

The trickle-down effect

Seven heads of organizations tell us how they got involved with 'giving back to society' and how they approach charity work

Sonya Dutta Choudhary

RASHESH SHAH

Chairman and CEO, Edelweiss

For Rashesh and Vidya Shah, giving back is an extension of what they already do. "At Edelweiss we are an investment banking firm—essentially a bridge between the providers of capital and the users of capital. So we thought why don't we do this for NGOs, since raising capital is usually a big hassle for them," explains Rashesh.



Committed: Rashesh Shah with son Neal (behind him, in a white T-shirt), wife Vidya and daughter Avanti (sitting in her lap) at the Utkarsh Night School in Mumbai. Abhijit Bhatlekar/Mint

Over the years, the couple have found that most NGOs are not run as businesses. "They are fighting fires every day trying to get Rs. 5,000 or Rs. 10,000 from somewhere," says Rashesh. The idea was to lend their financial expertise to the not-for-profit sector and that is what led the Shahs to set up the EdelGive Foundation in 2008. Headed by Vidya Shah, Rashesh's wife and formerly CFO of Edelweiss, the division works with 28 NGOs supported by the company. Every year this department also institutes an awards programme—five awards are given to NGOs working in education and women's empowerment and the company commits to support them.

The support includes funds (Rs. 4.5 crore was disbursed last year) as well as management advice. "For Mumbai Mobile Creches and Aangan Trust, we devised technology solutions to help them become more efficient in day-to-day processes such as payroll and MIS (management information systems), respectively. For Masoom and Under the Mango Tree, we worked towards building a five-year strategic plan with thoughts on organization structure, hiring plans, fund-raising strategies and process improvements," says Vidya.

Children of Edelweiss' employees, including Rashesh and Vidya's 14-year-old son Neal, are also encouraged to teach English and computers at six night schools in Mumbai (held in municipal school premises).

VR FEROSE

Managing director, SAP Labs India

V.R. Ferose is involved with Navjyoti India Foundation, Delhi, the brainchild of former police officer Kiran Bedi. The foundation is into a host of activities, such as a drug de-addiction programme, education, women's empowerment, rural and urban development, etc. "I had invited Dr Bedi to our office in Gurgaon, and after our first meeting she asked whether I would like to work with her. Luckily I was then working in Gurgaon and could join the School Ke Baad School project."

There were a lot of slum children dropping out of school because they had to take care of their siblings. Bedi asked Ferose what he was most passionate about. "I love music, and so decided to start the music school where children aged 8-14, who have not been exposed to any musical instrument, are enrolled." He helped find a teacher to conduct the classes when he moved to Bangalore. "When I go to Delhi now on work, which is once a month, I visit the school and spend time with the children. We are trying to do an event annually and sponsor children with talent."

AMIT CHANDRA

Managing director, Bain Capital

Amit Chandra got a full scholarship when he set out to do an MBA in the US. That he had a chance at an education well beyond his financial means at the time made Chandra decide early on in life that he too would strive to create such opportunities for others. "I got interested in Akanksha because it is associated with education and it helps to give children, who otherwise would never have a chance, a shot at education." Last January, Amit and his wife Archana, and employees of Bain Capital, raised Rs. 1.49 crore for Akanksha and other NGOs by running at the Standard Chartered Marathon Dream Run in Mumbai. The Chandras also support the Tata Medical Center and Cancer Patients Aid Association "We lost a loved one to leukaemia and saw first-hand how good healthcare can make a difference," says Amit.

While he credits his mother for instilling in him the values of giving, over time he says he has been influenced by the approach to "giving" displayed by Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Anu Aga, his sister Monica and her husband Nitin Nohria. Amit also runs a fellowship programme at Boston University with his sister. Additionally, Chandra and his sister have committed Rs. 45 lakh to four needy but deserving international students over a period of three years.

HEMENDRA KOTHARI

Chairman, DSP BlackRock

Hemendra Kothari spent last weekend at the Gir National Park & Wildlife Sanctuary. "Over years, the attitudes of the local people have changed and that's interesting. Earlier, there was always a conflict between man and beast. Now, if a lion turns rogue, the villagers no longer try to kill it. Instead they phone the forest department, who send a rescue squad. It took years of work before this point has been reached,"

says Kothari, with some pride. Kothari, who has enjoyed visiting forests since his college days, now wants to give back. "Not many people realize how important the forest is. So besides education, public health and our heritage, protection of forests and wildlife is one area I am keen to continue working in," he says.

The Hemendra Kothari Foundation invests in trying to generate alternative skills and employment for villagers in forest areas, as well as donating essential items such as rescue ambulances and patrolling kits. Some of the NGOs the foundation supports are TRACT, Tadoba-Andhari; Bombay Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BSPCA), Mumbai; Corbett Foundation, Corbett and Kanha; Katti Trust, Pune; and Wildwatchers, Kolkata. "You have to be able to enjoy giving. It is something that comes slowly. In India people have been building wealth only from the last two decades. Once there is a feeling of security, philanthropy will increase," says Kothari.

MADHABI PURI BUCH

Managing director and CEO, ICICI Securities

"I have rather radical views about giving. I feel every individual and corporate goes through stages in their lifetime; sometimes they can give money, sometimes they can give time, at other times they can't give. And that is all right," says Buch. In fact, she empathizes with Lakshmi Mittal when he says he is too busy contributing to the GDP and employment in 15 countries. "Why do we accuse him of not giving? Does giving have to be the way Bill Gates and Warren Buffett have defined it to be?" she questions.

Buch herself has been involved with the not-for-profit space for a while. After graduating from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, in 1988, she opted for deferred placement and joined Pradan (a not-for-profit organization) for a year. Two decades later, this CEO has once again become active in charity work. In 2008, she set up the Toofles Foundation—a platform that takes old possessions ("anything from a pin to an elephant") and resells them and then donates the money collected from the sale to the donor's favourite charity. "When General Mills, Mumbai, was moving office they gave us their office equipment—from workstations to chilling units. We sold it all, raised Rs.4 lakh and gave it to Baif (Bharatiya Agro Industries Foundation), the NGO they had nominated," says Buch.

MEERA SANYAL

Country executive, India, Royal Bank of Scotland

Meera Sanyal spent a few days in December in Mangalajodi, a village 75km south of Bhubaneswar. Host to thousands of migratory birds, this village has been able, with help from the RBS Foundation and local NGO Wild Orissa, to transform itself from a poacher's stronghold to an ecotourism hub.

"My parents and grandparents were members of the Ramakrishna Mission—they believed in the Protestant work ethic of hard work and giving back to the community. I believe in that too," says Sanyal. "My experience in fund-raising is that people would like to give but sometimes don't because they feel they don't know whether whatever they give will be enough. So when SUPPORT (an NGO that works with street children in Mumbai) came to us for funding, I thought a fund-raising drive internally would be a good idea. We decided that everyone would contribute anything between Rs. 100 and Rs. 500 every month from their salary and the organization would match it." Someone told Sanyal this was just a drop in the ocean, but she believes "it is with drops that you make the ocean".

PRIA SOMIAH

Executive director, Miditech

For the past five years, Somiah has worked on educational/art/science/learning shows for children. "Through this work, I began to feel that there are several ways to impart learning. Children in the labourers' *basti* behind our house are left behind every day by their parents. Most of these people are migrants and live in a sort of no man's land—forgotten by the government and not really on anyone's radar. A lady, Ila Ghei, who lives in the locality, takes classes under a tree. We both got together, spoke to the builder where these labourers were working, and got him to donate a room." It is in reality a shed, which Somiah renovated before she asked for volunteers to give tuitions to the children. "A 20-year-old volunteered, and the school began with one teacher and 55 children. We will celebrate the first anniversary of our school on 14 November."

Somiah refers to this as Project Chehera and the school, where she spends 2-3 hours a week, as the Ambience Basti Learning Club. She takes an art class once a week, and has taken the children for a visit to the *Galli Galli Sim Sim* (Sesame India) sets. She also tries to rope in friends and colleagues to take sessions with the children on general knowledge, wildlife and health.

Sulekha Nair contributed to this story.