Dear Friends,

I would like to share five thoughts with you.

1. Social Entrepreneurship is about leadership. To lead is to serve! Be of service together. Share wisdom together. Become a community in spirit, at all levels of body, heart, and soul—Deepak Chopra

3. Leader listens and open to all influences, but does not get swayed by anyone.

4. Everybody gets bonded at the soul level. At the soul level one gets connected to the universe, to the silent domain from which all matter and energy flow.

5. Successful entrepreneur is one who has a passion and a purpose. In them we find value drawn from the realm of soul-soulful leadership. Leader expands awareness and consciousness, and empowers people all around thereby empowering himself.

I am sure you will be able to relate to all these thoughts while reading the inspiring stories featured this month.

P. N. Devarajan

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I Too Can!
Career match maker for the disabled

From the Editor
E ver wondered what goes on in the life of a person whom we loosely call a beggar? The sight of small children and frail looking ragged adults calling out to us on our busy roads is not an uncommon one, and it only invokes negative feelings. Popular media often depicts beggars as a tragic or comedy element, exaggerating the characteristics of the underground mafia, and the overt congeniality of the beggars themselves. The reality however is much stronger and unnerving than that. How does one turn into a beggar? Did you hear of the millionaire who was dumped into a Beggar’s Home?

In the eyes of law, beggary is a crime. The Beggar’s Home at Chembur in Mumbai (a custodial institution established by the Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act of 1959) is considered a nightmare by all accounts. Although its objective is to regulate and control beggary and to rehabilitate individuals with their family and organic society, the system is riddled with lengthy procedures. Once inside, it is only luck that can take you out of those iron gates.

Where is the lobby to take up the cause of these displaced and wronged individuals? The answer comes in the form of Koslish, a Field Action Project of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) formed in August 2006—the brain child of Mohammed Tariq, a student at TISS.

“While pursuing my Masters Degree in Social Work at TISS (2004-2006), I was placed for field work with an organisation working with street youth. Once all of a sudden, many boys went missing. Upon enquiring I came to know that the police had arrested them on charges of beggary. I went to meet them in the custodial home and I was shocked with what I saw.”

“This was my first encounter with the Beggar’s Home. Conditions were beyond one’s imagination. It was overcrowded and it seemed as if people were simply left to die. How can we turn so uncaring and insensitive? I decided to challenge the situation. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy to break down the institutions that have been there for decades, but I needed to be free from the guilt and shame of being part of the society that left its own people to die and become food for the rodents. I believe Koslish was born that very day!” says Tariq.

Tarique was not alone in establishing Koslish. When he first discussed the idea within TISS, Dr. Parasuraman, Director of TISS expressed that he was keen on doing something as an institution on the growing issue of homelessness. Vijay Nagaraj and Kritika, also of TISS, came together and engineered the birth of Koslish. Dr. Vijay Raghavan, Asha B. Soleti, Professor Vidya Rao, and Professor Amita Bhide (all from TISS) and Kamini Kapadia from Action Aid India came together to form the Advisory Board of Koslish.

Today, besides the people mentioned above, the close knit working team includes Mangala Honawar and Pradeep, both former students of TISS.

Koslish works within the Beggar’s Home. Absolute belief in the worth of every individual is what makes them different. Their aim is to protect the rights of the people arrested under the Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act 1959.

“Our focus has been on empowering the homeless by building their capacities through various means. We have stayed within the system to challenge the system and that’s the beauty of our intervention. Efforts have been put for making government take up the responsibility and collaborate in the entire process, thus making the government accountable towards its people. Our strategy of networking with the police system and organisations in various states has helped in alliance-building to advocate for policy changes,” says Tarique.

Koslish works towards reintegrating homeless persons with their families and also back with the society and has succeeded well in their mission.

“So far, we have been able to intervene with at least 1,000 people and reintegrated almost 300 homeless people with their families. We have been able to trace the homes of our clients across the country who had lost contact with their families, been missing for weeks or months or years, and were found wandering on streets due to mental illness or family discord. We interact and understand our client. Our team members make home visits, inform families of the law and sensitise them towards the client’s condition and ensure family support by regularly following up with them,” says Tarique.

“We also enlist the support of the police and our network partners from different states across India. The support of the various government agencies in our intervention processes is growing favorably as the years go by. Their active participation and contribution has been of great significance in the implementation of our intervention programs. A large number of clients who couldn’t be taken back to their families are now living independently, are well settled in their jobs, and rebuilding their social life. On the whole, I attribute our successes to dedication, teamwork, and perseverance. But for my dedicated team, this project would be very difficult to run,” adds Tariq.

Koslish has faced a lot of problems as their field setting itself is a challenge. “Government treated us as if we never existed. If we are poor, what do we do? All we want is to live. Is that a crime? We would all have been forced to the streets and cycle of debts if you weren’t there,” says Megha, Raju’s wife. She was deeply relieved when Koslish informed her about Raju’s whereabouts and ensured his release and return to the family.

The very experience of clients being in custody is traumatic for both the client and as well as the worker. “Staff dynamics in these types of institutions is another challenge that one faces regularly. To mobilise support for the client group, with so many wrong notions attached with them, hasn’t been easy either. Building relations is the key to our work. Since we work so closely with the system, often our client group sees us as a part of beggar’s home staff. We are seen as the very people who arrested them and all their anger and frustration for being arrested is wrongly taken out on us,” quips Tarique.

“Life with Dignity—it’s not only my need or a choice I have made. It’s my right and I will continue to struggle for it,” says Uma, aged 60, who was arrested under BPBA 1959, and got released after Koslish intervention.

Unfazed by all these challenges Tariq speaks about Koslish’s future plans. He says: “We are focused on getting this punitive legislation repealed, and are confident of achieving it in the near future. However, even when this law will be repealed, the problem of destitution will still remain, and the rehabilitation process will continue to be a challenge. So, we are now channelising our energies to build appropriate structures and systems through which vulnerable people will be protected and supported.”

“We also aim to become a platform where youth could come and experiment with their ideas, thoughts, and vision without any hindrances, restrictions, or fears. We feel today’s youth is promising and willing to take up challenges. They need direction and motivation. We have been putting in our efforts to make the youth realise why it is important for them to get involved in the issues of justice delivery and protection of rights of vulnerable groups, and why they must speak up for the weak. We want them to overcome the fears of consequences and fear of failure while doing so,” says Tarique.

It has been a great learning curve for this youngster and his friends involved in Koslish. “People with tremendous grit and determination can rebuild their lives, even with little support. We are witness to their capacities in doing that. The patience and faith that they have in relations is tremendous. All it takes to make the system move is pure simple love. Through this work we have seen how greed and hate spoil beautiful families, and how jealousy has ruined people’s life. But, we have also learnt that the biggest truth of life is still ‘love’. It wins over anything else. Make a beginning! That’s the most crucial step to move mountains,” concludes Tarique.

May the efforts of this group pave the way for a young and vibrant India where beggary should be something that the next generation can learn about in museums alone!”

—Archanaa R.