

BY ANURADHA GUPTA ('86 MMS) WITH THANKS TO RAJ GILDA

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

*Despite our considerable progress in commerce, technology and the liberal arts, key socio-economic challenges continue to plague our world. Poverty, lack of basic health care services and education are but a few of the day to day challenges that we rarely stop to think about, yet they form the very essence of so many people's lives. In this article, Anu and Raj discuss the issues and also highlight the noble work being undertaken by Lend-A-Hand India, an institute that aspires to empower students through vocational training leading to jobs, self-employment and broad based community enhancement.*

**PHILOSOPHERS** (many of who are scientists too) muse over the purpose of life, we live from day to day often, enjoying our personal ambitions, chugging along, getting through life. Some of us ask the question, "What is my purpose?" and some of us want to know, "What can I give back to my community, to society..." If life were equal and socialist, it may have been dull but when it is so unequal that the GDP of 48 countries is less than the assets of 3 of the richest people in the world, it is no wonder that some of us are moved into thinking beyond our daily, mundane existence.



At least one child below the age of 5 has died in the world while you read this – of malnourishment – hunger, or diseases that could have been prevented by immunization.

One third of the world is near starvation, there are over 300 million malnourished children; can we just stop in our tracks and ask ourselves some soul-searching questions.

At primary school, in Gwalior when I was just 10 years old, there was a boy who wore slippers and tattered clothes and everybody laughed at him. He was married (!), he could barely speak English and therefore the door to higher education and eventually, employment, was slowly shutting. It made me cry. I thank my father for showing me poor people on the streets (and there are enough), talking of deprivation and my Mother for doing the rounds of hospitals with my scared housemaid who wanted to get a tubectomy done but was frightened of doctors and the lack of after care facilities that might have killed her and left her kids bereft of the sole earner in the family.

Many of us have seen our parents deprive themselves of something or the other for us to be where we are. When my mother asked me in an awed voice about whether the hotel I stayed in during my trip to Grand Canyon had bedding and towels, I was moved to tears. To ensure that we afford this quality of life, our parents have made so many sacrifices. But not all parents are as lucky, parents in slums and villages who are prepared to spend around 40 % of their income on educating their

children – education that does not assure employment despite their dreams, hopes and aspirations. Thousands join the pool of 'educated unemployed' and are left to their own devices. Often the disconnect between education and job skills required implies that the degree or diploma obtained proves useless in getting a job. These energetic and aspiring youth take longer and longer to achieve their expectations of leading a life of dignity and self-esteem. They are prone to becoming their own victims and are likely fall through the cracks of hopelessness and short cuts. This predicament and its outcome confront not only their immediate family members, but also the community, nations and the world as a whole. 44% people in India will sleep tonight having earned less than a dollar. Think about that.

---

When my mother asked me in an awed voice about whether the hotel I stayed in during my trip to Grand Canyon had bedding and towels, I was moved to tears.

---

My personal journey after studying involved observing suffering, feeling miserable and wondering whether I could do anything about it. At



Hindustan Lever, when they sent us for the IRD (integrated rural development) program, it was a real eye-opener for me. Our chairman then was Mr. S M Dutta, a very good man, a real visionary who believed that to sell soap (and end of the day that's what all of us are doing) we also have to think about how people will become capable of buying it. At Etah, I felt it is amazing to see how many blessings we have that we don't count and how much we take for granted, from water to electricity, to basic necessities, forget luxuries.

Corporate Strategy is an interesting subject, if we were to write one for ourselves, we might not feel like robots living from day to day and it could give us some direction. Drop everything else, ever pondered about your mission? As long as one felt in Levers that one was selling soap and detergents, it was not that great a feeling till we were apprised of our mission, "Meeting the everyday needs of people everywhere." It absolutely revolutionizes how you define your business or your life. A frustrated housewife could redefine herself as House proud, involved in nutrition, social security, and psychological comfort and make her feel more valued by herself to start with.

Even if we go by the Gita philosophy of us as evolving human beings, (over lifetimes if there is some such thing), a strategic vision helps. And if one were to put things in perspective and redefine our values and our mission, (rather than seek affirmation outside which often breeds discontent), respecting work ethics, believing in the dignity of labor and enhancing our lives through a social purpose are all options available to us.

My personal journey meant that the annual donation to CRY was not sufficient and today, I have left the corporate world to find meaning. It started with my sister's drawing room has a corner called the recycling corner – a different bin for plastics, one for cardboard, one for magazines and so on...which her son very proudly points out. She inspired my research and subsequent book on the environment to improve awareness amongst children in India and when I studied the subject, I was aghast at the implications – sustainable development sounds good in theory but to think that we could destroy future civilizations, jeopardize the lives of our children, it is scary. And to feel empowered by taking little steps, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a step – mine started with my book, "The Green Dragon".

Most donations that Indians make go to temples and as little as 10-15% goes to social projects. Can you imagine, at the cost of the poor, ill,

illiterate and hungry, funding RSS, Hindutva and pundits who scare people into submission with superstitions and feed themselves.

I think of my child and whether she will ever experience the pain of seeing the homeless or the poor in USA. And at the risk of sounding strange, part of my children's education will involve being sensitized to this. I see materialism



and I feel that if only one were to give up a few indulgences, one might be able to fund a child's education or immunization.

My journey has led me to **Sunanda Mane** and **Raj Gilda** and that was the turning point in my life. Sunanda was Regional Director with CARE in India and her simplicity and vision are moving. She set up Lend a Hand India ([www.lend-a-hand-india.org](http://www.lend-a-hand-india.org)) where I now work which deals with issues of empowering students

through vocational training that will lead to jobs, self-employment and community enhancement projects.

Working with them has been an eye opener. Sunanda for instance told me about a recent research on Indian philanthropy, the glaring findings of which are that most donations that Indians make go to temples and as little as 10-15% goes to social projects. Can you imagine, at the cost of the poor, ill, illiterate and hungry, funding RSS, Hindutva and pundits who scare people into submission with superstitions and feed themselves.

---

**One wonders whether and when there will be a critical mass of people involved in these activities. But I believe there will. I believe if each one of us tries to make a difference to one program or even person, it snowballs.**

---

I feel that for each of us, whether we are in the corporate sector, or academics, or anywhere, there are options to make a difference. I would welcome you viewing my NGO's mission and programs but everybody has a different agenda, something that moves them. Whether they are related to technology or gender issues or poverty or education or

employment or the environment or health or what have you. It could involve research, getting involved with an NGO that one is convinced about - and there are many doing a commendable job, and doing anything from volunteering time to skills to writing for them to donating, whatever. When I was involved in the team writing about how one could contribute to LAHI, we thought of number of different ideas – a fund raising team, people involved in creative, website design and development etc. (see [http://www.lend-a-hand-india.org/Getting\\_Involved.htm](http://www.lend-a-hand-india.org/Getting_Involved.htm)). There are many overlaps amongst NGO's. This is bound to exist, just like it does in the private sector. And competition is always good for the consumer – providing choices and improving efficiency, keeping us on our toes.

One wonders whether and when there will be a critical mass of people involved in these activities. But I believe there will. I believe if each one of us tries to make a difference to one program or even person, it snowballs. One of our partner organizations in Pune was involved in implementing Project

Swadheen to provide vocational and life-skills training to rural students and a Doctor who was their beneficiary left everything and went back to his village to implement the Project. Four other alumni have joined him. There are enough examples of inspiring people from Manmohan Singh, moved by poverty into becoming an economist, MS Swaminathan (Green Revolution and now, 'Every village a knowledge center'), **Ela Bhatt** (SEWA) and so many of our BITSians who are engaged in social activities.

There are people who consider this a second career option, some a feel good factor, some feel that they are giving something back to their parents, their community, whatever the motive might be, a person somewhere could benefit, or an animal, somebody hungry, dying or destitute. Let's make the world a better place.

As a girl involved in one of our programs said, very simply and eloquently, "I feel like I am flying a kite and I want to touch the sky." ♦

Photo credits:  
© Nadine Sloan (Glenaire). Source - [www.ncdoi.com](http://www.ncdoi.com) and MS Swaminathan (IDRC)

