

## **Expressing hope...**

Nalandaway: A former corporate executive tries his hand at building bridges in a deeply divided community.

When the 12-year-old boy walked into the office cubicle, clutching agarbathi packets for sale, Sriram V. Ayer was struck by the youngster's intelligent looks. There was something very proud in his demeanour. Out of curiosity Sriram began chatting with the boy, who told him, "My father makes these agarbathis through the day, while I am in school. In the evenings, we go from place to place selling the agarbathis." Moved by the boy's words, Sriram suddenly realised he had found the answers to several questions haunting him ever since he returned to Chennai from Baroda. The next day, Sriram, who was Head - New Initiatives, in charge of the European operations of I Bhar Technologies, quit his job. And Nalandaway was born.



Hear us out: Nalandaway - giving voice to young aspirations.

"May 2002 was a turning point in my life. I was in Baroda, just two-and-a-half months after the riots, and seeing the aftermath of the carnage up close completely shook me up. For the next year, I was in a constant state of introspection, trying to understand the realities around us," he says. A chance meeting with T.V. Venkataraman, former chief secretary of Tamil Nadu, gave Sriram a completely new ideology to work with. "Very often, it is simply a question of perspectives. One community does not understand the other, and that is the starting point of any conflict. That's when I began to wonder if there could be a working model that could bring the two communities together. It could be communities separated on religious grounds, language or finances — the question was, how do we bridge the divide?"

## **Nurturing the future**

The answer came to him a year later, with the young agarbathi-seller's visit. "It was a moment of reckoning for me. It made me realise that these were the children I needed to work with," reminisces Sriram. He worked on a training model that would bring one educated adult (mentor) in contact with a child from a low-income, marginalised society in need of support. "By support we mean emotional support, being there for the child, helping the child make career choices, overcoming obstacles and encouraging them to study further," explains Sriram.

With support from various professionals, educationists and experts, Sriram developed this model along with his former colleague, Patrick Mathews. “We began identifying gifted children who, for lack of better opportunities, languished into nonentities. The mentors would be the emotional anchors in their lives, giving both communities a platform to better understand each other. Today, we work with 340 children and 172 mentors in Chennai alone, apart from children in Krishnagiri and Vellore,” he adds.

Initially there was not much financial support for the effort; however, after Sriram won the Ashoka Fellowship in 2005 there was simply no looking back. “The Ashoka Fellowship identifies what they call social entrepreneurs, who work with a tangible system or model that brings about an effective change in the social environment. With their support, training sessions and encouragement, we have certainly come a long way,” says Sriram.

### **For the record...**

In 2005, Nalandaway launched a unique initiative called Eastside Story Its premise: “What if young people and children in our villages and cities had video cameras to document the world as they saw it? What stories would they tell? What could they teach us?”

“Often, we understand their issues only from our perceptions, but when the children themselves give us an insight, it changes the way we look at issues.”

Today, over 1,700 children are actively involved in this project and they are being trained in theatre, filmmaking and journalism through workshops conducted by experts.

“We encourage them to look at issues with a balanced perspective, not just emotionally, thereby helping them develop social consciousness. The results of these discussions are then converted into short films,” he explains. As many as eight films have been made, focusing on issues like child labour, child trafficking, domestic violence, eve teasing and the education system. “The films should not just empower the children, but should also bring about a change. We want our films to be technically on par with any in the market, and reach out to communities effectively,” he adds.

Many of the films have been shot by Vincent, who has studied under veteran cinematographer PC Sreeram. One of the films, *Mug up Mungamma*, which is a comment on the educational system and the influence of films and television on students, was screened at the Children’s Film Society of India’s Golden Jubilee Film Festival in Delhi. It is currently being used by the Tamil Nadu government to train its teachers. There’s also a music album in the making, with the lyrics penned by the children.

“We have garnered a lot of support from organisations like the UNICEF, CII, Deutsche Bank, Xansa, etc, who support us in our endeavours. In fact, Deutsche Bank sponsored 6,000 screenings of our films in rural areas and has also sponsored an edit and dubbing suite for us. We have also begun to screen these films on TV, and the long-term goal is to convert Eastside Story into a veritable production house for children-centric content,” says Sriram.

*Praveena Shivram*