

**Interview of
Mrs. H. M. Amitha, Founder Trustee, and
Dr. George Joseph, Chief Functionary,
Centre for Social Action Trust, Bangalore**

1. When and why was CSA Trust Started?

In 1993, H.M. Amitha, inspired by her background, values and convictions founded CSA Trust to realize her vision of serving the poor and the exploited.

More specifically, the Trust was set up for:

- a. The permanent and future benefit of the culturally, economically and socially less fortunate sections of society and those in distress
- b. Students who have the ability to dedicate their services for the development of these foregoing sections of society; and
- c. Individuals and organizations working for the improvement in the quality of life prevailing in the aforesaid sections of society

The overall aim of CSA Trust is to accompany and guide individuals and community based initiatives to promote organizations of the rural poor to take up issues blocking their empowerment.

2. What sets apart CSA Trust from other NGOs and Other Institutions who do similar work?

In the opinion of the Chief Functionary, the following characteristics of CSA Trust distinguish it from other NGOs and Institutions doing similar work.

- 1) CSA Trust consciously works with the 'poorest of the poor' and the 'most neglected' categories of the Indian Population. Such an option has led to working with a predominantly Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Backward Caste Population.
- 2) Even among the targeted population, the Trust focuses on the education of 'children in distress', caring for children with disabilities, working with single women and networking among other exploited women. In fact, Education of children in distress and empowerment of women for a just and peaceful community life remain the twin motto behind all CSAT activities
- 3) The major activities of CSAT are carried out by over 70 full time volunteers and 120 community leaders. Their dedication and commitment for selfless service is a unique feature of CSA Trust.
- 4) All CSAT staff are locally recruited and given ongoing training. Local staff, along with community leaders are given the responsibility to coordinate local actions

3. Who or what is the corner stone of CSA Trust?

The corner stone of CSA Trust is **people** –community leaders, staff, volunteers, board of trustees, friends, relatives and other individuals and institutions who have strived with us for building a better India. **However, over the years, our work is made possible by Aktionsgruppe Kinder in**

Not e.V., Windhagen. They have single handedly supported all our major programmes since 2003.

4. When was Kinder Care Special School Started? What were your dreams for it then? Are they different now?

The communities we work with largely depend on wage labor for subsistence. This means that all able bodied adults and adolescents leave home in the mornings to eke out a living. Normal children go to schools, leaving behind disabled children and the elderly to fend for themselves... Children with disabilities are generally not welcomed in local elementary schools and are left in the village street in the company of stray dogs and pigs... We were moved by this scenario and started KCSS in 2003 to care for such children. Beyond providing nutritious food and loving care, we also provide vocational training and physiotherapy. Initially, we were thinking of basic care but now we also dream of vocational training and rehabilitation...

5. Is it a Challenge to work with mentally and physically challenged children? How do you manage?

Working with mentally and physically challenged children requires a far deeper commitment and motivation. However, once we see them as Gods own creation, deserving care and love on a preferential basis, it is no more a challenge but a joy... Our work among children with disabilities is managed exceptionally well because we have well motivated and committed staff who deeply care for the children.

6. They say little drops of water make an ocean. How true is that in your organization? How important a part do the staff; teaching and non teaching play?

As already stated, all our staff; teaching as well as non teaching are local. Over the years, they have been motivated to genuinely care for and love our children. Their single minded obsession to care for our children makes our school a unique venture.

7. How are the teachers trained to handle the children?

All our teachers have undergone basic training in working with people with disabilities. Some of them have also undergone specialized training in the field of disability care and physiotherapy.

8. What is the most common disability found among the children in your school?

A majority of our children suffer from Mental Retardation. However, most of our children also suffer from a variety of associated disabilities.

9. What is the admission procedure to get into the school?

Ours is a community school... This means that any child with disability in the age group of 7 to 14 has the right to get admitted. However, we only admit

children whose disability is 'mild' or 'moderate' to the school. Such children are trainable. Our school is currently not equipped to handle 'severe' or 'profound' cases. We encourage children with physical disabilities to go to normal schools. Admission procedure consists of home visit, assessment, meeting with parents, participation in residential camp and admission to KCSS.

10. What are the hurdles you face in running the organization?

We are happy that we have not faced hurdles in running the Organization.

11. What is a typical day in the life of these children?

Our children are picked up in the morning between 7 and 9.30 am. Physiotherapy sessions are from 8 a.m. As the children arrive, they are all given a glass of milk and biscuits. School assembly is at 9.45 a.m. Classes start at 10 a.m. The children are divided into 7 sections: pre-primary, primary, secondary, slow learners, hearing impaired, pre vocational and vocational. Physiotherapy cuts across classes. Lunch break is at 12.30. The afternoon classes continue till 3.30. All our children are dropped home latest by 5.30 p.m.

12. How has the school changed things for them?

The improvement in our children have been nothing short of 'miraculous'. The hearing impaired children now can 'speak', those who had no vision have at least 'limited vision' now, those who came crawling, not only can walk but have become excellent 'dancers', most children can take care of their personal hygiene. In short, there has been a very significant turn around for the better in the lives of these children. The parents are overjoyed to see these improvements in their children.

13. Do the children have any medical check ups done regularly? How is it organized?

All our children have routine medical check up once a month. Those who require specialized medical care are brought to specialists for their opinion and treatment. Some of our children have benefited greatly from the services rendered by 'Unit of Hope', St. John's Medical College Hospital, Bangalore. Besides, children requiring 'aids and appliances' and 'hearing aids' have been supplied the same. For disabled children at large, we have also been organizing 'medical camps'.

14. What makes you want to continue doing this work? What does it give you?

It gives us great joy and satisfaction to be of service to these children who are otherwise neglected and rejected. Over the years, these children have grown and shown their capability to love... Seeing them happy and cheerful and learning to take care of themselves in itself is a motivation factor to continue our work among these children.

15. Is there any specific thing that happened to a child, that had you in awe, that you take pride in?

Till we started the Special School, we had only heard of 'miracles'... But in our special school, we are witnessing miracles ... blind can see, deaf can hear, lame can dance... There is a huge change in the whole environment... there is laughter and joy all around and the children have all grown in self dignity and responsibility. So many things have changed/improved so dramatically that nothing surprises us anymore...

16. What is one lesson you have learnt from the work you do?

Impossible is nothing... Genuine care is the foundation for any transformative action. God makes everything possible...

17. What according to you is the most important value to possess while doing work like this, and even otherwise?

Genuine care for the other as God's creation... Collective action for making this world a better place to live in for the suffering and the exploited

18. What is your wish, dream for these children for the future?

We wish that we can help these children stand on their own leg... take care of themselves, earn a livelihood, and find the security and comfort of human existence.

19. Have the children helped you grow as a person? Has your work helped you to grow?

Yes... In fact, what we are today, at least most of it can be attributed to us deriving out of our work among the poor and the disadvantaged... Our work has brought happiness into our lives.

20. How important are youth in social work? Should they be more involved? What is your advice to them?

Youth of today have a very crucial role to play in social transformation. Surely, they should be much more involved in social action. People sit up and notice when youth get together and spearhead social change. However, it is a pity that most youth of today are only worried about building their career or in 'enjoying life'... Care and concern for the poor and the disadvantaged is diminishing as 'selfishness' overrules such noble intentions.