

A new paradigm for the social enterprise

-Relatively an old article but still relevant

I had always thought of AIM for Seva as one among thousands of similar social projects, with the underprivileged of India being the beneficiaries of the generosity of well intentioned, or skill-rich benefactors with cash or time to donate. But here, these girls, who were so-called under-privileged, who most likely would have missed out on childhood and basic education, were giving the 'privileged' visitors a gift that is rare anywhere in the world: a taste of love, of open-heartedness, of generosity – a touch of ananda. The beneficiary-benefactor terms of the equation had momentarily flipped sides. And in the hospital and farm too, what was it about the doctors and Ramanji that allowed them to exude the care they did?

This answer came in one document in the pack of reading material I was given: Elizabeth Thornton's 'A Social Entrepreneurship Framework'¹. Reading it changed my view totally. It brought out the massive scale and uniqueness of the vision behind AIM for Seva. It showed that the movement is more than just another Indian fundraising project for building schools and hospitals. It is an audaciously ambitious project aimed at nothing short of transforming India – on par with the Grameen Bank movement. The penny dropped! I suddenly saw that AIM for Seva isn't one in a thousand. It is a one-off. It may be about material upliftment, but it is much more beside.

The vision of AIM for Seva is to uplift Indian society by inspiring a culture of compassion. This unique movement gives people the opportunity to change from simply being consumers to being contributors to the wellbeing of fellow citizens in greatest need. Individuals with resources and skills are invited to express compassion by contributing funds or expertise to support a range of education and health programmes across India created for those in greatest need. The people delivering the programmes are not simply doing a job: they are chosen because of their commitment to the larger social vision of compassionate contribution. And the people who benefit from the programmes are taught the value of compassion and are raised to a position from which they too can be future contributors to society.

Everyone wins. A nation of contributors is a mature nation. The best way to understand the true import of AIM for Seva, is to go straight to Pujya Swamiji's description of his vision:

"Competition means you have to follow norms. Without rules there is no competition. Whether it is a game or business, you need to follow rules. The rules have to grow upon you. The competition we see today has been thrown upon us. Therefore people are insecure, and the symptoms of insecurity are seen in terms of grabbing and hoarding and taking advantage of each situation. This is a society that was once unknown in India, but now it is seen to be rampant.

"Therefore, I thought we should create a new chemistry. In our culture there is such a thing as *dānam*, sharing, caring. We are caring people. We do not throw our elders into old age homes. We have homes and we keep our elders with us and we respect them. Therefore, we have to emphasize

some of these very important values in our own being and allow these values to surface. For this, a movement is necessary. I, therefore, started the All India Movement (AIM) for Seva.

"Any movement needs to reach a critical point and from that point alone it will take off. I think we are somewhere around that point. The new chemistry has to come from caring. Why? Because there is no other way a person can really mature. The whole process of maturing implies the transformation from being a consumer to a contributor, even though one continues to be a consumer. The one who contributes more than he or she consumes is a grown up person. Otherwise, the person is still a child. Therefore one has to discover oneself as a contributor and inner transformation has to take place.

"That is India. Giving is India. We have to emphasize this caring through programmes of caring. We should get people involved because the problems are so enormous. Even people who see the problems cannot do anything because they are emotionally paralyzed. They cannot think of doing anything. Therefore we have to create an avenue for people to pitch in. It may be small help, but when there are a lot of people pitching in, then that becomes a movement. So that's the whole vision. All our sadhus are also engaged in this work. There are also a lot of people who are quietly doing small things individually. But all of them have to be brought together in a movement. This is the movement."

A new paradigm for giving

The implications for benefactors from this vision are far-reaching. AIM for Seva is asking more of them than mere disposable income and social consciousness. No doubt, the building of hospitals, schools and hostels is essential to lift people out of social deprivation. And there's no denying that disposable income and a social consciousness are essential to fund the building of hospitals, schools and hostels. But to transform society for the better requires more: a conscious commitment to becoming a contributor instead of just being a consumer. AIM for Seva asks benefactors and volunteers to add this attitude to their donations and social consciousness.

Contribution is an attitude, not just an activity. When the contributor is in place, social giving can become transformative. The contributor is the one who is aware there is an ethical and spiritual dimension to life, and the contributor-benefactor gives with this attitude in mind. The contributor-benefactor is as interested in his or her own transformation as in the transformation of the lives of those who are less privileged. Is it essential to have disposable income to be a contributor? The straight answer is: "No", one can contribute expertise and time as well. But is money necessary to initiate the sort of programmes that AIM for Seva is initiating? The straight answer is: "Yes", but with the caveat that it is not sufficient to bring about a fundamental uplift in Indian society without the attitude of *dānam* behind it.

So here are three key questions for donors and volunteers:

- > Will my spiritual maturity be furthered by my contribution? If so, how?
- > Is the project I support instilling a 'contributor-mindset' in its beneficiaries? If so, how?
- > Do I subscribe to Swami Dayananda's vision for transforming India?

When the answer to all three is 'Yes', then the full vision of AIM for Seva will be advanced. And India will be the beneficiary.

-By Peter Bonnici