

THE FREEDOM ISSUE

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ARE WE FREE TO BE FREE?

BY PRATAP BHANU MEHTA



ESSAYS BY

SWAPAN DASGUPTA
SHASHI THAROOR
TUNKU VARADARAJAN
SHIV VISVANATHAN
PRIYAMVADA GOPAL
TM KRISHNA



LIBERATORS 2015
THEY DARED AND WON

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ILLUSTRATION BY ANIRBAN GHOSH

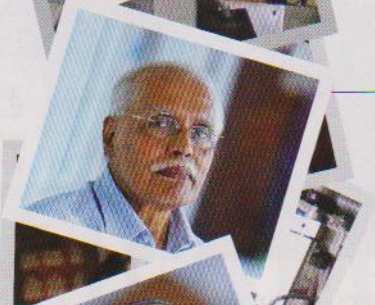
"In the beginning, the locals thought I had no work but to plant trees on rocks"
Abdul Kareem



"Design is the way to inspire thought, which may or may not trigger change"
Sneha Keshav



"The children I work with have perhaps never had a chance to speak up"
DD Nampoothiri



"I realised that with cross donations, many people can get kidneys"
Father Davis Chiramel



"The casual acceptance of sexual assault and the silence that surrounded it was infuriating"
Jasmeen Patheja



"E-commerce seemed the best way to make inroads into rural and small-town India"
Sridhar Gundaiah

"We make robots to replace humans in dirty, dangerous and dull jobs"
Pulkit Gaur

"We said, 'Let's put these drinks back in people's lives.' Otherwise, they'd just disappear"
Neeraj Kakkar



They are teachers and preachers, entrepreneurs and ecologists, students and dreamers. Their ideas make a difference in the life of others—for the better

| By ULLEKH NP

UNTIL A FEW decades ago, innovation in India meant striking a new business opportunity. Entrepreneurs and innovators who rose from nothing to the top of their game were then feted as icons. Not for nothing, of course. The hurdles they had to overcome were formidable. Bureaucratic red tape and policy hiccups that marked the Licence Raj years had made such success stories as rare as they were encouraging. The Liberalisation exercise of the 1990s offered greater freedom for Indian corporates and unleashed the animal spirits of capitalism. Though the marginalised and the poor continued to suffer as in the days of the mixed economy, the true stories of success of people behind some of the showpieces of Indian enterprise helped raise aspirations as more people moved out of poverty and began to attain higher disposable incomes. The country also saw men and women making gains thanks to newer opportunities irrespective of their pedigree. The breaking of the glass ceiling of elitism that marked the first five decades of Indian independence was no mean achievement for spirited young people who dared to dream big. By the time the words 'startup', 'venture capital' and 'angel investor' became popular, it was clear that entrepreneurs could do things differently and on their own terms no matter what the priorities of the government of the day were. True, as more businesses struck gold thanks to pro-growth reforms, narrow pacts began to emerge between the ruling and the affluent classes, resulting in the rise of crony capitalism and gross inequalities that threaten to restrict the impact of growth on poverty alleviation. Yet, notwithstanding the growing economic disparities that are at the root of several of the country's social problems, a new breed of entrepreneurs and innovators began to emerge to take up challenging social goals to set things right. Alongside, there were altruists and passionate advocates who championed the rights of the marginalised through the use of technology and new mediums. For all of them, social responsibility was the driving spirit. While some of them were impelled exclusively by the vital energy to do something good, some others were angry at the state of affairs and wanted to set an example through their work; yet others were entrepreneurs who

while being socially responsible managed to highlight the value of their products and services—and reasonably so, to earn profits and stay ahead of the competition.

In this issue, we feature a group of innovators, picked carefully by our reporters, whom we define as liberators for their stellar, though not-so-well-known, roles in touching the lives of people, for thinking out of the box to meet their goals. They may not be in the media glare, but all of them epitomise the right mix of innovation and social responsibility. Jasmeen Patheja deserves enormous credit for drawing attention to sexual harassment of all sorts on the street. Her Blank Noise Project perhaps taught women to stand up and speak up in public places, including dark alleys of a city, where sexual abuse of the worst kind often happens. She wanted women to make a noise and disrupt a silence that reeks of hypocrisy. So does Sneha Keshav, who has come up with easy-to-use substitutes for popular swear words, using her expertise in design to meet her objective. We have Father Davis Chiramel on the list because he is a beacon of hope for those in need of organs. Born in penury, he is now an inspiration for volunteers nationwide working to spread awareness about organ transplants in a country beset with flaws in its laws. Known also as 'Kidney Priest', he is the founder of the Kidney Federation of India and has managed to get thousands of people to pledge their kidneys in the event of brain death. Abdul Kareem makes it to this list because he revolted in his own inimitable way against the way we treat our forests: he used hard-earned money to plant one by himself. DD Nampoothiri gets applauded for helping thousands of professionals from disadvantaged backgrounds and small towns acquire skill sets to overcome their fears and gain confidence.

The success stories of these innovators and entrepreneurs are different from those in the time of the Licence Raj. Sure, there are several glittering rags-to-riches tales that abound in our modern public consciousness. Yet, these are no less inspiring especially because their social commitments are, without doubt, much higher. The stories of Neeraj Kakkar, Pulkit Gaur, Sridhar Gundaiah and others featured in the following pages are proof of that conviction.

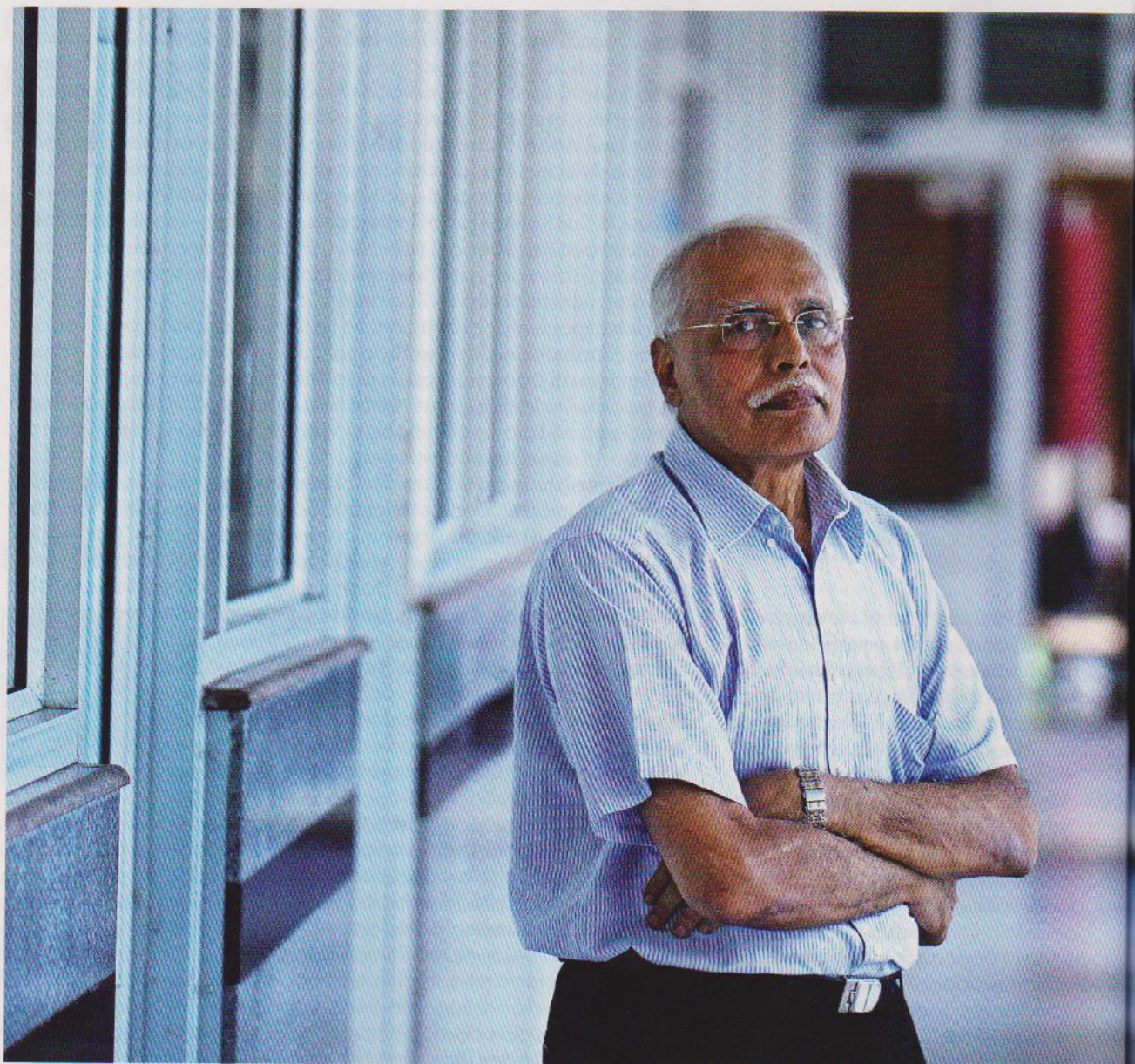
Be inspired—and indebted. ■

ERATORS 2015

THE KIND PROFESSOR

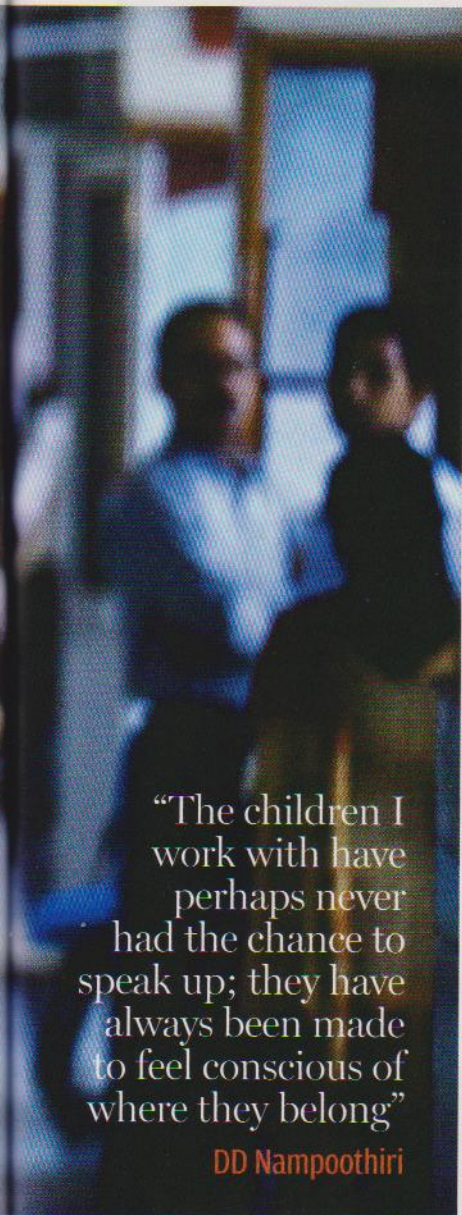
He helps disadvantaged students succeed in a competitive world

By SHREYA SETHURAMAN



ASHISH SHARMA

SSOR



“The children I work with have perhaps never had the chance to speak up; they have always been made to feel conscious of where they belong”

DD Nampoothiri

TALL, SPECTACLED, AND slightly grandfatherly, Professor DD Nampoothiri, executive director of Crest—Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation—meets you like an old friend. A professor of Sociology and member of the Regional Steering Group (South Asia) of Global Partnership for Prevention of Armed Conflicts, Nampoothiri has been associated with social work in India, particularly for children of disadvantaged backgrounds, since 1998. “The children I work with have perhaps never had the chance to speak up; they have always been made to feel conscious of where they belong. These students [mostly from disadvantaged segments of society] are usually diffident and shy. Many of them attend school, but the environment at institutes of higher education leaves little room for introverted children, especially in engineering colleges—where the emphasis on peer level interaction is a lot more.” His work with Crest aims to change this by equipping students with the skill sets needed for social inclusion.

An autonomous institution under the government of Kerala, Crest is based in Calicut. In its earlier avatar, it was the Centre of Excellence, which was incubated by the Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode, in 2002. It has been an autonomous institution since 2008, and continues to receive support from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Development Department, Government of Kerala. Today the organisation holds regular workshops for almost 50 engineering colleges in Kerala, and has been conceived as a national institute of humanities, science and professional studies, addressing the needs of Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalised communities of India. For now, it is the only institution doing any research in this field.

There’s a sense of pride written on his face when Nampoothiri explains the workings of the flagship programme at Crest, which is a Post Graduate Certificate Course for Professional Development. Students enrol for this course once their primary degree is over. The students could be from any professional or education background, which could range from a BTech to a basic graduation degree. The certificate programme works as a module to prepare the students for their actual professional phase. “Most of the candidates are trainees working in the corporate sector—and these places have no reservation, you see. Also, you can easily spot these students, for they’re always shy and diffident, always occupying the last bench, slouching, almost never participating in any discussion. We’re attempting to change that by training them with English communication skill sets, where the trainer makes it a point to meet and interact regularly with the students,” he says, adding that a college environment is the best platform to use and build upon this diversity. “In today’s age, adolescence is very important. While some students are open-minded, others take some time to open up and get used to a big city environment, or being away from their homes for the first time,” Nampoothiri explains, like he would perhaps to one of his students. “The advantage and beauty of India’s rich diversity is that there are people of different societies and backgrounds living with each other.”

For their flagship programme, students make weekly presentations on topics that interest them—these vary from menstruation and how it affects women to the problems faced by the transgender community. The advantage is that students receive feedback and comments from experts. In addition, they too perform a play at the end. Some of these students have gone on to become CEOs of local companies. “Theatre is a wonderful programme, which allows all your skills to be transformed and prepares students for all types of competitive tests,” says Nampoothiri. While there are more females enrolling for these programmes, a sizeable section

is now opting for a career, as opposed to doing nothing about the skills they acquired. The glint in his eyes is obvious when he recalls how the students he's trained always come back. "They always keep in touch."

His team recently concluded a ten-day workshop at AIIMs for 70 odd first-year students. Conducted on an annual basis, the first day is known as 'the ice-breaker', where it's just about getting the students to talk to one another. They're made to introduce themselves and where they're from: which has to be then repeated by every student of the batch. "This way, they perhaps learn of villages and towns they'd never heard of earlier," says Nampoothiri. The next three days are focused solely on communicating with each other and also personality development. Students are constantly encouraged to speak. Predictably, at first, some are reluctant, for they are conscious of their weak English-speaking skills. However, when they see their classmates come up and speak even if it's in-correct English, they feel they too can overcome their complexes. Ordinary speakers eventually pick up, buoyed by the feeling that they too can make mistakes but need not be bogged down by it. Similarly, there are Hindi-speaking classes for those who're weak in the language. After five days, theatre takes centre stage, where students are involved in basic life skills, such as learning to work together, decision-making, problem-solving, etcetera. The plays they enact are usually scripted, enacted and directed by the students themselves, aided by faculty from the National School of Drama. The group in the room during our interview is rehearsing a play on what appears to be eve-teasing.

NAMPOOTHIRI TALKS WITH the tone of a content parent about the success stories of students that Crest has helped nurture. "One such student is now working in Silicon Valley, California—something which she says she owes to the institution. By the time the students finish [any of the various courses that Crest conducts], they're completely different individuals," he says. There's a one-month intensive in-house orientation programme for students who obtain admission for BTech degree courses. Throughout the duration of the course, students are given mentoring support to improve their performance level. "We realised that what we want to achieve cannot be finished in 7-10 days. So we devised a programme for the faculty—where there will be a group of mentors with three to four mentees. This way, it's easier to incorporate and achieve social inclusion," he says.

An encouraging aspect is that none of the students or their parents really care much for caste or class divides—this could be because getting into an institution of national repute is itself a big achievement, and even the parents are of a generation that wants its kids to go far and beyond. They want their children to be better placed socially. Nampoothiri also gives credit to the advent of social media and smartphones, which has made information far more accessible and students more aware of what's happening around them. "We conduct regular, monthly reviews for the faculty as well. However, a lot more awareness is required to achieve what we're setting out to do."

From the feedback that Nampoothiri and his team have received, and from his own observations, because of their skill training, students are now attending classes on a regular basis and their performance levels have also gone up. "Similar programmes are conducted in other societies as well. Take for instance, University of Michigan,

which conducts a one-two week programme for students of the Latin-American and African-American community to prepare them for interaction with other students," he says. "Every student's competitive skills have to be at par with the rest, regardless of whether they pursue a course in engineering, medicine or agriculture. One of the biggest problems that students face is cultural change. They feel that they're brilliant, having made it to a reputed institute, or perhaps being the only person in their entire family or village to ever make it to university. However, when they reach their dream college, they meet other equally brilliant students. This leads them to feel they're maybe not as good as they'd thought," he says. Such students require regular counselling, which Crest enables.

The organisation will soon train students at the school level. It has shortlisted schools in 10 districts in Calicut, all of which are exclusively for students of disadvantaged backgrounds. "We hope to train a number of students and teachers through this programme. Intervention at the right stage and right level can have far-reaching effects," says Nampoothiri.

Crest also has a placement cell for students who complete their certificate course that advises and supports them for higher studies and employment opportunities. In addition, it conducts regular workshops on job opportunities and higher education with the support of the British Council and the United States-India Educational Foundation (USIEF).

Nampoothiri is optimistic about the future of Crest and its goals. The institute is working to become self-sufficient by 2016, by when it will shift into its own campus in Kerala. It is also looking to set up a research wing, which will continue to look at problems of social exclusion. "The right faculty with the right mindset can really do miracles. Teachers have to realise that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been at the receiving end for years, and it is now their job to help improve their skill sets," he concludes. ■

"Teachers have to realise that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been at the receiving end for years and it is now their job to help improve their skill sets"

DD Nampoothiri