

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE
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Pulse of the Nation

On June 11th, 2021, a Panel Discussion was jointly hosted online by the Centre for Research in Social Sciences and Education (CeRSSE), JAIN (Deemed-to-be University) and the Indian Institute for Public Administration (IIPA), Karnataka Regional Branch, Bengaluru, titled, 'Civil Society Organisations and the Pandemic: Lessons and Opportunities'. All dignitaries were first warmly welcomed by Dr. Priyanca Mathur, Associate Professor, CeRSSE, JAIN. At the Introductory session, Shri S. Ramanathan, (IAS Retd) Chairman of IIPA, took the audience back to the first national lockdown on March 2020, when the Government of India and NITI Aayog had reached out to more than one lakh civil society organisations to assist in providing supplies to the poor and disseminating information on hygiene and physical distancing. The Supreme Court had applauded the role played by NGOs in helping migrant workers by providing food, water and transport during the difficult time. Development experts understand that it will not be possible for the Government alone to provide assistance during the pandemic. The government needs the civil society and non-governmental and community organisations to spearhead relief with its extensive reach and large volunteer base in the community.

The next speaker in the Introductory session was Dr. Raj Singh, Honourable Vice Chancellor of JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru who welcomed all dignitaries and lauded the appropriate topic for discussion. He said that any change whether in the social sector or education sector which we represent as a University, in the foreseeable future in the next 4-5 years, and the New Education Policy which talks about increasing trans-disciplinarity in education, a response to the needs of the society, in case of say a pandemic, or in the technological field, the response of society is going to change significantly. The role of the civil society with relation to the pandemic has differed from country to country, and the entire third sector has

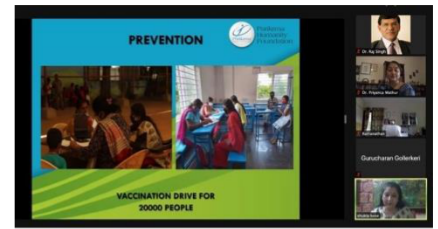


undergone a change. Their challenge will be if they will be able to maintain their primary purposes for which they came into existence, the advocacy that they were doing earlier, and most importantly, will they be able to safeguard the participatory democracy that we boast about in our country, the civil debates that influence the governance in our country. In pre-COVID times many CSOs were looked at with eyes of suspicion but the pandemic has been a leveller as it allowed them to come into dominance. He highlighted how the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the IIPA, KRB and JAIN University will open up new avenues of such collaborative work and in serving the society.

The Chairperson of the Panel Discussion, Mr Gurcharan Gollerkeri, President of the Public Affairs Centre (PAC) Bengaluru congratulated all on the MOU and began by focussing on the importance of the civil society in uniting the community, the people, in the face of crisis, and while that is commendable, what we make of it is what is critical to the ensuing discussion. He began by introducing the three Panellists - Ms. Shukla Bose, CEO of Parikrma Foundation that runs many schools for underprivileged children in the city, representing their voice; Fr Swebert D'Silva, Rector St. Joseph's College (Autonomous) Bengaluru, and we all know of the yeoman services that the Society of Jesus renders to humanity at large, and Fr. Swebert brings with him the most commendable quality that we need today, that of compassion for the other; and Mr Jagdish Reddy, Ward Representative of Varthur Ward, a humble activist representing the citizen, working to protect the lakes of Bengaluru. He set the tone for the Webinar by asking what gives legitimacy to civil society? It comes only from the citizens and when it represents their voice can it address the challenges they face. We need to relook the current developmental model that we have and redesign a paradigm shift in which we bring the citizens in the centre. In this backdrop the Chairperson framed four fundamental questions that civil society needs to fundamentally address – First, in the context of the gaping inequalities, the growing informalisation of labour, and a fragmented public system, how best can civil society respond to the needs of the underprivileged and disadvantaged. Secondly, as the pandemic has disrupted education, especially of the rural poor, how might civil society help prioritise distance learning as digital gap has only widened



The first speaker, Ms. Shukla Bose, CEO of Parikrma Foundation described the excellent work done by her foundation with her presentation titled 'We Have To Do What We Have To Do' to provide assistance in the field of school education amongst the urban poor in Bengaluru. The current pandemic has hugely impacted children as say the staggering numbers all over the world. UNESCO says that 1.5 million are out of school and 10 million may become victims of child marriage because of COVID. Parikrma responded to this world-wide crisis through the lens of 'Preservation, Protection, Prevention, Progress, and Percep-

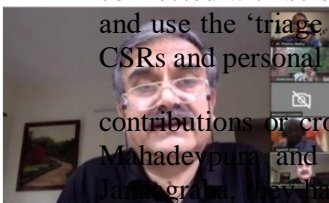


tion'; distributed 9,00,000 meals to their school children and their neighbourhoods so that they won't go hungry; vaccination of teachers and families so that they are protected, perceived safe, and the virus is prevented from spreading; providing 600 digital devices to poor students who cannot afford them to ensure progress; 5 mobile units with oxygen concentrators. COVID-19 should have taught us that we need to work together to create a climate of trust as the poor of the nation are our collective responsibility.

The second speaker was Father Swebert D'Silva, the Rector of St. Joseph's College (Autonomous) Bengaluru. He emphasised on how faith-based organisations have worked to come together with citizens for COVID relief, to pursue excellence, to do their best to create the society we wish to live in. The college has started a COVID care and isolation centre, specially for the economically poor migrants and slum-dwellers, meant only for the poor, with food and medical assistance. St. Joseph's also has a team to help bury the COVID victims with dignity, conducted a vaccination drive and awareness drive and reach out to people in their local language. Ration kits were distributed to migrants, slum dwellers, transgenders, LGBTQ community, ASHA workers, blind people, auto drivers, college students and their families, spending around 10 crores rupees in the first wave of the pandemic and 40 lakhs in the second. The college had a team of counsellors and staff to take calls for counselling those in trauma, stress and grief and even organised webinars on mental health.



The next speaker was Mr Jagdish Reddy, who represented the Varthur ward and the voice of the citizens-movement 'Varthur Rising', which creates a platform where changemakers and citizens can assist. He started by pointing out the failure of governance which necessitated the need for people to step in help in good management. Our volunteers, he said, bring with them a vast range of experience gathered globally, well connected with science, representing the pillars of democracy, and use the 'triage method'. Funds are raised through SMEs, CSRs and personal



contributions or crowd funding. During the pandemic a citizens team was prepared to operate in Mahadevpet and Anekal areas to collate data by forming ward-wise teams. With the NGO Jagruti, they have committees that function like a disaster-response team at the ward level, to gather traction around the corporators, politicians, or minister himself/herself to assist in pandemic related relief. They help citizens to build 'covid consciousness', to find beds if they need hospital care, prepare cooked food and supply medicines on needs basis. They have a 'War Room' and anyone can call for help on those numbers.

Mr Gurcharan, as the Chair in his concluding remarks complemented the panellists for an excellent discussion, for their

authenticity as there was solid work behind all that they said. He added that there were three takeaways – first, that there exists a great need to decentralise, to enable decision-making to take place at a local level. For example, the great work that ‘Rising Varthur’ is doing is enabled as citizens are motivated to participate. So the need to strengthen the last mile. Secondly, its not just the NGOs and government who have to do their jobs, even people should practise health-seeking behavior. Thirdly, the time has

come for us to use science and technology and data analytics, specially the way Mr. Reddy spoke of how he uses data to deliver services to those who need them the most.

Dr. Priyanca Mathur, then handed the floor who Dr. Reetika Syal, Assistant Professor at CeRSSE, JAIN, who spoke that it is evident that civil society organisations have worked along with government, at times better than the government, and so it is critical for us to shift the spotlight on their untiring efforts. She was followed by Dr. D. Jeevan Kumar, Secretary of IIPA-KRB giving the official vote of thanks, noting that this has been a very informative and meaningful panel discussion, that highlighted important issues like the addition of disaster risk management in academic curriculum, the role of religion and spirituality during the pandemic, the politicisation of humanitarian relief, and upholding the integrity of CSOs.