined the Foundation as regular staff, experts and/or consultants feel equally passionate about our vision ‘to ensure that all children get an education that will help them become caring, responsible, and productive citizens.’

We all believe this vision can be attained by engaging with the school system in a proactive and collaborative manner, building on the strengths of all stakeholders. Our mission is ‘to help school-systems, schools, and teachers enrich their capacities for fostering the all-round development of children.’ My primary strategy is to leverage my entrepreneurial energies, and the expertise of like-minded professionals from several fields to develop and deliver empowering solutions for schools and their stakeholders. While the range of possible solutions is large, Shantilal Muttha Foundation (SMF) is currently focused on two areas to which it brings a vast amount of experience, knowledge, and research-based evidence: Value Education and School Assessment.

SMF in Value Education: SMF strongly feels there is need for ‘value education’ through a planned and systematic school effort aimed at promoting student understanding and knowledge of certain values, and development of the competencies and dispositions

required to live according to the values. In expressing this concern and priority, SMF is reflecting the views of many leading thinkers and educationists in India and abroad, and recommendations of many education commissions and committees set up in the country since Independence. However, the recommendations have largely been not implemented, particularly in government schools, which form the majority of elementary-level schools in the country. Hence, SMF has made a principled and strategic choice to develop a value education programme as a whole school approach for adoption and adaptation by school systems and schools across the country.

The cornerstone for SMF's whole school value education initiative is a conceptual and operational framework for 'enabling schools to provide child-friendly and value-based education to nurture democratic citizenship.' This framework has been so designed as to be in consonance with the Constitution of India and the policies like the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act) 2009. The idea is to demonstrate a replicable model of value-based school education which can then be scaled up to a large number of schools, government and privately managed.

SMF in School Grading and Process Assessment: In order to consolidate our years of experience and expertise in the domain of school grading and process assessment, I decided to institutionalize this offering from SMF as a result of which Athena Advanced Learning Solutions Pvt. Ltd was created as an initiative of Shantilal Muttha Foundation. It is a private limited company created with a vision to promote a culture of institutional excellence through continuous improvement, and strive to make this culture a way of life at educational institutions for them to provide joyful, meaningful, and useful learning experience to every student. Founded by me, Athena also has as its co-founders, Dr. Arun Nigavekar (Founder

Director, National Assessment and Accreditation Council - NAAC), along with Mr. Prafulla Parakh, National President, BJS, and Ms. Manjiri Sule, Director, BJS, the duo who jointly own the school assessment and accreditation initiatives of BJS since 2009.

Athena is dedicated to endorse and promote an institutional environment where students are encouraged to grow academically, emotionally and socially. Athena provides complete 'grading and process assessment' and certification services for schools thereby 'Endorsing Quality of Education' through its comprehensive quality assessment and grading system with the brand name of Athena - GPA. It is an upcoming quality dashboard for managements to run their schools effectively and efficiently.

Athena strives to create a positive relationship with management, principals, teachers, students, and parents that will help in creating a quality-conscious environment in the entire school, and so the schools as a community gear up for essential quality improvement. Athena, through leadership in Innovation in School Assessment, and with partnerships that augment resources in support of classroom transactions, can offer significant opportunities to heighten the classroom experience for students and teachers, while heightening the excellence in whole school quality.

All the future efforts of SMF in the government as well as private space in this crucial area of school quality assessments will be channelized through Athena.

I have always been keen to ensure that our educational solutions and interventions are grounded in solid research and backed by a strong body of evidence. I believe that every learning organization should invest adequately in research and nurture a research temperament to validate and enrich its offerings to the world at large. To this effect, SMF has rightfully started an educational and social research institute guided and led by noteworthy and experienced individuals from the field of research. It will be an

institute functioning independently, and its scope of work will go beyond the domains in which SMF is currently working, catering to a larger pool of clientele. As such its main emphasis will be on generating actionable insights to help its clients design effective and efficient interventions in the education and social sectors. The clientele will include, but would not be limited to governments, NGOs, NPOs, the corporate, as well as individuals and communities.

I am right now focusing on forging strategic partnerships with certain other educational service providers and resource institutions to strengthen and enrich our basket of offerings so that schools can receive high quality educational improvement solutions through a single window. Alongside, our work within the challenging landscape of government rural and urban schools is also in full swing, which gives us plenty of opportunities to learn, review, reflect, and improve our own solutions. I am also pursuing several individuals of national and international repute to join us in the advisory capacity and help provide the necessary direction for the organization to reach its pinnacle of excellence. It's a matter of great pride for me that Prof Parasuraman, Director, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, has accepted to be the Honorary Director of SMF. I also feel honoured to have by my side a veteran educationist like Dr. Ramesh Panse, who has dedicated his whole life in promoting the cause of child-centric and child-friendly education, and is himself a figure of authority in the domain of constructivism in education.

The realm of school education is so vast, with complexities galore, that it never ceases to awe me, inspire me, and I thrive on the challenges that it has to offer. It might seem an audacious dream for a man of my humble beginnings, but I have always believed in thinking big. I believe that due to some pre-ordained circumstances and my own abilities, I am in a position to invest time, energy, and resources for making fundamental changes in school education.

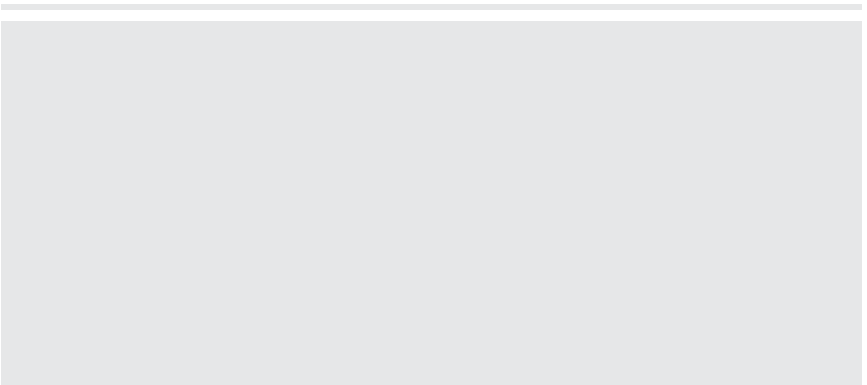
I don't know how many other people in the country enjoy this privilege, and how many will get this privilege in the future. I

NEW ENERGY

believe it is my god-given duty to use the privilege I have earned to work whole-heartedly for the betterment of the country; I believe this is my calling to help create a generation of active, intelligent, sensitive, and socially responsible citizens. And I know I will do it, no matter what.

Some dreams do come true....

FIRST PERSON





*“A silent warrior bringing about
sustainable change in society”*

PADMA VIBHUSHAN

Dr. KANTILAL H. SANCHETI

World-renowned Orthopaedic Physician

“

I remember the first time that I met Shantilal Muttha in the late eighties. I met him through a friend of mine, Ashok Jain, and another friend who once approached me, talking about this young man who was trying to bring about social change. I was intrigued by the concept of mass weddings that he was promoting at a time when the Marwari community was splurging money on weddings.

I decided I wanted to meet this man and I am glad I did that, because that meeting has resulted in a friendship that I value deeply. Shantilal Muttha is today a close friend, a man who I admire deeply. In fact, I am his lieutenant and he has to just reach out and I will be ready to be of whatever help I can deliver.

I remember meeting with him and being fascinated by the idea of mass marriages. Even in those days, the sharpness of his mind and the clarity of his thoughts were impressive for someone so young.

I decided to become a volunteer in the mass wedding movement and for me it was also a great way to creatively express myself – till today I have a passion for designing things, be it artificial limbs, hospitals or anything else – and so I told him I would help him design the wedding mandap.

Weddings today are very different from the weddings of those days where there was no concept of designing a designated place for the guests to relax, lunch to be served, and for people to move about. I offered my services to Shantilal and he was delighted to have someone do that for his dream project. It was both hugely challenging and immensely fulfilling thing to design the marriage mandap for the 625 weddings that he organised in January 1988. Lakhs of people, including

many celebrities and political leaders, came to Pune to participate in the ceremony and it was one of the grandest events of those times. I was glad to be part of that.

What I admired about him then and continue to do to this day is the fact that he does his social work with his own money, and I have not seen anybody in the world who does this, without any benefit to himself. In an age where almost everything is being done to benefit the self and to create a public image of the self, Shantilal continues to be a solitary figure striking out on his own and living life on his own terms. For a person from our Marwari community who came up on his own after having grown up in extreme poverty, to take up this kind of selfless work was very unusual.

Every time I met this simple man, he had a new idea that he was working on. And all of these are meant for social transformation. I was impressed by this young man's missionary zeal, his passion and his practice of doing things first and talking about it later.

In an age where people live on the glory of just one thing they have done in their lives, Shantilal is someone who has been continuously involving himself with the poorest communities in the state and bringing positive, life-transforming change into their lives.

Shantilal is also a person of keen intelligence and he possesses a very practical outlook on life. I know that every time I need a practical, unbiased, and clear opinion, I can reach out to him. In the eighties, when we (Sanchetis) built the new wing for the Sancheti hospital, the old building was vacant and I did not know what to do with it. It was he who suggested that we give this on rent to an IT company. It proved to be a brilliant piece of advice because the IT boom was beginning just then and we could generate a good income by renting out the building to Satyam Computers.

I admire the fact that Shantilal never says a single negative word about anyone. He is one of the most positive people I know and he inspires me with the way he lives his life. When he started work on the Mulyavardhan project, there were people who suspected that he had a

FIRST PERSON

hidden agenda behind it. Some insinuated that he had a political agenda and that he was doing this to get votes from the rural poor. Shantilal has proved them all wrong, not by addressing those accusations, but by implementing what is, perhaps, one of the most socially relevant revolutions in this country. It is when we educate people that they go on to bring about sustainable change in society. Shantilal Muttha is a silent warrior who is bringing about that change in our society. I shall watch his future journey very closely. ”

Blessed to Serve



*"The surgeries give a new life to a whole
lot of people"*

Dr. PARAG SANCHETI

Renowned Surgeon

“ In 1992, I finished my MS in a foreign university and headed home to start practice back at my father’s hospital in Pune. My initiation into my career at the hospital was with the plastic surgery camp being organised by Dr. Sharad Kumar Diksheet and Mr. Shantilal Muttha. Over the years, I developed a deep sense of awe about both of them. I was impressed by Dr. Dicksheet’s work and his unending dedication to the poor and the downtrodden. He became an idol and a role model for me, and I have Shantilalji Muttha to thank for bringing me in contact with the selfless doctor. Shantilalji himself conceived the idea of plastic surgery camps after a meeting with Dr. Diksheet at Aurangabad where the former was holding a plastic surgery camp. Upon his return from Aurangabad, Mutthaji immediately met my father and spoke about the idea of organizing such camps through the BJS and we agreed to do it at the hospital.

I had met him before as a volunteer in the mass wedding event – my duty was to walk one of the 25 couples who were getting married to the dais – and had been impressed by the scale of the event. Back then he was an elder, my father’s friend, but gradually I realised the significance of the kind of work he was doing.

When the surgery camps started at our hospital, local doctors criticized a number of things about Dr. Dicksheet and the camps, but we went on to prove the utility of the exercise. At each camp he operated 300-400 patients over five days, and I saw the transformation that happened in the lives of those patients. Over the years I began to admire Mutthaji’s vision and his commitment to the various causes that he adopted.

I also have Mutthaji to thank for curing me of a great fear of public speaking. Once, at a function during the early plastic surgery camps

at the hospital, my name was on the list of speakers during the event, but I was so terrified that I ran away. He sent his volunteers to fetch me and insisted that I say a few words to mark the event. But he realised that I had got it into my head that I was scared of speaking in public, so he worked patiently with me, taught me the nuances and the art of talking in public, gave me tips to grab and keep audience attention, till one day I lost my fear completely.

Mutthaji inspires me with his endless energy, his enthusiasm and his ability to come up with solutions for every kind of problem, personal or related to work. Every time I have approached him with a problem, he has always given me a solution and if he does not have one, he says he will revert with a solution in a couple of days, which he does.

I am amazed by how organized and methodical he is. For the plastic surgery camps, he actually published a book about how things would work during the event, right from placing advertisements about the event, to the number of patients who would be operated upon, and the flow of events till the last patient had gone home. It was so well-organized that the camps eventually seemed to run on auto pilot.

People often talk about the importance of delegation, but while most people just talk about it, he actually delegates and does not interfere when his team is doing their work. Apart from the first couple of times when he would come and find out if everything was under control during the camps, he completely withdrew himself and never made us feel that he did not trust us to carry on the good work that he had initiated.

Mutthaji also practices what he preaches. Most people keep it to just lip service, but he is walking the talk and has done exactly what he has promoted all his life. He had the courage of conviction to get his daughter and son married in a mass marriage and that was a bold thing to do in our community.

How many people do you know who spend money from their pocket to do social work? To me, Mutthaji has all the qualities of a leader. He is one of the few men I know who will not be hypocritical about things.

FIRST PERSON

If he does not agree with a particular thing, he will express himself without being fearful of the consequences or without thinking of who he is talking to.

He is a man of great commitment to his relationships and friendships. I was at a memorial service for a common friend who passed away recently and I was moved to tears by the speech he gave. He said life has ups and downs and if you have good friends and the goodwill and blessings of people, God will always help you during your bad times. It was a wonderful, touching message to give, and it was relevant that he spoke those things at that memorial service because they were the closest of friends and were always there for each other.

It is a measure of his commitment that even after Dr. Dicksheet's demise, Mutthaji has ensured that he continues with the plastic surgery camps by working with his team. Those surgeries transform lives, in fact it gives a new life to a whole lot of people. ”



“A karmayogi, doing work not for himself, but for a larger good”

RAMKUMAR RATHI

Founder of Promoters and Builders Association of Pune, now CREDAI

“ *Shantilal and I have been friends since 1980, when I was president of PBAP and he was the honorary secretary. Together, we did a lot of work in the construction industry at a time when the industry was viewed with suspicion and looked down at by society. We made a good team and took up projects such as the mobile crèches for children of construction workers that have given their kids a better chance at life. Today, the PBAP looks after some 2,000 such children.*

Even though he is a lot younger than me, we clicked right from the very beginning and became close friends. He is a very fine person and was a good colleague, and I have great memories of wonderful card sessions with him. From the very beginning, I was struck by his enthusiasm, his energy, and by his desire to do something for the underprivileged. In the industry too he focused on schemes for the low-income group, and he has continued that sensitivity and sincerity to this day.

He was one of the most successful secretaries of the PBAP. It was extraordinary that a man who was so young could become a secretary when there were so many other senior members of the industry, but he managed it because of his commitment and his vision. I have always been impressed by his enthusiasm and conviction about things.

Today we are in different fields – I am working in promoting yoga in our country and he has dedicated his life to social work – but in our hearts we are still the good old friends that we used to be.

In my mind, Shantilal is a karmayogi, doing work not for himself, but for a larger good. Karma Yog is the highest form of yog and he has already touched that height. I have tremendous love, affection, and regards for him.”



*“When his work benefits someone,
that alone is recognition
and a mark of success for him”*

G.C. JAIN

Trustee, BJS (Chhattisgarh)

“ *After I retired from a successful career as a chartered accountant, I started devoting my time to social causes, and that is how I first met Shantilalji Muttha. I had heard of his work in various parts of the country and I was thrilled when I started working with the BJS and was made President of the Chhattisgarh branch in 1996.*

Right from the very beginning, I was fascinated by the man’s sincerity, his dedication to his cause, his powerful oratory, and his hold over the masses. In the year 2000, Mr. Muttha addressed his first meeting in our state, and I still remember that he spoke to the audience almost without a break from 12 noon to 8 p.m., leaving for the railway station just half an hour before his train was scheduled to leave. More than 1,000 people attended the meeting and they mostly listened to him in pin-drop silence; such is his oratory and the clarity of his thought. Mutthaji is also a man who is remarkably humble and has a great connect with every member of the organization from the top to the very bottom. He is disciplined, enthusiastic, and always ready to pitch in with help wherever he is needed and he expects that from other members of the organization too.

Over the years that I have known him, I have noticed how firm he is of his decision, and how steadfast his intentions are when he sets out in the service of fellow human beings. When he is at work, he is focused only on that and has little need or regard for recognition for his work. When the work that he has started benefits someone, that alone is recognition for him and the mark of success.

From the time I met him, to today when I am one of the trustees of the organization, our relationship has always been of respect and friendship. I wish him all the best in his remarkable journey.”



*“Rare leader who consciously built a
second rung of leadership”*

SURESH KOTHARI

State President, BJS (Gujarat)

“ About 12 years ago, I picked up the phone and invited Shantilalji Muttha to be chief guest at the annual function of the Arya Kanya Gurukul, of which I am a member in my hometown, Porbandar. I was overjoyed when Shantilalji agreed to fly in for the function without once asking me for any other details to make himself available. All he said to me was that he would come provided I promised to agree to something that he would ask me to do at a later stage.

I already knew Shantilalji as a person doing great social work and so I agreed, without any reservations.

He took me up on that promise after some time by asking me to be the head of the Gujarat branch of the Federation of Jain Educational Institutions (FJEI) that he was setting up. I was taken aback by that request and tried to wriggle out of it by saying that I knew nothing about educational institutions, but he stuck to his stand and eventually I simply gave in to his request. Such was the power of his belief in me that when he asked me to organise a state-level conference of the FJEI some time later, I worked very hard to make it a huge success – then Chief Minister and now Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, and the Governor of Gujarat attended that session and shared a stage which, in itself, was a coup.

It has been a memorable association for me. I first met him in 1995 when I was in Pune to attend a large conference of the Jain community. As the president of the Federation of International Jain Social Groups, I was asked to felicitate Shantilalji, who was doing path-breaking work in effecting social change, and I fell in love with his simplicity and his sincerity from that very moment.

Over the years, I continue to be impressed by his down-to-earth nature; he is a millionaire, but never makes anyone feel that he is

superior to them because of his wealth. On the contrary, he goes out of his way to mingle with everyone, no matter what their social status. He has dedicated his entire life and his wealth to his cause and very few people can claim to have done that so selflessly.

My friend is also a great visionary. I remember a large meeting that he organized once to tell his associates and the BJS members about his concept of the empowerment of women in our community. I remember clearly that India was playing a crucial cricket match in England that day, and despite our craze for the game not a single person walked away from the venue till his speech was over. The women empowerment project has had far-reaching effects on the status of women in our community.

It is heart-warming and humbling that a man who is so knowledgeable has the generosity to seek and accept feedback from the smallest member of the organization. There are instances where he has called me and asked me to take a look at the documents relating to various projects that he is undertaking. And when I give him my feedback, he is happy to accept and include my suggestions, wherever possible. Few men have the ability to take criticism on the chin, but he is always welcoming of criticism too.

Shantilalji is also one of the few men who are true leaders. While most leaders and trustees will keep control of organizations with them, Shantilalji is one of the rare leaders who have consciously built a second rung of leadership. For him ego issues and power struggles don't exist. What matters is that the work of social change that he has initiated should continue to grow and benefit the largest number of people. My salutations to this splendid human being!

”



“Our father has given us a legacy in the form of countless blessings from society”

SONALI CHORDIA

Daughter

“ *In every family, a father leaves his children a legacy in the form of property or wealth, but our father has given us a legacy in the form of countless blessings from society. I am blessed that I am born to a man who has the good wishes of so many families whose lives he touched with his kindness.*

Growing up in a nuclear family with my parents and my brother was in many ways an ordinary life. But what was unusual was the fact that though father would be away for long stretches at a time, when he came back the house would be overflowing with his friends, colleagues, and people who would arrive at our home just to meet him.

I was too young then to realise that my father was an ordinary man attempting to do extraordinary things to change the way we live our lives. What I did know, however, was the fact that while other schools would invite politicians as the chief guest for the flag hoisting ceremony on Republic Day, our school invited my father and treated him with so much respect that my heart filled with pride from it.

I think I realized when I was around 15-16 years old that my father was a well-known man who was doing path-breaking work. His pictures would appear in newspapers and they would talk about his community wedding projects. At that time I never knew one day I would get married in one of those very community marriages, but when it happened it was special because instead of the few family members and guests who usually gather at weddings, my wedding was attended by thousands of people. And I went home with their blessings and my dad had the opportunity to yet again prove that he walked the talk himself.

Even as a child I remember my father used to put a lot of premium on our education. He monitored our performance all along, and when I



In colours of harmony: Bottom row (L to R) - Grandchildren Aariya, Arham, Shourya, Neil Middle row: Sarla Muttha, Shantilal Muttha Standing (L to R): Neha, Sameer, Vaibhav, Sonali.

passed my tenth class he sat with me discussing my options and giving me suggestions.

Father's persuasion skills are amazing. He also has this rare ability to listen to other people, and if he feels he has erred, he is the first one to make amends. He doesn't have ego issues. As kids, even we had the right to tell him if we thought something he did was wrong.

A few years ago he underwent a bypass surgery, but impressed us with how fast he bounced back from that setback. He is disciplined with his medicines, with his lifestyle, and with the way he now manages his work. Now he focuses more on strategizing, spending hours in his office room, meeting people and steering the organization's work with



With daughter Sonali

a missionary zeal. I wish sometimes that he would relax a bit and slow down, but as a family we also know that this is his passion, and we are proud that he is able to achieve all that he has set out to do.

A lot of credit for what my father achieved goes to the unstinting support that my mother gave through the years. As a young bride, and later as the mother of two children, she stayed in the background, tending to us and her home when father pursued his passion. All the values that we have, we learnt from her. We imbibed a spiritual streak from her, learnt to respect our elders, and to treat everyone as equals.

In many ways, father knows and respects that, and that is why he has a soft corner for her and treats her as a trusted and loved companion along his journey. ”



*“Admire his vision, ability for
strategic thinking”*

SAMEER MUTTHA

Son

“

Growing up with our father was a completely fun-filled time. I remember he used to work very hard, but he used to take time out to have fun with us as well, despite his hectic schedule. Today, I find myself struggling to find the time to spend with my own son and wife. In fact, it is a rare luxury to take a break at all.

He was and continues to be a stickler for punctuality and discipline. Bunking school was never an option for us; it was something that was allowed only if we were ill.

For me he has always been a figure who commands awe and respect. He is my father, but he is also someone I look up to. I try and measure up to the kind of work he has been able to do, but it will be a long time before I reach anywhere close to that.

Father is also a man of great wisdom in other ways. I don't remember him as someone who used his authority to rule our lives. He is more likely to suggest things and then allow us to follow our own path. When I was in college, there were times when I struggled with figuring out what I wanted to do with my life, and at every stage he helped me clear my mind and take the next step forward. He nudged me towards computers and information technology at a time when it was just making its presence felt in India. Moreover, IT is something that has immense scope for increasing knowledge, creativity, and a lot of other things, and the profession also has got stature.

He never wanted me to get into real estate because he said there is more space for learning and innovation in IT, but when I eventually decided I wanted to follow him into the business, he did not object or deter me.

The decision to get into real estate was also taken because we had

started one of our large commercial properties on which we had made a huge investment. While my uncle was already steering the project, I thought it would be the perfect learning opportunity for me. Father never stopped me. In fact, he encouraged me so that I took to spending the entire day at the construction site understanding a lot of things. I didn't even know how a wall was built and my family was in the construction business! I learnt it all from scratch and today I am convinced I am doing a decent job of it. He is very particular about deliverables and will not give me any concessions if I don't deliver the desired result.

I hugely admire his vision and his ability for strategic thinking. At a time when other builders were making money selling residential apartments, he decided to go for asset creation by leasing, not selling. With our current business model we continue to make an assured income from leasing space in our properties and it is this income that is used for a large portion of his philanthropic work. And, he has the security that his family is looked after very well and not wanting for anything.

While everyone else in the business was constructing buildings for BPOs and call centres, father decided he would provide high-quality facilities for companies in the high-end research and software development space, and the strategy worked. Our clients in that space did not mind spending more, but they did not want to be in the same space as BPOs and call centres.

In the mid-90s, we had a line-up of multinational clients ranging from Cirrus Logic, IKEA to Unilever, and slowly we built a healthy relationship with these companies who then connected and recommended us to other clients. We have never had to advertise our space because of the goodwill father created in his business.

Now that I am handling a major part of the business, he restricts himself to looking at the macro picture and developing the roadmap for future. What I really admire about him is that when he gives you a job to be accomplished he completely trusts you and leaves you to handle



In the same boat: A family getaway.

it without interfering. His entire social change movement, in fact, is based on the fact that he envisions it and trusts his volunteers and team members to deliver on it.

The needs and requirements of society change from time to time and the wisdom is in being sensitive to that requirement and addressing the issue at hand.

Sometime in 1990, father came in contact with Dr. Sharad Kumar Dicksheet, the reputed American plastic surgeon, who spent a large portion of his life conducting free plastic surgery camps in India. Father lost no time in connecting with him and for 20 years, between 1990 and 2010, the BJS and Dr. Dicksheet conducted countless free plastic surgeries, not just in Pune, but across the state, in smaller towns, where people had no access to this kind of services or even knew that such options existed.

When he first started the plastic surgery camps at the Sancheti



With son Sameer

hospital in Pune, there was a backlash from the practicing surgeons in the city because they perceived that the free surgeries would hit their own practice. They spread malicious rumours about the camps, insinuated that they were being conducted in unsafe conditions and that he had a hidden agenda behind the project. Father continued his work with the co-operation of Dr. Sancheti. He openly invited critics to come and check for themselves if the conditions at the camp were unsafe and very soon the criticism died down.

But the measure of the success of the camps was the fact that 2,50,000 people – a large portion of them girls who were born with disfigured faces, kids with cleft lips – benefitted from this voluntary work. For years, wherever he went, father would run into young women who thanked him for helping them get a better life by taking away their debilitating disfigurement. Grateful parents wrote to my father or came to meet him, thanking him for giving their girls the

FIRST PERSON

chance to find a life companion and get married.

When Dr. Dicksheet passed away a couple of years ago, father was devastated. He had forged a great bond of friendship with him and together they accomplished a lot of good work. Eventually he decided to continue Dr. Dicksheet's work, and together with a team of 5-6 surgeons who had trained under him in the US, the BJS continues to hold plastic surgeries that benefit so many unfortunate girls and children.

Away from work, father is a fun-loving person. He is a movie buff and loves watching a film every week. During the evenings he watches old Hindi films at home. While his illness has made him careful about what he eats, he loves a breakfast treat of misal with his friends. He loves his daily walk with his gang of fellow walkers and says it rejuvenates his mind and body. ”



*“At home he is like my father and a friend
to my children”*

NEHA MUTTHA

Daughter-in-law

“ I grew up in a little village in Jalna, part of a large joint family, with four sisters and one brother. If you counted my cousins, we were totally 12 sisters and 6 brothers who lived together and had fun together. I was studying in the second year for my bachelor's degree when a proposal came from Mr. Muttha's family, who were looking for a bride for their son.

My family was already familiar with his work in mass marriages and social change and I had once received an award from him when the BJS was felicitating children who scored over 60 per cent in their SSC examinations. The marriage was, therefore, finalized really fast in 2003.

When I was in college, it was my dream to come to Pune and study, but my parents did not approve of their daughter going so far away from them, especially because ours is a conservative society. But look at my destiny. I got to come to Pune anyways and completed my graduation after marriage, going back home to give my final exams.

The initial months in Pune were really tough because I had married into a nuclear family after having come from a huge wada (ancestral home) in which 45 people lived together! Here Papaji and Sameer would go off to work first thing in the morning and it would only be me and Mummyji. But soon I made friends with my sister-in-law and mother-in-law. I would miss my home terribly earlier, but now it has been 10 years and my two children keep me very busy.

I got married to Sameer in a mass marriage, but it was not a new concept in the family because Papaji's work was already famous. Over 10,000 people attended my marriage along with 15 other couples. I was totally nervous, a little scared because everyone was somebody in



Grandchildren Neil and Shourya with their mother and doting dadaji.

that gathering – politicians, celebrities, city elders – and they all came and congratulated us and introduced themselves. It was already scary because I had not spent a lot of time in a big city, and this was a very big city after Jalna.

Papaji's ability to plan and organize, his management skills and his dedication to his cause never ceases to surprise me. He does so many things with his time, it is impossible to ever be able to keep up with him. I recently started going to his office and was so taken aback because he has multiple projects on at the same time, but he never talks about any of this at home.

At home he is like my father and a friend to my children. From him I learn the nuances of discipline; he can be very tough with the kids if they do something that is not acceptable.

I don't think many people can match the way he leads his life. Sameer respects him, but they are very different in the way they work.

FIRST PERSON

Now that the kids have grown up a bit, I try to involve myself in his projects, but the responsibility of the kids is still with me and I get only a couple of hours at work. ”



*“Amazed with his penchant for finding
new, bigger challenges,
his missionary zeal”*

VAIBHAV MADAN CHORDIA

Son-in-law

“

It has been almost 12 years to our marriage but I still think back about how it came about and laugh heartily at it.

Growing up in a community in which almost everybody knows everybody else, I had heard of Mr. Muttha and his work from the age of 10, when he would frequently be discussed for some or the other social change project he was doing. But I never imagined that I would one day end up being son-in-law to him.

I remember one day my parents called me up in Germany where I had gone for a year's study. I was surprised because those days they would call me only on specific days of the week and this was out of the ordinary. They said Mr. Muttha was visiting Germany for a couple of days to meet me since he was interested in looking at me as a prospective groom for his daughter. I was a bit taken aback because I was still a student, but agreed because my parents were keen that I meet with him. Imagine my surprise when I found a few days later that Mr. Muttha had come to Germany with his entire family!

It was an interesting two days though and I was struck by the amount of enthusiasm he had for everything—knowing the local customs and traditions, visiting various tourist spots.

I was happy to take them around the town I lived in, introduce them to my friends, and take them out for meals. To his credit, he only brought up the topic of the marriage just before they were leaving Germany, and Sonali and I had a quick chat and we decided we would spend the rest of our lives together.

Back in India, a few months later, my family and I visited the Mutthas for the formal finalization of the wedding plans, which is when I came to know that he was proposing to get us married as part

of one of his mass marriages. For a few moments, I must confess, I was flummoxed. I had never imagined I would get married in this unusual way, but when he told me that 11 other couples would get married with us and that he was getting those couples married at his own expense, I realized it was a good cause and agreed without further reservation.

Papasa is a man of great determination and commitment to everything. I remember in the months prior to the wedding, he would visit 50-70 families every single day and personally hand over the invitation card for the wedding. Over 10,000 people attended our wedding and he had made personal contact with most of them prior to the event. On the day of the wedding, I remember arriving at the venue and being a bit overwhelmed. I had never before seen 10,000 people in the same place, unless, of course, it was a political party's gathering, but to have that many people witness our marriage and shower us with blessings was an unexpected bonus. My friend, who had come from Germany to be at our wedding, could not believe the festivity and the sheer number of people. Their weddings are small affairs and very quiet and here we had music, dance, and so many rituals. The beauty of the mass weddings was the fact that Papasa made sure that each couple got to have their own rituals and memories to carry home with them.

It has been almost 12 years since I became part of his family and every time I meet him I learn something new from him. I never cease to be amazed with his penchant for finding new, bigger challenges, his missionary zeal about these causes, his great ability to leverage the collective strength of his network of volunteers around the country and, above all, his intuition about each person's individual strengths. If there is a project on hand to be implemented, he knows exactly which of his team members can take it to fruitful conclusion.

He is also a caring father and patriarch, who is always ready to guide us, help out in every possible manner, and be the pillar of support that only a family elder can be. ”

FIRST PERSON



Flanked by his pillars of support, Sameer (right) and Vaibhav.



*“I was struck by his single-minded focus
and his commitment
to the causes that he believes in”*

SUDHA MENON

Author

“

I first heard about Shantilal Muttha sometime in the late 1980s, when I was studying journalism at the University of Poona. As aspiring journalists, our brief was to read every city newspaper that we could lay our hands on, and while on this mission one name would pop up regularly: Shantilal Muttha.

I remember vaguely that his media appearances would be about some social work project or the other. I was intrigued by the man's frequent appearances in the newspapers and remember wondering to myself how he made that happen when he was neither a politician nor a well-connected head of a business house. In mid-1988, I was part of a team that put together a daily newsletter for the 75th edition of the Indian Science Congress that was being held in the university campus. Then Prime Minister, (late) Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, and his entourage, including Home Minister, Mr. Buta Singh, were in the city to visit the Science Congress and the local media went into a tizzy with so much to report on. And yet, the newspapers found the time and the space to simultaneously report on an event completely unconnected with Rajiv Gandhi during those days: the mass marriage of 625 couples, organised by Shantilal Muttha. My curiosity about the man was further whetted, but I guess it was not yet time for our meeting.

I went away to Mumbai to pursue my journalistic career in 1988 and returned to Pune in 1994, and for the next 16 years I continued to read about Mr. Muttha on and off, in newspapers. I never imagined for a moment that I would end up writing a book on the man, a quarter of a century later.

Social revolutions in India have largely been catalyzed by ordinary people who have lived life at the grassroots level. History is replete with the examples of such ordinary people – from Mahatma Jyotiba

Phule, Sant Gadge Maharaj, Mahatma Gandhi, to even modern-day social change makers such as Anna Hazare. Unfortunately, this has also come to mean that most people would find it hard to believe that people of means who live in mansions and drive luxury cars are capable of catalyzing change too.

Shantilal Muttha could well have remained a khadi-clad man from a humble rural background who struggled to bring about change, but as he made his journey from a poor boy growing up in a rural outpost of Maharashtra to a young man setting out on a new life in Pune city, he learnt that he could not take up the work of social change with money that he had to beg off others. He took a decision at that point that he would give up aspiring to do social work till he had earned enough money of his own so that he could follow his heart and commit himself to that passion whole-heartedly. That was one of the turning points of his life. The young man began as a real estate agent, worked hard to set himself up as a builder of repute in the city, and earned a reputation for being a hardworking, honest man who honoured his commitments. Ten years after he became an entrepreneur, he walked away from that world when he was at the peak of his career/business, to go back to his first love: social work.

It was not an easy thing to do. When he announced his decision to move away from a thriving business at the age of 31 and devote himself to social work, he was the butt of ridicule from everyone – friends, extended family, and the community around him which put a premium on material success. It takes an extraordinary mind and a great deal of conviction to follow one's heart, heedless of the cacophony of voices expressing their diverse views. I suspect that if I searched, I would find very few people like Shantilal Muttha, who started life from scratch at the age of 25, earned much money, social standing and reputation in a decade, and then walked away from all of it. In doing this, he managed to destroy the myth that the rich could not be bothered about the well-being of anybody but themselves.

Along the way, he made another decision. That he would not base

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his life's work on criticizing someone else. When the idealistic young man and his friends arrived at the doorstep of a rich businessman to chasten him for hosting a very lavish wedding ceremony for his daughter, he had no idea what awaited him in that house. The furious businessman took them to task for their naïveté and audacity. He had every right to use his money as he pleased, he said, summarily dismissing the stunned young people. That day, Shantilal decided that instead of criticizing someone, he would take up his own agenda to bring about social change and follow it through to the end.

I met Mr. Muttha several times over a one-year period in his 8th floor office in a sprawling office complex that he leases out to large IT clients. These clients pay him the money that he uses to look after his family, and to fund most of the social work projects that he has underway. Each time, I left with wonderment, marveling at life and the extraordinary journey of this man who was born an impoverished village boy, but has grown in stature over the years to become something of an icon in his community.

One of the most noticeable traits about the man is his dogged determination to take a decision, stick by it irrespective of sneers and criticism, to take a dream to fruition. One of his most audacious steps, to my mind, was the decision to bring 1,000 children from the earthquake-stricken region of Latur to Pune, where he rehabilitated them. His community laughed at him, and cautioned him against taking on such a task. They said he was asking to be bankrupted, but he was determined to give those children a better life, and if that required him to set aside potential income from the sale of his residential apartments so that he could house the children in those apartments, he was happy to do it. He did not have the resources to do it, but his heart said it was the right thing to do and he did it. It was a journey fraught with uncertainties and challenges because he had neither a school nor a college or any experience in education that equipped him to take up such a task. Many of the kids missed their homes and several ran away, and he had to put his people on the job of tracking them down and

taking them back to their families in Latur. Others developed severe anxiety after the trauma of the earthquake, so he called in psychologists and therapists to help them tide over that crisis.

I met several of the people who came along with Muttha to Pune and was awed by what one man's dream and determination can achieve. Many of those children are now adults who hold responsible positions in society. They are teachers, doctors, technologists, sarpanchs (headperson) in their villages, and no matter what their situation in life, most of them are mentoring people less fortunate than they are, and helping villagers improve the quality of their lives. And no matter what else they are busy doing, Shantilal Muttha has to simply make a call and they are ready to help out in any project where he needs them. They have not forgotten that their lives would not have been the same but for a stranger's act of kindness.

When he decided to undertake a padayatra of the state, he did it by first committing himself to the task publicly, saying he would not step into a vehicle even for a second during the padayatra. And he did not, even though many of the colleagues and friends who set out with him on that padayatra returned home in a couple of days, unable to bear the blisters on their feet.

When the Gujarat earthquake claimed thousands of lives, Muttha went there with his volunteers, pitched a tent by the road and stayed there for four months, never once retreating into the comfort of a hotel room to escape from the traumatic scenes all around him. Instead, he worked round the clock with his army of volunteers, ate and slept with them, and returned only after he had erected over 360 schools in the affected villages so that the children could reclaim some normalcy in their lives. On the 13th day after the quake, BJS volunteers inaugurated the first temporary school at Samkhiyali, one of the worst-affected villages. For the villagers, it was almost symbolic because the 13th day also marks the end of the mourning for the dead and a new beginning for the rest of the family. For Samkhiyali's residents, the school was a sign of renewed hope and the beginning of their new life. It is a measure

of the man's amazing foresight, vision, and of his entrepreneurial skills too that those earthquake- and cyclone-resistant classrooms were later used to provide shelter to the quake-affected in J&K, and many other such disasters.

When speed was of essence in getting the temporary schools in Gujarat dismantled and transported so that thousands of victims of the 2005 J&K earthquake could be provided shelter, it was Muttha's determination that won the day. Ashok Pawar, one of his long-time associates, talked to me about struggling to get 30 wagon loads of the dismantled schools on their way to the valley, from Gandhidham. It was Diwali time and there was no labour available to load the wagons and BJS volunteers were in the mood to give up in despair. When Muttha came to know the situation, he lost no time in speaking to members of the Gujarat Builders Association and within half an hour 70 labourers reached the railway platform and loaded the wagons. The train left for Jammu at 11 a.m., as scheduled. "Bhau's constant refrain to us is: 'We are here to do what is impossible,'" says Pawar.

It is with that very same determination that he tackled other challenges over the years – the rehabilitation of Andaman & Nicobar schools following the tsunami, the floods in Bihar and Maharashtra, among others. No challenge is too tough that the man will accept defeat, and it is with this spirit that he is now on the way to implementing one of the most ambitious private sector interventions in the education system that will transform the way education is delivered in India in the years to come.

In early 2013, he decided he would shift to Dongarkini and revive hundreds of water bodies in the chronically drought-prone regions of Maharashtra that would give a better life to the population of that area. It was a gargantuan task, but he did it, using his own resources and garnering the support of hundreds of people who live there. He braved the severe heat and hardship of living in a place where water had become the source of fights amongst friends and neighbours. When he returned home to Pune after a month, most of the water bodies

there had been de-silted for the first time since independence. When the rains finally arrived, the water bodies soaked up water thirstily and the ground water in that region is now so healthy that villagers don't have to worry about water for the coming year.

Over dozens of meetings with him, his friends and colleagues, I realised that Muttha's winning quality is the ability to make friends for life. Making friends and keeping connections is something that comes to him easily. In an age of rent-a-crowd audiences that make events appear well-attended, Shantilal Muttha has the rare quality of attracting people and keeping their loyalties for a long time. And that is because he invests his time and emotions in each of his connections, takes personal interest in their families, and is available for them any time of the day and night. When his daughter got married in a community wedding, he visited some 10,000 families, personally inviting them for the wedding. These visits gave him an opportunity to take a close look at the way families in his community lived and gauge the mood amongst them. Those who come to know him remain loyal to him because those relationships are forged by him not on the basis of money they have in the bank, their connections, or their social standings, but by their personal qualities that appeal to him.

Some of his closest associates are the friends that he made during his childhood in Dongarkini, Pravaranagar, boarding school at Kada, his one year in college at Ahmednagar, and his days at the hostel in Pune. Little wonder then that he has just to pick up the phone and talk to a few of them and an army of volunteers are ready to commit months of their time, selflessly, to his cause. Like the time he was able to get volunteers together to help him during the Jain conference in Pune. To this day the community talks about the efficiency with which the conference went off and the appreciation that the organizers got from the guests who thronged the conference from across the country. Such is the pull of that man and the strength of his relationships that heavyweights, including Mr. Pawar and then Union Minister, Mr. Salve, attended the event to marry off 625 couples in one single ceremony.

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Friendships are pleasurable, but they are also hard work and you have to be able to stand by your friends through thick and thin, he told me during one of our many chats. "There is no place for hidden agendas and exploitation in relationships."

Muttha's charisma and his commitment to relationships have proved useful when he set out on various journeys. His first foray into entrepreneurship, the first construction project, was started on a Rs. 5,000 loan from a friend in the Jaycees Club. The BJS' EDUQUIP spread from Andaman & Nicobar to Goa on the basis of word of mouth, and recommendation from the then education secretary, who later took up the same post in Goa.

His ability to strategize and plan things much in advance has always been a trump card and a great enabler for him. His planning and strategizing, it is evident, is always based on an understanding of the ground realities and not on theoretical knowledge. When he planned the Shanti Yatra following the demolition of the Babri Masjid, he was dissuaded by his friends, colleagues at BJS, and even friend Sharad Pawar who cautioned him against getting involved in religious conflict. Muttha persisted and followed his instincts because his own religion opposes violence against any living being.

The aftermath of the Babri Masjid's felling left him shaken and he did not want to remain a mute witness to the violence that people were committing against each other. He decided to set out on the Shanti Yatra with leaders from across religions joining him in the initiative. Such was the impact of the yatra on common folk in the cities and towns that he visited, that by the time it reached its final destination and went through volatile places such as Malegaon, the government itself was encouraging people to go and attend the public meetings that the Shanti Yatra leaders were organizing in various places.

In an age where there are any number of rich people who donate generously towards social causes, Muttha is one of the handful of successful entrepreneurs who devotes himself completely to the causes that are close to his heart. He is the ultimate grassroots man,

connected to hundreds and thousands of people in different corners of the country, who uses his time, money, infrastructure, and intelligence to make social change happen when he could well have used all of these to promote his business or another agenda of his own. He is neither a politician nor one in the making. His only interest is to change lives and he has committed his life to make that happen.

It is said our lives span out on the back of the life choices that we make at different points in our life. Each of us arrive at various junctions in our lives where we have to take one path or the other without ever knowing that those decisions could be the turning point of our lives. Muttha's life too posed many such dilemmas, but at each stage he took the path less travelled, knowing well that it could change his life and the lives of those around him. But that did not deter him from his life's mission.

When he started promoting the concept of mass marriages, people told him that he should first promote it within his own community. When he did that, they laughed at him saying he should first put his theory to practice in his own home. While the ordinary man would have been disheartened at the response to his concept and possibly given up, it was a signal for Muttha to show his mettle. He got down to work, convincing his elder brother, who had a daughter of marriageable age, to get her married in a mass wedding ceremony.

That was over 26 years ago. The duo is now proud parents of two teenage daughters and says they are glad they stood by a man who is committed to a cause. Muttha's commitment to the concept was further proved when he got his own two children, a son and a daughter, married in such ceremonies when he could, in fact, have got them married in the lavish ceremonies that his community is known for.

Over the months that I worked with him for this book, I was struck by his single-minded focus and his commitment to the causes that he believes in. In early 2013, when the first reports of the drought in Maharashtra started trickling in, I was witness to a flurry of activity at the BJS office in Pune. Volunteers, senior office bearers, and Muttha

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spent hours collating information, charting out an action plan, and garnering support for the work they intended to do, to bring relief to the drought-affected people in the state. And when the action plan was ready, the man simply shifted to Dongarkini, the village where he began his journey, and stayed there for a month braving the severe weather conditions as he undertook the massive work of de-silting the water bodies in the region and providing critical water storage tanks and water pumps that could alleviate the misery of the villagers. Each morning he would tour the affected villages to address public meetings, where he called on the villagers to participate in the work and help themselves by solving the vexing water-related issues they were facing. At one point, entire villages dropped everything else they were doing and headed towards the water bodies for 'shram daan', inspired by the words of a son of that very soil.

It is this spirit of commitment that has also propelled Muttha to spend the last few years of his life to bringing transformational change by integrating value education into the existing education system in government schools in the country. It has been an uphill task, but he has chosen to take it up nevertheless, pouring endless personal resources, tracking down the best minds in the space – academicians, psychologists, educators, and trainers – and convincing them to come on board so that they can work together for long-lasting change in our education.

Children are the future of this country, and to raise them to be honest, upright citizens with a sense of the fair, the good, the correct and the just is crucial, he told me repeatedly during our conversations. I found it both awe-inspiring and admirable that he chose to take up a project of this proportion when he knows that his work in this space could well end up in the dustbin of history, if the government opts not to allow his Mulyavardhan project to be delivered through its network.

That it is a work of lasting impact became clear to me when I visited Dongarkini and a few villages where the Mulyavardhan project is being piloted. In a tiny two-room school in a hamlet surrounded by

hills, a five-year-old boy, Bhagwat, stole my heart when he recited this poem to me.

*Chhota sa maajha ghar
Shalechya vatevar,
Babaa maajhe shoor far
Dada aahe khoop chhaan,
Aaji ani aajoba
Mi tar tyaancha ladoba,
Aai dete mala daba
Aatya mhante chal babaa,
Ghar mala aavraicha aahe
Neet netka thevaaycha aahe,
Kaka neto phirayla
Tai havi khelayla,
Saglyanna mi madat kareen
Gharchyanvar mee prem kareen.*

Roughly translated, this means: Mine is a small, happy house on the way to my school. My father is a brave man, my elder brother is a great guy, and I am the apple of my grandparents' eyes. My mom lovingly makes a lunchbox for me every day, while my aunt keeps the house clean. My uncle indulges me by taking me out on a spin every day, and my sister is my constant companion for games. I promise to be of help and support to everyone, and love my family members.

This is Bhagwat's story, in his own words: "I live with my parents, grandparents, and siblings in a small house which is surrounded by fields and mountains in the distance. My parents and grandparents go away early morning to work in the forests and fields. Aai (mother) makes me roti in the morning before going to work and tells me to study hard at school and not be naughty.

"I love going to school, especially because it is in my own backyard. I know that I have to have a bath and be neat and clean before I go to

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school. I like being in school very much because I like the teachers and like to hear the stories and sing the songs that they teach me. I especially like the story about a small village family and how they love each other. I have memorized all the lines in that song and often recite it to my family.

“At 4 p.m., when my school gets over, I go home and wait for my parents and other family members to come home from the fields. My classmates and friends from school who live on the other side of the mountain have to walk a long way to reach home. They have learnt it is safe to walk in a line along the side of the road and stay together while they walk up the mountain to get to the other side where their homes are. Someday I want to go with them when they walk home because they say they have a lot of fun when they walk back home together.”

What tugged at my heart-strings is the fact that the boy had so little in terms of material comforts, but displayed a reservoir of spirit and enthusiasm that very few urban, privileged children possess. The family has barely enough to keep their body and soul together, but their son is growing up with values that will take him from strength to strength.

Gandhanwadi in Beed district's Patoda taluka has a population of a few hundred people. The villagers are humble folk who eke out a living working in fields as wage labour. Most of them are illiterate or barely know to read and write. Up until five years ago, the village was like any other village in the country, a place where progress of any kind had forgotten to knock the door.

The principal and teachers at the Gandhanwadi zilla parishad school, which I visited, talk of village folk who were ridden with superstitions and spent their hard-earned money on alcohol and other addictions. The village was not very clean and disease was rampant. Families suffered from the ill-effects of various addictions, and children grew up seeing frequent fights and domestic violence at home. Largely unlettered and dependent on their daily wages, the adults would leave

their children to their own means while they went out to earn their living. Schooling was not considered necessary, and if the kids did go to school, drop-outs were frequent and not surprising.

But that was before the Mulyavardhan project started at the school. Visiting the Gandhanwadi school, at the dead end of a winding road flanked by swaying fields that lie outside the settlement, is a heart-warming thing to do. It is nothing like what you would expect in a village school. A total of 206 children, including 116 girls, attend school every day. This in itself is extraordinary because the male to female ratio in Maharashtra's Beed district is the lowest at 916 females to 1,000 males in the age group of 0-6, and female literacy is well below the state's average.

Brightly-coloured walls here carry messages of peace, harmony, and togetherness. Pictures of inspirational figures from our history constantly remind children and teachers alike about our past and the sacrifices of these leaders who got us independence. Classroom walls carry messages that reiterate the values that make life better: good manners, courtesy, the importance of learning and education. Outside, the courtyard with a couple of swaying trees around which the kids play during lunch time is spotlessly clean in a way that is immediately noticeable; you don't catch kids carelessly tossing discarded bits of paper or trash, nor do you see anyone spitting paan or tobacco.

The school principal, Suryabhan Bedre, and Mulyavardhan team members, Pravin Kathwate, Ganesh Koli, and Sunil Bahirwal say there is a parallel revolution that is happening in the village and in the families that populate it. At the village temple in Gandhanwadi, goat sacrifices to appease the gods are a thing of the past. Till about five years ago this was a frequent practice because people used to believe that doing so would rid them of the evil eye cast upon them by someone. Or, they thought that illness and other streaks of misfortune would disappear if they sacrificed a goat at the altar of the deity. Instead of inflicting violence on helpless animals, villagers today seek the blessings of the deity by offerings of sweets.

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In humble village homes, kids are beginning to talk to their parents about the ill-effects of addiction, and intervene when adults pick up fights under the influence of alcohol. Homes are cleaner now because the kids know the importance of hygiene and the co-relation between disease and poor hygiene. Both children and adults are aware of the importance of education. While the kids in this village thought nothing of bunking school a few years ago, they now look forward to attending school every day. Their parents, who previously neither knew nor cared what their children did in school, are now interested and involved in the process of their education.

Somnath Nawale, the Mulyavardhan teacher at the school, says that teaching these values to the kids has brought about a sea change in his own personality. The young man, who grew up in a village near Amalner, says he had a mercurial temper and was quick to take offence and flare up for small reasons a few years ago. Then he heard of the BJS and its Mulyavardhan project and since he already had a B.Ed (he was inspired by his uncle who is himself a teacher) he decided to try his luck with being recruited as a teacher. Newale cleared the selection process, underwent the training, and is now a Mulyavardhan teacher. "Teaching the kids about courtesy, kindness, and empathy has made me adopt the same way of living. I know today that it is my responsibility to practice what I preach to the children."

School Principal Bedre says the Mulyavardhan project has had a very significant effect on the school: "Not a single person in the school, including teachers and other staff, has any addictions today. All of them have given up their dependence on beedis, tobacco, and alcohol!"

"Social change is slowly coming into our village. It is not going to happen overnight. The habits of generations of illiterate people will not disappear overnight, but we are already beginning to see some improvement.

"When the children in the classes undergoing Mulyavardhan education go out into the world, they will steer the change. We are now waiting for the value education class to be expanded from standard

5-8 too so that those kids get a solid foundation of values on which to lead their future lives."

While achieving work-life balance continues to be one of the most challenging tasks for highly motivated, successful people, Shantilal Muttha seems to have pulled it off with ease. For several years in the beginning of his tryst with social work, his life was based on printed schedules that kept him on the road for months together, moving from place to place where he was involved in his social change projects. But he made sure that it was never at the cost of his family. Since he was not involved in business, he devoted the rest of his time to his family, working to become a caring father and husband, and now, a loving grandfather who maintains strong bonds with his extended family.

He is known as an enthusiastic man with a great zest for life. His children spoke to me about memorable family holidays across India and in foreign countries, and of their father who took great interest not just in their academic performance but also in their all-round personality development. Wife Sarla told me of a man who is a devoted husband and a supportive companion who was away for long stretches of time, but always made sure that he was there for her in times of need. In a way, she told me, watching him chart his course inspired her to be an independent woman who has a life and interests of her own too.

One of the most striking things about the man's life is the extraordinary discipline that has permeated all aspects of his life. For all his busy schedules, Shantilal Muttha is almost fanatically committed to his health and wellness. He is up at the crack of dawn each day and heads to the University of Pune where he walks at least five kilometres every morning. That is also the time he catches up with his group of old associates who match strides with him. Back home at 7, he catches up on reading at least 10-15 newspapers before a simple breakfast. He devotes an entire hour after that to make telephone calls to family, friends, and associates that he has to before heading off to work at 9.30. "This is my life after I developed cardiac problems. Before that I was on the road for great stretches of time. Today I feel constricted because

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I am not allowed to travel so much, but I have decided that I need to be in good health if I have to take my work to its logical conclusion."

The man's determination is the stuff of hushed conversations amongst his associates and friends. In 2007, a routine investigation revealed that he had major blockages in his arteries. While the discovery could have put the fear of god in an ordinary man, Muttha decided to take immediate action to pre-empt further complications. Several cardiologists cautioned him against going in for surgery because he had no symptoms from the ailment, but he went ahead nevertheless because he did not want the fear of the ailment to hold him back from his work. Such is the man's fearlessness and his commitment to his work that the night before the by-pass surgery was scheduled, he addressed a large meeting of members of the Jain community who had come together for an important conference. Sixteen days after the surgery he was back at work and started his day by talking to his entire staff to reassure them of his good health!

A long time ago, when he brought children from the J&K valley to Pune to rehabilitate them, he was hurting from the criticism that decision earned him. Some of the kids were violent and aggressive and proved to be a source of anxiety for him and his team. When a team of senior IAS officers from the state visited the campus where the kids were staying and visited Muttha later, he expressed his distress at the children's behaviour and his concern about the criticism. Muttha told me he still remembers the advice the IAS officers gave him: "Don't expend your energy on reacting to external criticism, but focus on your thought process and make sure your actions are being taken with the right intent." Muttha has made that advice the mantra of his life, a valuable tip that has allowed him to keep stress at bay and continue his work, undeterred.

When I first met him, I considered my work with him as simply another project, but over the next few months, as I worked closely with him, I developed a sneaking admiration for the man, his selflessness, his attention to every detail, his refusal to let circumstances pull him

Blessed to Serve

down, and his overriding positivity. It has been a transformational experience that has changed my own outlook towards life in ways that I can't define. I am glad I took up this project. Thank You, Mr. Muttha, for giving me the opportunity. ”



AUTHOR PROFILE

Sudha Menon is a bestselling author, a columnist, and a writing coach. She is the author of three non-fiction books—*Leading Ladies: Women Who Inspire India*, *Legacy: Letters to their daughters from eminent Indian parents*, and *Gifted: Inspirational stories of people with disabilities*. Her books have been translated into Marathi and Hindi.

Sudha is a former journalist who worked with publications such as *The Independent*, *The Hindu BusinessLine*, and *Mint* for over 20 years before she decided to follow her dream of writing a book.

Her first book, *Leading Ladies: Women Who Inspire India* (42Bookz Galaxy), on the inspiring journeys of some of the country's most admired and accomplished women, was launched in end 2010.

In early 2012, her next book, *Legacy*, (Random House India), a collection of letters to their daughters from eminent Indian men and women, was launched. The book provides a rare insight into

the minds of these leaders who set aside their public images to reveal to their daughters the lessons that they learnt along their own journeys, and the values that they adopted to lead a responsible and fulfilled life.

Sudha's next book, *Gifted: Inspiring stories of people with disabilities* (Random House), was co-written with V.R.Ferose, and launched in mid-2014.

Sudha is the founder of 'Get Writing!', a writing workshop that helps people kickstart their writing journey, and 'Writing In the Park', an initiative that she started to get people to spend time in the outdoors, writing in public parks and gardens.

Sudha also started 'Telling Our Stories', a voluntary initiative where she works with senior citizens to help them write their stories and thus capture the legacy that they will leave for posterity.

Sudha is a motivational speaker who has conducted numerous inspirational workshops and women's leadership sessions for various corporates, educational institutions, and NGOs across the country.

Sudha lives in Pune with her husband, an IT professional, and daughter, a pastry chef.

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