

Analysis 2

Living the life of a Changemaker

By Ajit Kanitkar

What prompts certain individuals to become social workers? What gives them the desire to bring about a change in the lives of people? What makes them resolutely pursue their mission in spite of hardships?

In this section, we look at the journey of all the individuals profiled in the book and how and in what way their schooling, family background and atmosphere, environment in the society, and experiences while growing up might have (or might not have) influenced their decision to engage in social work.

We notice some patterns in the 22 profiles. These do suggest that the early years of each one of them had an abiding influence on their personal and professional growth. We discern the following patterns across the profiles:

1. All of them hail from a middle-class background.
2. The parents and families of most of the individuals profiled had modest livelihood resources; hence they had no parental assets to fall back on, when each of them decided to pursue social work as a career.
3. Conduct of parents and in some cases, relatives and teachers acted as a moral compass that laid a strong foundation of values and commitment. The experiences and interactions of the early years have stayed with them in their sustained motivation to do something for the society.
4. Peer group in educational institutions, especially during graduate and postgraduate studies, was a critical influencing factor in shaping the lives of the individuals profiled in this publication.
5. A few individuals and institutions have played a stellar role in shaping the visions of many of the individuals. Many of the social workers had the benefit of being coached and mentored during the formative years of their journey.
6. Exposure to the society and new experiences during college education and at the beginning of their respective professional careers shaped the worldview of the social workers. Those exposures often built up the foundation for their subsequent and lifelong pursuit of a career in social work.

In the following paragraphs, we present insights from the extensive interactions we had with them during the research study.

Parental influence

Parents and immediate family members had profound influence on the personality of all the social workers with whom we interacted. Each of them narrated a number of anecdotes and stories from their childhood and adolescent days, recalling fondly, even after many decades. Such has been the impact of the early years and values that their parents instilled in their kids, not by preaching but by practising.

The jobs that the parents held also had a direct or indirect influence on the individuals. Parents of some individuals profiled in this publication held government jobs that meant frequent transfers – Pramod Kulkarni, Sudhir Katiyar and Akeina Rongmei. A few of them were in teaching profession either in a school or a college - Yogesh Jain and Prithibhusan Deka.

A parent being employed in a government or private sector organisation assured steady if not great income for the family - Osama Manzar, Ashis Mondal, Vivekanandan and Johnny Oommen.

However, it should be noted that some of the social workers lost a parent very early in life, necessitating an urgency to seek secure employment right after the completion of their studies - Vivekanandan, Sarat Das, Prithibhusan Deka, Ashis Mondal and Sarbani Das Roy. Ashis's brother supported him financially in completing his studies.

In the latter part of this note, we have discussed in detail, the risks that the individuals took, both on the personal and professional front. None of them had a privileged childhood with wealthy parents providing whatever comforts the child asked for. There were moments of struggle while growing up.

Vivekanandan lost his father when he was in school. Sarat losing his father at an early age meant that he had to choose studies that would assure regular employment immediately after the completion of his studies. As a young girl, Sarbani Das Roy had to leave Kolkata and spend a few years in Delhi, before her mother succumbed to cancer.

The story of Madhukar Dhas, to whom we have dedicated this book, is extremely touching. Madhukar's father worked as a daily wage labourer. In fact, Madhukar also worked as a daily wage earner, under a labour contractor.

Akeina recalled her father's uprightness and his refusal to accept favours from contractors while serving in a government department, a position that many might have used to amass wealth. She remembers her mother always coming to the rescue of the needy and the poor when the situation so demanded. Her mother was also actively involved in a political party.

Listening to animated discussions about political and social issues of the times in the neighbourhood opened up Ashif's mind to prevailing injustice and discrimination in the society.

Chingmak's father is a politician serving his fifth term as a member of the legislative assembly. That exposure surely helped Chingmak to be a different person. It might have been easier for him to step into the shoes of his father, but he decided not to.

Dr Johnny's inspiration clearly stems from his father, who was a pastor in a church. He served the cause of humanity in and outside India. Johnny's interaction with his father and his father's message to him, 'When you leave the room, make sure you turn off the light' is a great lesson in transition and succession management.

The conservative beliefs of Jameela's family did not provide a supportive and encouraging environment to fulfil her aspirations. Her family did not appreciate or encourage her urge to express herself through painting and writing. However after marriage, she continued writing poetry and later formed Shaheen, an organisation that rescues and rehabilitates women lured into sheikh marriages.

For Osama, his father's strong association with an educational institution in Ranchi created a lasting impact on him. Though his father was employed in a public sector engineering company, he volunteered most of his free time to educate children from the community. He and his friends established a formal school that enjoyed a reputation of its own in the city.

Pramod has fond memories of his mother and the time he spent with his grandmother. He recalled the love, affection and warmth he received in full measure while growing up in his grandmother's house, as his father in government service got transferred to different locations. Pramod's work in later years with children rescued from railway platforms probably reflects the same emotions where he understood the importance of repatriating and reuniting the child with his family. 'A child needs loving care of the family' is his simple message in the work that he took up later.

Prithibhusan Deka's father impressed upon him the need to be completely selfless when engaged in any public activity or social work. "One should not partake of any *prasad* till everyone has got a share" was his spiritual message as someone who believed in probity in public life. This message, simple and straightforward, stood Prithibhusan in good stead when there was rampant corruption in relief and rehabilitation activities of the government after floods. As a volunteer, he exposed some of the corrupt practices.

Vivekanandan's inspiration was his uncle who was an activist, besides being involved in a political party. His uncle's collection of books opened new vistas for the young Vivekanandan. He recalled with pride, his father's association during India's freedom struggle, stories that he heard directly from his father before his death.

Inspiring individuals

Mentoring does play a critical role as seen from many of the life stories of social workers. Though mentoring was not a fashionable word during those years, being in the company of a few motivated individuals influenced and benefitted the young minds. Interacting with them certainly inspired some of the social workers.

The mentoring and coaching happened in different ways and forms. Ashis and his initial team of founders in Action for Social Advancement (ASA) found such thoughtful mentoring support in the Jagawat family of NM Sadguru Foundation in Dahod. Mrs Jagawat provided the ASA team with a typewriter and a two-wheeler besides practical advice and guidance. This initial support was extremely valuable to Ashis and his team when they had limited financial resources.

Ashif learnt many a valuable lesson during the time he spent with a number of renowned activists like Swami Agnivesh and Kailash Satyarthi. He drew a lot from the activism of both these individuals.

For Nimesh Sumati, a businessman before his venture into philanthropy, mentoring by stalwarts like late Baba Amte of Anandwan and his teacher in the vipassana meditation guided him to take the work of Caring Friends as his life's mission.

Similar to being inspired by his uncle when he was young, Vivekanandan found inspiration from late Dr Varghese Kurien in Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) during his postgraduate studies.

Sudhir's stint in Prayas in Chittorgarh brought him an awareness about the plight of workers employed in the quarry mines and brick kilns.

Identifying his inclination, Osama's faculty advisor in Aligarh Muslim University encouraged him to opt for a course in arts rather than struggling in a science stream, that was not to his liking.

Dr Narayanan was Sarbani's mentor and colleague. He encouraged her to examine why people with mental illhealth were homeless and had to be literally on the streets when their families abandoned them. He offered support in her effort to rehabilitate them.

Eklavya gratefully acknowledges his learning from many stalwarts in the field.

Institutions as mentors

Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), a reputed organisation working in the development sector for over 35 years has been a home to four individuals profiled in this book. These four social workers had their formative years in PRADAN before branching off to form a new organisation.

Rajesh Singhi worked in PRADAN in Alwar. Anil Verma was associated with PRADAN in Bihar in north India and Pramod Kulkarni in Karnataka in southern India. Rajesh's association with PRADAN, though a short one, helped him respond to his passion for development work, though after toying with other options including a brief stint in his brother's business.

Sudhir Katiyar studied in IRMA, where he got his vision of working for the marginalised. Rajesh and Vivekanandan are also alumni of IRMA. Akeina studied in Nirmala Niketan in Mumbai, another reputed institution. Ashis is an alumnus of Xavier Institute of Social Services (XISS).

We suggest readers to go through the individual profiles. In each profile, we have described at length, the influences these institutions had in shaping the dreams of the social workers.

Embracing the unknown

Many of the social workers whom we have portrayed in our publication took risks in deciding to take up social work and often giving up secure jobs and steady incomes. There is a widespread misconception, especially in the last few years, that social work pays well and voluntary sector organisations offer lucrative salaries to their employees. There is a belief that those who work with civil society organisations enjoy a lavish lifestyle, travel abroad frequently, stay in luxury hotels, enjoy exclusive perquisites and so on. This perception is not entirely misplaced and perhaps true for only a handful of professionals who are employed with international donor organisations or UN organisations. But this number is an exception rather than the rule.

There are a large number of individuals who have been working on paltry salaries and in harsh environments devoid of any comfort. The social workers about whom we have written took huge risks to initiate developmental activities often with no or very meagre resources at hand. For some, the risks involved quitting a steady job and taking a plunge into the unknown. Another risk factor was relocating to a completely unfamiliar terrain where they had to struggle for many years to understand the local customs, cultural practices and get accepted by the people in the new locale.

A good number of social workers also had to risk their professional background and diversify into a completely new thematic area of work. While their social orientation would help them diversify into new themes, it involved unlearning and acquiring new skills and knowledge necessary to be effective in the new domain.

For a few, it was literally a question of life and death as they had to face threats to their lives from some quarters who found the work being championed by the social workers a hindrance to their ulterior motives. Many felt the risk of swimming against the tide, being ridiculed and criticised, of losing community and family support and fear of being isolated while pursuing their cherished goal.

Sarat Das left his cushy job in a financial institution and later another one in Delhi to return to Assam to work on livelihood issues. He had no other financial resources to support his family and thus as a compromise, took up a salaried job briefly, but quit when he was certain of some seed funding for his work.

Rajesh Singhi could have continued in his brother's business, but his IRMA background and initial stint in the Mewat region of Rajasthan left him restless in his secure and well-paid job.

Pramod Kulkarni realised early that a corporate career was not his calling, though he had credentials as a successful graduate from a prestigious management institute of the country, the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

Akeina declined job offers from international donor organisations. Instead, she returned to her home state of Nagaland and began working with a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

Ashis Mondal along with his colleagues was performing well in Krishak Bharati Cooperative Ltd (KRIBHCO), another reputed organisation. When they realised the limitations of working within an organisation, they chose to begin afresh with a small initiative that later grew into a big NGO, Action for Social Advancement (ASA).

We have profiled three physicians in this research study. All of them would have had a steady and financially rewarding career if they had held onto a predictable career as medical practitioners. None of the three did that and instead took risks. Dr Suresh Kumar, a trained anaesthetist working in Calicut Medical College ventured into palliative care as he felt that was his calling. For Dr Johnny Oommen, a degree from Christian Medical College (CMC) Vellore and Dr Yogesh Jain from All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) were sure passport for raking in money either as a private practitioner or for continuing in the prestigious institutions where they studied. Both had other ideas.

Dr Johnny chose to work in the remote regions of Bissamcuttack in Odisha; Dr Yogesh and his friends from AIIMS decided to relocate to Chhattisgarh to work on health issues of the poor.

Both were risky personal and professional decisions that could have had negative consequences for them as well as their families. They took a plunge albeit with lot of thought and careful considerations. Dr Yogesh visited various community organisations to study their work before choosing to begin his work in Ganiyari near Bilaspur in Madhya Pradesh, now a part of Chhattisgarh.

In all the profiles, we have several examples of risk-taking behaviour of individuals, who put their life at stake at an early stage in their career. This is significant since none of them could predict how their decision would turn out to be later, say after 20 years.

Vivekanandan, an engineer, had a job offer from National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) after he completed his course from IRMA. NDDB was a dream employer in the early 1980s. The newly emerging fishermen's federation was an unknown entity and not exactly a great employer but Vivekanandan chose the federation over NDDB.

So did Osama Manzar. Working in a Hindi newspaper in Aligarh after completing a media and communication course must have been comforting in those years. Instead, he decided to leave Aligarh and move to Delhi as he wanted to establish himself in the English print media. He did not have a regular job for almost three years. He had to stay in a slum where he could afford to pay minimal rent and for some time even had to depend on the fellowship of his spouse before he articulated the idea of Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF).

For someone who is trained in theology, the role of a pastor in a church has a predictable career path. For a pastor based in a village, the path progresses up to state or even regional level work as a preacher. Dr Reverend Chingmak Chang knew this career ladder. However, instead of being confined within the four walls of the church and restricting himself to performing limited religious duties, he opted to work on many issues that the community was facing. Drug addiction was one such issue. However he had no knowledge of drug addiction and associated HIV infection. A pastor working on such issues was unheard of. He didn't mind venturing, another evidence of risk-taking and embracing the uncertainty.

Akeina narrated challenges that women social workers face, bearing responsibilities at work and also at the home front. National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) officials persuaded her to attend a meeting that was to be addressed by the RBI Governor. "I was carrying my second child and in the eighth month of pregnancy. I was not sure if I could manage the travel and also sit through the meeting for a long time," she recalled. "After the meeting, I was unwell, and had to be admitted to a local hospital, but fortunately survived the stress."

In addition to all the examples of risk-taking described in the above paragraphs, we found at least three examples where there were physical threats given to individuals if they continued in their mission.

Prithibhusan Deka's work started in lower Assam region when insurgency was at its peak. He motivated youth to shun violence and instead channelised their positive energies into constructive and peaceful developmental work. He persisted amidst threats to his life. Chingmak and his spouse Phutoli were working in villages close to the border between India and Myanmar. He worked with youth who were caught in the deadly nexus of drug trafficking, underground insurgency activities, and many other vices. He and his family were threatened on many occasions. He continued amidst the threats.

Sudhir Katiyar's work with migrant workers was to give voice to the exploitation of brick kiln workers. The workers were always at the mercy of their employers and contractors who had hired them.

The women engaged in manual scavenging were in a similar situation. Entrenched in a hopeless situation with deep prejudices, Ashif Sheikh had to fight against the system. It needed courage of a different kind. Such struggles against the powerful did sometimes lead to backlash from the establishment for both Sudhir and Ashif. They chose to stand their ground.

Thus, when most of the social workers profiled here began working in the late 1980s and early 1990s, their choice was almost like a gamble, a big personal decision fraught with risk. They embraced the unknown and charted a path whose trajectory was unclear. It involved a great personal risk of leaving a secure comfort zone. It is also to be noted that all the social workers had a middle-class background about which we have discussed earlier. None of their parents had accumulated financial wealth that could have been a cushion for the social workers if they failed. The parents had modest incomes and this compounded the risk perception.

Since all of them had to start from scratch, besides the lack of adequate financial and human resources to support them in their journey, the decision in itself, was a leap of faith. They did not have a legacy of an established organisation to bank upon. Family and parental support were mostly moral. There were no established models to imitate and therefore to replicate. Each step in the journey, at least in the initial years, posed challenges and uncertain situations that needed to be responded with both limited financial and intellectual (experience) capital. Thus risks of failure were significantly high. The individuals portrayed in our study and their work is thus remarkable in the light of the above situation. The readers will find details of their experiences in individual profiles presented in this publication.

Moment of epiphany

We tried to read the individuals' journey of becoming a social worker looking for answers to a question: Was there an epiphany, an 'ahh moment' that helped them decide that social work would be their call of duty? Or was it a series of experiences and the impact of those experiences that shaped their journey?

The answer we derived from the stories is that actually it was a combination of both, a critical and impactful incidence coupled with a series of steps that led to the social worker taking up his dream. It was not just one single episode or a turning point. It was a culmination of factors including parental influence, socialisation, mentoring by seniors and well-wishers, experiences in the first few years of professional work and most important of all being the reflective practices of the individuals. There were some coincidences or chance factors too in an individual's journey.

Eklavya Prasad always wanted to work in his home state of Bihar after having studied in Delhi and worked in Rajasthan. It became his life's mission when in a North Bihar village, he came face-to-face with stark poverty and scarcity amidst plenty of resources like lack of drinking water during recurrent floods. The paradox of scarcity amidst abundance was the turning point for him to work with communities on water and sanitation issues in North Bihar.

Dr Johnny's epiphany happened during his first visit to Christian Hospital Bissamcuttack (CHB) in Odisha when he was a student in Christian Medical College in Vellore. The initial exposure to CHB helped him determine his future course of action.

For Chingmak, the funeral of a child, who had died in a hopeless situation of extreme poverty was an eye-opener. He could not remain oblivious to the ocean of helplessness and hopelessness around him. His decision was then to leave the comfort of being a preacher and face the challenges around him head on. Losing a family member to the deadly menace of drug addiction was another jolt for him. It was a personal blow of what the consequences of drug addiction would be. Such events strengthened his resolve to address social issues. However, in his story, one also finds a constant dialogue between him and his spouse Phutoli during their study-years on the purpose of life and his wife persuading him to take up social work.

Mamoon's resolve to start a school in the slum area that he lived in stemmed from a bitter individual setback when the school that he attended closed its doors on him, his fault being his inability to pay the school fees on time. The school denied him permission to appear for the annual examination. There would have been hundreds of such not so fortunate individuals who would have experienced similar humiliation. Mamoon turned this situation

of personal insult and shame into an opportunity and challenge that propelled him into initiating a number of community development activities in the slums of Kolkata.

Bhopal gas disaster was a turning point for Dr Yogesh who went as a volunteer to assist the victims of the gas leak. In Dr Yogesh's own words, "In Bhopal I observed the oppressive power of the state being used against well-meaning citizens and not against perpetrators of the crime." While Bhopal was indeed a turning point, Yogesh was also an active member in the student days at AIIMS and recalled a story book given to him by a visiting lecturer. The book that captured the life of a poor Dalit woman struggling to get medical treatment left a deep impression on him. He began thinking about the political economy of healthcare provisions for the poor and how its absence had the maximum impact on the poor. A series of such incidents became cornerstones behind the foundation of his work in later years in the form of Jan Swasthya Sahyog.

Sudhir Katiyar experienced oppression in two incidents that taught him valuable lessons. When he took a principled stand against injustice and falsehood in the Sainik school where he was studying, majority of the students did not support him. In fact they became violent against him and a few of his friends who were right. In another incident, he was witness to a blatant violation of law when police fired at agitating contract workers in the university campus where his father was employed and the family resided. More than 20 workers died in the firing incident but nobody came to the rescue of the powerless, unorganised labourers. The two incidents had a deep impact on him and his later choice of activities. The activist in him did not rest with any other intervention except that of organising the unorganised.

Sarbani Das Roy's turning point is dramatic and happened literally on the road when she came across a person abandoned by family, eating from a garbage bin. That person's 'fault' was that he was suffering from mental illness. Sarbani decided to work for the hundreds of such people abandoned by their near and dear ones and literally living on the streets of Kolkata. Her resolve to begin a shelter for women with mental illness and living on the streets was the result of a tragic and shocking incident. A tribal girl living on the sympathy of a roadside vendor died after being sexually assaulted by some men. Sarbani decided that no woman or girl would live on the streets; she felt compelled to construct a shelter for women in distress and suffering from mental illness.

An accident in a factory in Ujjain in which a few Dalit workers died changed Ashif Shaikh's perspective on the structural exploitation in society. He realised that injustice and inequity were the result of not just class factor but also of caste. Only Dalits were employed in such hazardous work as manual scavenging. The society, through a systematic mechanism, ensured that they continued to do the same work so that the interests of the exploiter could be served. Once this form of exploitation became clear to Ashif, he decided to work on transformation than on a patchwork solution.

Serendipitous solutions

While there are indeed such life-changing events in the lives of social workers, there were also deliberate journeys, an exploration with a purpose. When there were goals yet to be crystallised and clearly articulated, a chance encounter with a person or a brush with a situation showed her/him the way ahead. We found many such examples.

Sarat Das always had a desire to return to his home state of Assam and work with the poor to improve their income through livelihood interventions. He took up a few jobs initially but never lost sight of his goal. A chance conversation with a friend from the Northeast fructified later when his friend began working with Tata Trusts. Trusting Sarat's sincerity and commitment, a seed grant from Tata Trusts gave the much needed initial boost to Sarat to pursue his dreams.

In a similar chance interaction, Dr Suresh Kumar met a lecturer - a visiting nurse from another country - who shared her experience of providing palliative care. Dr Suresh Kumar knew that relieving pain through medicines alone was neither giving him satisfaction nor reducing the ultimate suffering of his patients and the caregivers. He had to go beyond prescribing lifesaving medicines. The road to his work on palliative care opened after this chance encounter with the nurse.

Jameela in her interactions with the Muslim women in Hyderabad came to know about the terrible practice of sheikh marriages, where parents from poor families married off their daughters to men from Arab countries, in exchange for money. Her determination to work on concrete issues and not limit herself to writing poetry about women's rights and emancipation was consolidated after the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. That incident prompted her move from being a poet to an activist working towards communal harmony and confront injustice and discrimination in society. Thus Shaheen was born in Hyderabad.

Eklavya Prasad spent close to two years visiting his home state of Bihar, shuttling regularly from Delhi and meeting a number of civil society organisations in North Bihar. He was undecided about working in Bihar after he had learnt a lot from his earlier assignments with other reputed NGOs in Rajasthan and Delhi. He did not give up, though he lacked direction on how he should proceed. His deliberate search for answers led him to find about scarcity amidst abundance. Devastating floods were a recurrent annual feature in Bihar. Amidst plenty of water, the communities struggled for access to clean drinking water. He subsequently zeroed in on water and sanitation as his work theme. He formed a network of like-minded NGOs with whom he engaged regularly for a few years before shifting to Bihar to work there.

While studying at AIIMS in Delhi, Dr Yogesh Jain and his friends were associated with a group that dispensed medicines in nearby slums. They were deliberate in their decision to work on issues of health for the poor.

Nimesh Sumati cut his teeth in social work when he and his family members offered food and shelter to many citizens stranded on roads after the heavy rainfall and floods in Mumbai in 2005. He was actively involved with an NGO that worked on animal welfare then. His friend Rameshbhai Kacholia introduced him to Baba Amte. That meeting proved to be a turning point for him, spurring him to plunge deeper into social work, culminating in Caring Friends.

Pramod's introduction to the world of children found on railway platforms in Raichur was almost dramatic. Though he had worked for over 15 years in the developmental sector, it was mostly with farmers and rural communities on irrigation and water management. When a college student studying social work wanted to do a project, he suggested that she do one about children on railway platforms. The student's short-term project later turned into a full-scale mission for Pramod. In the last 20 years, SATHI has rescued close to 50,000 children who end up on railway platforms after fleeing their homes.

For Anil Verma, the journey to focus on strengthening roots both of the plants and of people is indeed a constant exploration. He didn't hit upon the System of Root Intensification (SRI) in one go. It was like a trial and error. The initial pilot was with a few hundred farmers. It proved to be extraordinarily beneficial to them. The farmers reported three to five fold increase in the crop yield. Anil then decided that propagating SRI would be his mission. Anil expanded the pilot in a big way, reaching close to 30,000 farmers. He improvised on the extension methodology, creatively linking Hindu mythology and modern agricultural practices to effectively communicate his message to a large rural population in Bihar.

To conclude this section, the individuals whom we have profiled found their calling not overnight or accidentally. There were foundational years that shaped their values, and a supportive network of family and friends that helped them sustain their motivation. On their part, their restlessness sustained them to search for answers that they desperately wanted to find. Coupled with all the above, a chance meeting or a particular incident did prove crucial. But overall it was a conscious journey that led them to where and what they are now.

Support of spouse

While interviewing the social workers for this study, we observed that their immediate family members provided them critical support in all the stages of their journey. For many of them, family members offered not just significant moral support but even pitched in with crucial financial contribution as the social worker did not have an assured income to keep the family running. The spouse's earnings came handy in such situations.

When Akeina joined Rongmei Baptist Association, Reverend H.M. Rongmei – whom she later married -mentored her. Akeina acknowledged the critical role played by Rev Rongmei in initiating developmental activities and also in his support towards her work.

Chingmak had many discussions with Phutoli, who later became his life partner, when they did a Master of Divinity course together in Pune. Phutoli nudged him to take up community development work rather than restricting himself to religious duties within the church. After many discussions, Chingmak agreed. Phutoli has been contributing significantly to the health and overall growth of Eleutheros Christian Society after spending the initial years of her career outside Nagaland.

When Osama Manzar was struggling to decide on his future course of action, with only a few assignments in hand as a freelancer, his would-be life partner Shaifali Chikarmane supported him.

For Jameela, born in a conservative Muslim family, her husband's support has been critical in her work. This support was significant from two perspectives. As a woman, she was fighting against men who were perpetrators of injustice against fellow women. But another critical aspect was that, as a Muslim woman, she had to face conservative elements within the society who did not like her activism. Her husband is welcoming and supportive of her work.

If one reads the story of Vandana Gopikumar and her work with those suffering from mental health, one realises how thankless and traumatic such work can be for the individual and her team. Vandana acknowledges her husband Senthil's support in her work.

Madhukar's wife Vijaya was a co-traveller with him right from the beginning of Dilasa, the NGO Madhukar founded. In the early years, they started an orphanage for children of sex workers. Vijaya continues to be with Dilasa, leading several interventions. Her responsibility has increased manifold after the untimely demise of her husband Madhukar. Incidentally, we have dedicated this publication to Madhukar and many such heroes who work relentlessly without any fanfare. *Nahichira, nahipanati* - an adage in Marathi aptly describes their selfless sacrifice. "There is neither a plaque built nor a lamp lit for them". Still they persist.

Pramod Kulkarni in his interaction mentioned that when he and his wife moved to rural Karnataka, they lived in a house that didn't have a separate kitchen and an attached toilet. His wife accepted this challenge rather heartily. She supported Pramod in his journey, and associated with Mahila Samakhya work for over 15 years. Pramod was candid enough to share with us his financial situation when he retired from SATHI. "We don't need this information," we said. His reply was that the readers should know that while he did not end up as a billionaire being in the NGO sector, he did not remain a pauper either! At the end of his professional career, at the age of 62, he said he had a reasonable bank balance and owned a small house in the outskirts of Bengaluru. His compliment to his wife was that she

had to wait rather long to be in her own house that he built close to his retirement from SATHI.

The life of a social worker especially if the place of work is rural can also be a limiting factor for the family members as Rajesh's spouse experienced in Alwar.

Rajesh Singhi chose to work in Alwar in Rajasthan and continues to stay there. His wife Aarti, a qualified homeopathy doctor, initially did not find the place suitable to offer her opportunities for a growth in her career. But to support Rajesh in his work, she has been working in Alwar.

When Dr Suresh Kumar decided to quit being a practicing anaesthetist to a professional offering palliative care, he also experienced a dip in the earnings for the family. Fortunately his spouse got an employment and the family was able to overcome the stressful situation.

Dr Yogesh married a doctor colleague and they moved to Bilaspur. Dr Rachna continues to practice in the hospital that they established near Bilaspur. She provides solid support as an equal partner in the growth of Jan Swasthya Sahyog.

Dr Johnny Oommen married Mercy, a highly qualified professional in nursing. She heads Christian Hospital Bissamcuttack's nursing department. Johnny used to travel extensively in the interior areas of Odisha, with no means of contact. Mercy and their young son remained at home, his son eagerly awaiting his father's return. There were many moments of stress and anxiety and the family survived the stressful situation.

Sarat Das and his family went through a similar situation in Guwahati. Sarat wanted to work in his home state of Assam and that too on promoting financial access and market linkages for rural women. While the overall goal was clear to him, the breakthrough was not visible immediately. After marriage, with a family to support, he decided to take full-time employment in Delhi to build some financial security. His wife stood behind this decision wholeheartedly. At the opportune moment, Sarat quit his job and returned to Guwahati.

Ashis had to face a similar situation when he and his colleagues from KRIBHCO founded Action for Social Advancement. He and his colleague Jayanthi decided that while Ashis would venture into forming ASA, Jayanthi would continue to work with KRIBHCO that would earn her a monthly salary so that the team would be able to overcome financial uncertainties in the initial years of ASA. Ashis's spouse Sangeeta fully supported his mission.

Prithibhusan continues to reside in his native village that is about 80km from Guwahati, the capital city of Assam. His spouse Karabi expected - a natural and obviously aspirational assumption - that the family would move to Guwahati after their marriage. The Deka family did not. We are sure that all those who went through a similar experience had to sacrifice a lot not just for themselves but for their respective spouses and even more for their children and other well-wishers.

To conclude, it is important that one acknowledges the contribution of family members of the profiled social workers and the strong moral support each of them provided for the growth of not just the individual but his or her life mission as well.

Moral, spiritual or religious moorings to be in social work?

In this study of the 22 individuals, we have diverse representation as far as the religious background is concerned. Three of them are Christians and four are Muslims. The rest are Hindus. There are four women and the rest are men.

For the purpose of this research, we did not ask any of them either implicitly or explicitly about their religious beliefs or their views about religion. Therefore we don't have data (from interviews) about their opinions on the meta-physical aspects of life. However, in interactions with some social workers, we did get indirect glimpses of their philosophical and spiritual orientations. Needless to emphasize, all of them are torchbearers of human values and work for the cause of humanity.

Osama Manzar, at the end of our conversation in Delhi, summed it up nicely when he said that he believed in the wishes of many that accompanied him all the time. He said, "I never felt that the world has been unkind to me. I always thought that I needed to work harder. We have taken risks. My confidence has come from my inner voice if you call it that way. There is a difference between stress and feeling exhausted. I don't have mental tension as I have a loving family. I am surrounded by many well-wishers. I feel that I am guided by a divine power, somebody who walks the path with me and those good thoughts accompany me all the time."

Akeina Gonmei and her husband Reverend H M Gonmei are part of the Baptist Church. They are practicing Christians and hold official positions in the church. Chingmak Chang and his wife Phutoli studied in a theology college in Pune before they began work in the developmental sector. Akeina too added to her previous qualification of Master of Social Work (MSW) another degree when she completed Master of Divinity, a formal training needed to be a preacher/pastor in the Baptist Church. Both Akeina and Chingmak expanded their vision to work with the needy and deprived rather than being content with religious duties.

Mamoon Akhtar had a difficult situation to handle when he mobilised significant support from the neighbourhood community in reviving a defunct school. Some members suggested that the proposed school be a *madrassa*. Mamoon categorically opposed the proposal and argued that what children from poor communities needed was educational opportunity in an English medium school imparting quality education. The residents agreed to his vision and they built a school that would later open up avenues of employment for the prospective students.

Prithibhusan Deka was influenced by the Gandhian values of peace and engaging in constructive activism. Apart from his father who was very religious, Deka learnt these values from Robindra Babu, a noted Gandhian leader of the 1950s, who chose to make Assam his home and place of work immediately after independence. Those values stayed with Deka amidst violence unleashed all around by extremist groups, besides threats to his life.

Dr Johnny's father was a pastor in a church and worked in and outside India for the church's mission. A discussion that Johnny shared with a friend, a confirmed atheist, centred on the eternal search that many individuals have - What is the purpose of life? And what or who is God! Johnny and his friend had endless debates. Johnny knew and believed that he would serve humanity as God wanted him to be useful for others. "If God wills that work happen here, then if Dr Johnny is present or not, it will. If God wills that work doesn't happen here, then even if Dr Johnny tries, it won't happen. Something my parents taught me: our calling is to obedience, not necessarily to success. So the aim is not success in life, the aim is obedience to a higher calling, to what God and need requires of you. The story is not about us."

Pramod Kulkarni on the other hand was more of a pragmatic and rationalist while his spouse was deeply religious. Pramod ended his conversation with us on a very philosophical note, a kind of renunciation, a 'let go' attitude which is a typical philosophical belief in the Hindu system of *Vanprasthashram*- the third phase in an individual's life when one has to begin slowly leaving the worldly things behind. To quote Pramod, "It is good for NGOs and all organisations that the founder steps down and gives way for the new generation to function. Mine was a good decision to retire. It is necessary to disconnect with money, fame and power. Letting go is good both for the organisation and the individual," he said.

Anil Verma has an interesting interpretation of Hindu belief systems and modern agricultural innovations such as system of root intensification (SRI). He compared strengthening of roots of a plant to strengthening an individual and the community. He uses this metaphor in all his community meetings and interactions, often creating songs around this value. He observed that such messages stayed with the villagers.

Also to be noted is that in our list of social workers, there were some individuals who grew up and assimilated values that were clearly not pro-religion! Dr Yogesh was associated with a group in college that believed in secular values and probably in 'left of the center' world view. So also with Dr Suresh Kumar whose association during college days was with a youth group. Vivekanandan's uncle was an active politician with the communist party though Vivek never considered politics as a career. Ashif was certainly influenced by his father who was an active worker with a political party. He later came into contact with many firebrand activists such as Swami Agnivesh. These were certainly influencing factors in his later work. However his own reflection on several incidents of atrocities happening around him made him realise that there was a deadly nexus of class-caste and religious identity when it came to systemic oppression. He noted that there were multiple oppressions because someone

was a woman, and a Dalit and also a Muslim. Even within the Muslim community, to his dismay, he observed deep-rooted caste hierarchy.

For Jameela Nishat, in the cosmopolitan yet deeply divided old city of Hyderabad, bridging the trust deficit between Dalits and Muslims proved to be a huge challenge. Though both were neighbours, there were many wrongly held beliefs and perceptions about one another. It was through Shaheen's effort, the NGO that she founded, that she could bring both the communities together. Akeina faced a similar challenge. Though her association was of Rongmei Nagas, they made it a point to be inclusive in their developmental programmes. In her own words, "We are taking a clear position that development effort of RBA is for all. We don't categorise the villages according to clan affiliations. RBA has programmes in Zeme villages too. For us, a socioeconomic programme means a path to social harmony. We do not take any programme that does not bring harmony in the community. We also recruit staff carefully giving preference to their commitment and integrity irrespective of whether s/he is an Aao Baptist Naga or Catholic or Seventh Day Adventist. Our efforts have slowly opened up minds of the community and leadership within the church."

Social workers as human beings and not God!

How do the social workers see themselves after having spent over 20 or 30 years of their career in serving the underserved? Do they think as normal human beings or are they under constant pressure to be a super human being, bearing the cross of the sufferings of all the poor and the neglected? We had some glimpses of their thinking.

Rajesh Singhi said, "I often wonder, if I would ever retire. If I do, I would want to go the mountains. They are mystical and carry a unique charm for me. I have always been attracted to them. But then, what would I do there? I would have no work, nothing to keep me occupied. A Sunday in Alwar, becomes torturous for me sometimes. I don't think I can ever retire."

Pramod Kulkarni's ambition is different. "I want to go back to teaching mathematics. I think I am good at teaching. Actually, I have started teaching in four primary schools around the place I live. If I can run a summer school for bright children around the villages, that will be a good contribution. I want to teach teachers who offer tuition classes and private coaching. Continuing my work in SATHI, I want to open more shelters."

Chingmak Chang observed rather jokingly, "I am tired of social work. I want to be a pumpkin farmer, growing vegetables in my own field!"

Dr Suresh was more philosophical. "Developing an institution is easy, but leaving it is the most difficult part. The issue is within you and not with the people working with you.

Tomorrow if I die suddenly, the institution and its people will have to survive. But once I decided to quit, I had to do it, I had to overcome the barrier within me. I believe in the philosophy that 'you are not you are because of what you are'. Certain opportunities are given to you and you make the best use of it to become successful but these opportunities are not equal. You are making use of what is available to you. People may say that I worked hard, studied hard, etc. But reality is, you had all those opportunities and I think those who get better opportunity and succeed have a responsibility to help others."

Dr Yogesh Jain thinks on similar lines. Was it a sacrifice for him to have relocated to Chhattisgarh? "No way," he said. Did he make a big sacrifice by coming to a small place? Yogesh thinks otherwise! "People who live off the pen and of one's mind like us, are much inferior to those who live off the land, who grow things, who labour on the ground; they make the biggest sacrifices and not we."