

The note is presented in Q&A form. I had prepared it while compiling my application for a scholarship...one which I did not eventually get!! - **Nikhil Pant**

● **What is your new idea?**

For a nation to develop along lines of the genius of its people it is necessary that the education which is imparted to children and the youth is complete in terms of developing them physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. This education should make them capable of growing and developing in harmony with their own aspirations, the requirements of the ever-changing society, and the call of the nation to serve it to the best of their individual abilities.

Even after more than 50 years of independence India remains afflicted with widespread poverty, illiteracy, disease and ill-health, unemployment, homelessness, bonded and child labour etc. To add to these, the problems of population explosion, pollution and widespread corruption have made efforts at national regeneration difficult. Our metro cities and large towns are bursting at their seams due to the relentless pressure caused by their ever-increasing populations. Villages are getting deserted as more and more people migrate towards these cities to try and make their future brighter. The 'hellish' urban slums are a consequence of this unabated rural-urban migration.

The children and youth of today, as well as their future generations, will have to be made aware of this worsening situation. They will also have to be adequately sensitised and encouraged to think and contribute in their own 'little' ways to contribute in the restoration processes so that mother earth sustains and regains its productive and re-generative powers.

Education in schools and colleges, and parenting at home and in the neighborhoods, if purely didactic, can promote hypocrisy. There is, therefore, a need to organise creative activities in educational institutions as well as community participative activities in neighborhoods which develop a moral fiber amongst the young. To initiate our young minds in this direction, they must be provided a platform. To do this the concept of SAMEER Clubs (in schools and colleges) and Maitreya Clubs (in neighborhoods) was initiated by me as part of my work with REACHA (Research and Extension Association for Conservation Horticulture and Agro-forestry), a Voluntary Organisation registered under the Societies Act. SAMEER stands for Social Action Movement for Education and Eco-Restoration.

These Clubs encourage and motivate young minds to also develop an aptitude for social work as they grow up so that when they take up responsible positions in society later on in life, a part of their personality always remains sympathetic towards the cause of the needy in society, and the environment. The efforts of these Clubs are to help its members keep abreast with all that is happening in the outside world in various fields of human growth and development. In this way they seek to harmonise education with practical experience and fieldwork in the growing individual's respective area of interest. The Clubs thus attempt to encourage the young to grow and develop along lines of their own genius in such a way that they become aware of their inherent strengths, talents, and weaknesses. This helps them

attain desired goals in life in a way that is in harmony with their own aspirations as well as with their surroundings.

Education then becomes uplifting – seeking to decipher the ‘call within’ each child, nurtures it and enables it to evolve for a noble cause. Such children and youth become active agents of positive social change in society by exerting healthy pressure on their parents, relatives and friends. When the same youngsters grow older and take up jobs, they would themselves become responsible citizens of the nation. I sincerely feel that this ‘satyagrah’ of the young on their parents, relatives and friends is perhaps the most powerful tool for social reform in a country like India. What laws cannot achieve might become possible through the positive pressure of school children and the energized college youth.

My new idea is to develop such plug-ins for education (formal as well as non-formal; in urban as well as rural India) and neighborhoods in the country so that a humane value is added to the process of human growth and development. I have evolved such plug-ins over the last 10-12 years through extensive fieldwork at the grass-root levels. Through them I am seeking to enable and empower every youngster to discover his/her function for existence, to nurture and develop it, and then seek a vocation matching it. As this proceeds, I also seek to sensitise teachers and parents to become partners (by sharing their time and talent) in this wonderful journey of self-discovery. I seek to carry on working with the youth as they enroll for College so that they do not lose focus.

● **How is it different from other interventions that have been applied before in your field of developmental work?**

In the schools and colleges of today there is intense scrutiny and measurement in terms of marks scoring ability/examination performance of students. In this process, very often we lose the script, and many children and the youth are pushed into areas of human endeavor that are 180 degrees at variance to their aptitude and abilities. Such individuals grow up and enter careers that were perhaps not meant for them! One can imagine the enormity of HR mismanagement that is going on in our country. I have found, through years of my counseling experience and fieldwork, that often it is these Indians who fuel the infamous Indian phenomenon of “bhrash-taa-chaar” (corruption). This happens because these individuals do not get the right ‘kick’ from their profession (due to the inherent HR mismatch), and so they seek ‘other benefits’ through unscrupulous means! For the rare few who are in the right profession (by accident, or through planned matching right from school days), work becomes their religion, their passion. For them, the ‘kick’ is automatic – and this leads to fame, wealth and stature in society (some or all of which they may be prepared to share for community welfare). Balance in life for these few is often a by-product, because their ‘religion’ of karma gives them a true insight and prevents them from going overboard. Also, this enriched minority is fiercely passionate about its work, takes great pride in its work ethics, and thereby establishes extremely high standards of uprightness, honesty and integrity in their office, as also their personal and public lives. These people become role models for their children, kids in the neighbourhood, and peers and friends in the community and in their workplace. Such people make great parents and play an invaluable role in the

evolution of a conscientious new generation of Indian citizenry. India needs to be led by such stalwarts.

My idea is different in the sense that it seeks to create an environment, a platform, whereby every child is enabled to grow and evolve as an 'individual.' It seeks to empower the child (and later too when this child enters college), as well as the teacher and the parent to become partners in self-discovery and growth, leading to positives for the individual, the family, the community, the nation and the world.

● **What is your chosen methodology of action?**

My methodology incorporates establishing SAMEER and MAITREYA clubs (as thrust areas. My other efforts have backward and forward links with SAMEER and Maitreya) through creative and sustainable partnerships. Some of these successful partnerships are already visible on the ground. REACHA is working with many schools, corporates, and PSU's through such associations. (refer www.reacha.org. link – Social Interventions). But these efforts now require scaling-up.

At the school level (formal or non-formal) SAMEER Clubs focus on the free time available. This time, which is normally wasted, is creatively organized into exciting activities for kids – committee-wise. Each Committee in a class comprises of 5-6 kids. These Committees focus on general issues like health, sanitation, sports, campus maintenance, ecology etc as well as specific ones that may be pertinent to the needs of the area where the school is located. For example, a school in Braj, near Mathura, could have a Forest Committee if greening the hills etc is a mandate for the people. Such Committees of kids galvanized by motivated teachers and parents can campaign for various causes that are dear to the people and relevant for sustainable development of the area. The teacher is motivated to use her subject as a tool to 'reach-out' to the child's 'voice.' Thus, a math teacher not only finishes her syllabus on time – as per school requirements – but also gets involved with the child to the level of becoming a surrogate parent in school. This leads to the teacher opening her arms out to the child and accepting the child as god's gift to this world – further leading to a reduction in comparisons and measurements. This promotes acceptance and tolerance, compassion, and friendliness. The SAMEER CLUB provides this interface in formal and non-formal schools. Such a child becomes a 'happy and cheerful child' in school, and when in college the same child evolves into a confident, focused and responsible citizen. Infact, such SAMEER Clubs in schools (students and teachers) can work in tandem with Maitreya Clubs in the adjoining neighborhood (children, youth and parents) for the sake of such humane causes. Thus, the coupling effect of both forums can yield positive results – integrated development of every child – leading to satisfying and conducive vocations; instilling of moral fiber in children, the youth, parents and the community at large; peace and harmony all around, and a sense of community ownership for the growth and development of the area.

At the domestic front the parent begins to share his time and talent and tries to 'adopt' parenting responsibilities in the neighborhood. His goodness then transcends his own child's needs. He becomes a role model for kids in the community. In urban India where people are

fast getting isolated in the concrete maze of multi-storied apartment towers, semi-nuclear families (often the child has only one parent at hand!), and the never ending race for better 'packages,' the social fabric is fast depleting. The social dynamics of 'parivaar' (family) and 'paros' (neighborhood) are being greatly altered - leading to development of many dangerous distortions. These are manifesting in the form of rising crime (especially against women), individual and family suicides, divorce, child abuse, road-rage etc. Communities need to rise beyond this isolation of the individual to establish a balance for the sake of peace and harmony. The MAITREYA CLUB provides this interface for neighborhoods. Such clubs can play a crucial role in promoting harmony and goodwill through kids in group housing societies, urban slums as well as industrial townships.

SAMEER & MAITREYA have a role to play in rural settings too. The rural children and youth need guidance, while elders need support from the community. These clubs can be customized to meet rural needs. I am assisting REACHA to explore this area through Village Maitreya Clubs in the villages of Lucknow District (UP), but a lot more needs to be done.

When 'maitreya' (friendliness) evolves in a community there is no reason for government programmes not to deliver. I believe that one of the major reasons why the tax-payers money gets wasted is that communities are rarely consulted in formulation and implementation of development programmes meant for their growth. SAMEER and MAITREYA have the potential to change this. They can together perform 'samajik gurai' (tilling of the social soil) before the seeds of development are sown. If the soil of the mind of the community is tilled (consulted and then cultivated) and then the seeds of development sown, I am sure we will get much better results. Government schemes and programmes could then be debated, designed, and delivered once the local populace is ready for change.

SAMEER and Maitreya also have the potential to make existing government programmes a success. For example, SAMEER can play a critical role in making government schools perform better. Programmes like the 'Sarv Shiksha Abhiyaan' of Government of India will benefit tremendously if government schools become more receptive to its schemes via SAMEER - through increased motivation of school managements and teachers, reduced absenteeism of children, their enhanced activity levels that meet their expectations and a more creative participation from their parents. The NDPL Energy Club in North Delhi, with REACHA participation, is doing this by involving such schools in its novel programme.

Village Maitreya Clubs can create conducive environments in rural settings that can ensure more effective delivery of government programmes in the rural hinterlands.

SAMEER and Maitreya concepts can play an invaluable role in the integrated development of urban slums.

If we can revive village life in India through SAMEER and Maitreya I am sure it will have a major impact on the ever increasing rural-urban migrations. Not only that, I also believe that this is likely to trigger reverse migrations (urban-rural) that can play a major role in de-congesting our cities by gradual folding up of the 'hellish' urban slums.

- What is your strategy map for spreading the idea for wider impact, beyond the immediate area of current demonstration?

I have a multi-pronged strategy to scale up my work:

- Strengthen ongoing works as listed on www.reacha.org – Social Interventions.
- Scale up the same by evolving relevant partnerships.
- Develop new partnerships, as also explore new work programmes that have links with SAMEER and Maitreya. I am already in discussion with other organizations, like:
 - Jindal Saw (www.jindalsaw.com) for associating with their CSR programme 'svayam' – to take up disability related sensitization programmes,
 - CII – for spreading the Energy Club programme in the Northern Region under CII.
 - National Institute of Open Schooling (www.nios.org), an institution under Ministry of HRD, to develop 'life enrichment' programmes based on themes of SAMEER and Maitreya, which would be targeted at school teachers, parents, older children and college youth.
 - I have personally met the CBSE Chairman to explore how SAMEER and Maitreya can be incorporated in the Life Sciences curriculum in middle and senior school as part of practical implementation of this area of child development.
 - I propose to interact further with other corporate organizations to try and take up my programmes in their areas/domain of activity as part of their genuine CSR. I hope to convince them that proactive, need-base CSR will not only help the community but will also give their brands a more responsible and trustworthy image in society. Simultaneously, I propose to motivate corporates which do not as yet have a mandate for CSR to think seriously about setting up a separate department for the same. This way they will be able to give a socially responsible profile to their organizations.
 - I have met/interacted with HOD's/senior faculty/students of IIT-Roorkee, IIT-Delhi, IIT-Kanpur, IIT-Mumbai, NIT's, NSIT (Delhi), JNU (Delhi), Indraprastha Engg College (Ghaziabad), IMS (Ghaziabad), IMT Ghaziabad, IIM Indore etc to explore how the concept of 'bharatbandhu' can be initiated in order to promote Volunteer Internships amongst Indian College youth in order to sensitise them towards national issues. More of this is available on www.reacha.org (under the link – Social Interventions). This work falls within the ambit of SAMEER Clubs at the College level.
 - My effort is also to try and introduce CSR as an important subject in our IIM's, IIT's, and other colleges so that when college students take up jobs in the corporate sector/government etc they are adequately sensitized to become agents of positive social change within their organizations as well as in the communities where they work.
 - I also propose to share my work with ongoing good works - organizations like the Infosys Foundation, Azim Premji Foundation, Tata Council for Community Initiatives (TCCI) etc. I sincerely feel that 'goodness cannot and should not be copyrighted' and there should be constant and sustained inter-sharing between such work through time and space.
 - I am very keen to implement programmes that can harness the power of Information Technology (IT)/Telecommunication for fulfilling all that I have stated in this Q&A Note.

The above discussions may or may not bear fruit but I sincerely believe that if we are able to work through schools, colleges, institutions and corporates (and also develop partnerships with local governments in the process) we will be on our way to creating a new and vibrant India over the next 15-20 years that should be able to set a trend of UNIVERSAL RESPONSIBILITY (in the words of the Dalai Lama) in the comity of nations.

Since results are already there on the ground for all to observe and analyze I feel the time is not far when these models of development will gain wider acceptance.

New models as well as new agents/leaders of positive social change are also likely to evolve over time and space as these models play out on the ground.

Once there is greater acceptance it will lead to enhanced implementation by different entities.

I will also seek a convergence in my work to see how it can eventually affect national policy making – Planning Commission, National Development Council, Government Ministries and Departments, CBSE, NCERT, NIOS, CII, FICCI, PHDCCI, NASSCOMM etc. This may lead to positive policy changes at the highest levels as this 'work speaks' on the ground.

I would then hope that such paradigms of development will get incorporated in the manifestoes of all regional and national political parties. I strongly feel that this may actually happen because if these social engineering models give results then there is no reason why political party would not like to adopt them.

If policy level changes are successfully made at the highest levels – in Government, the Corporates, our Political Parties etc - and people-centric programmes like SAMEER and Maitreya are in place at the grass-roots – in urban/urban-slums/rural settings - I am sure the infamous 'delivery mechanisms' of our country will fall in line and a process of 'self-reform' will be set into motion. If it does not, then the people of India will demand it!

- In what significant new ways will your innovation impact program beneficiaries?

I see many tangible and non-tangible benefits for beneficiaries through my innovative programmes:

- Every child, youth and adult touched will become empowered, enlightened, and energized – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually - towards exploring his/her role in life. Many of the 50,000 odd students sensitized through the NDPL Energy Club are well on this way. Once this role is defined everyone should grow as well as evolve harmoniously.
- Such individuals – in different stages of life – will engage in activities and professions suiting their inherent aptitudes and talents, leading to the best possible HR management in the country.
- Those already engaged in professions may re-discover themselves as also their role in life. This could encourage them to perform better in existing settings or seek new avenues of human endeavour.
- With proper HR management in place throughout India over the next 15-20 years we can hope to become a developed nation by 2030AD.
- Such development will be sustainable and enlightened – equitable, economical, ecological, and efficient.
- This should lead to greater peace, harmony and well-being for the individual, the family, the society, the nation and eventually the world (if India sets such an example).

My work with REACHA, the Voluntary Organisation through which all these efforts are being relentlessly made over the last 15 years, I feel will add momentum to this progression.