

AIM for Seva - The Penny Drops A Personal Perspective

After saying goodbyes to new friends made at the *Rama Gita* camp in Rishikesh and waving goodbye at Delhi Airport to fellow London campers, a small group of students of Swamini Atmaprakashananda took the Spice Jet flight to Coimbatore.

Tamil Nadu was hot, the rains hadn't yet cooled the dry air, but Swamini (appropriately nicknamed 'Swamini Dynamite' by Pujya Swamiji) kept up the pace. But this is not about the 25 temples visited in 15 days, or the amazing generosity and warmth of all the families we met, or the tranquillity of the Anaikatti Gurukulam, or the brightness and confidence of the six *veda pathshala* boys who study there, or the unspoilt beauty of Manjakkudi (Pujya Swamiji's home village), or the deliciousness of South Indian cuisine. This is about the moment when I suddenly realised that I had not really understood what *AIM for Seva* was really all about.

Interest in the work of the movement was re-stimulated by two events: the first was the visit to the tribal hospital and the 'Green Kovai' project near Anaikatti; the second was a visit to a hostel for tribal girls in the area. (The visit to the nearby *peda*-making co-operative – also set-up by *AIM for Seva* – will be remembered most for the sweet taste it left in the mouth!)

The hospital and the 'Green Kovai' herb farm were exemplars of dedication and order. The hospital was clean, bright, tranquil. There was something different about it – one got the fanciful impression that simply being there would be enough to eliminate one layer of disease. The doctors and the pharmacist attended the tribal women with calm dedication and still made time to talk to us. The overriding impression was one of love and simple happiness.

A short walk from the hospital was the herb farm – another labour of love. Around 90 plants had been meticulously researched and labelled for their medicinal properties and made available free of charge to those who wanted to grow them as cash crops for the pharmaceutical or alternative therapy industries. The project had also been commissioned to grow 500,000 *Jatropha* saplings for distribution to tribal families to aid both the greening of Coimbatore as well as to produce oil for diesel vehicles and for electricity-generating plants. This alone would lift 80 tribal women out of poverty. Sri Ramanji, an engineer by training, had dedicated his retirement to the task of researching and labelling the plants, overseeing their distribution, securing buyers, collaborators and funders and generally being the welcoming face of the project. (Anyone visiting, however, beware if he ever invites you to sample a yellow plant that deals with toothache: it will numb your tongue and lips and cheeks, and send Ramanji into fits of laughter at your astonishment. He's quite a character!).

And then came the moment that made the deepest impact: the visit to a hostel for young tribal girls. It started simply enough: being shown the girls going about their various tasks of washing clothes or playing or studying. But just as we were getting ready to leave, we were requested to please wait because the girls wanted to sing for us. The hostel bell was clanged, followed by a flurry of activity as girls emerged from all corners of the place and scrambled into the assembly room and did a whirlwind tidy up of clothes, books and other personal items. We entered into a room of order, the girls sitting in neat rows, the older ones at the back and the youngest (a lively six-year old) in the front row.

Swamini Atmaprakashananda, one of her students from Spain, a young teacher from London and myself (the only male) were ushered to chairs facing the girls. Then they began to sing! Even now as I write this, months and miles away from the event, my hairs are standing on end with the memory of that sound, and a wave of sentimentality is struggling to surface. Today, back in London, I might be able to control that sentimentality; that afternoon at the girls' hostel I couldn't. In next to no time, listening to the girls had all of us fighting back the tears (unsuccessfully). Their voices touched the heart and melted the ice of defensive distance. It will be a memory that will stay with me for a long time yet.

That evening, back at the Gurukulam, I related the story to Sri Jagan Nathan, the *AIM for Seva* Project Manager for the Coimbatore region, and expressed my willingness to help to spread the message to help raise support in London. He gave me some reading materials to digest.

A new paradigm for the social enterprise

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.

NOTE 1.

Elizabeth R. Thornton’s ‘A Social Entrepreneurship Framework’ was developed for the Entrepreneurship Faculty at Babson College in the US, one of the country’s leading management courses for the past 15 years. The Framework places *AIM for Seva* among such pioneering social programmes as the Grameen Bank (Bangladesh), the Women’s Health and Economic Development Association (Nigeria), Project Impact (USA) and the Furniture Resource Centre (UK).

Elizabeth Thornton is Adjunct Lecturer of Entrepreneurship, and Babson College’s first Chief Diversity Officer.

Thornton is a member of the President’s Cabinet, leading efforts to create and sustain an

inclusive multicultural environment that attracts, educates, empowers and retains under-represented students, faculty and staff. She is also a part-time member of the Entrepreneurship Faculty, teaching in the graduate and undergraduate programs at Babson.

Thornton was founder and CEO of the training and consulting firm, Entrepreneurship Advantage, Inc., which helps dislocated or downsized workers regain economic self-sufficiency by creating small businesses. She has assisted more than 85 businesses in Massachusetts and hundreds nationwide, and has consulted with the Pioneer Institute, the Center for Women and Enterprise, Inner City Entrepreneurs, the State of Massachusetts, and the City of Boston, to name a few.

She has 15+ years of corporate experience with institutions such as American Express and Bank One and 15+ years of entrepreneurial experience with clients such as the Presidential Inaugural Committee, Clinton '92, The White House, and several small businesses.

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Free Hospital for tribal women



Herb farm. Peter Bonnici , Ramanji, Swamini Atmaprakashananda examine roots of the Vetiver plant, used for making aromatic oil.



Girl's hostel

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