

## Removing Weeds, Tending Flowers by Sachi Maniar

Last month, a remarkable gathering took place in Ahmedabad, India. Dubbed, "Gandhi 3.0" it was a retreat that brought together change-makers from around the world who aspire to drive that change from the inside out. Through the power of inner transformation. One of the first speakers at the retreat was Sachi Maniar, a dynamic young filmmaker-turned-social-entrepreneur who devotes a significant part of her time to running an Observation Home in Mumbai (the local equivalent of juvenile hall) In her heartfelt talk she describes pivotal stories, insights, edges and aha moments from her journey. She describes among much else, the vital organizational value of "doing the work of listening" and cultivating relationships that expand the circle of stakeholders, and operational questions such as, "Should we be all volunteer-run?" "Do we need to scale up?". What follows is the video and full transcript of her talk.

I am super nervous and that's also because I am sitting with people who have been practicing and walking on this path for decades and I am just beginning my journey. I made all these notes but I have pretty much forgotten everything that I had to say. So, I am just going to share from my heart. I will share a little bit about how I started my journey in service.

I was 9 years old when my dad passed away. And, I remember very clearly, when they were taking his body to the crematorium, our entire building was super full. There was no space to stand. People were just pouring in one after the other and we didn't even know all these people. I think, at that time, I felt like, I want to live a life like that. I want to do my bit for the world before I go. I think somewhere those seeds stayed with me and there was always this hunger to serve. I kept looking for different opportunities to serve. And God was very kind and gave me many many opportunities.

Jump to 2014, when I actually went to a Children's Home and an Observation Home in Mumbai, which is actually the first prison of Mumbai, where some of our freedom fighters were. So, I went there to volunteer to paint walls as these walls were white and tall and we just thought, "Let's go and paint and bring some color to the home." So a bunch of us volunteers went there to paint walls. Some things that I noticed on my first visit there, were that approximately 350 to 400 children were locked up in one room, which stank of urine, and the clothes were very dirty and the kids had scabies all over. The identity of a child was a number. It wasn't his name, it wasn't his face, it was a number. That somehow just irritated me and it just broke my heart.

So, I just started volunteering there. And because of my background in film-making, I thought, maybe I should go and make a film and then go to these big builders and say, "Come on you have all this money, we should rebuild this entire place and we should

break these walls down and reconstruct and re-dream a Children's Home and Observation Home." Of course, after 10 days of doing research they canceled my permission [smiles]. But in the 10 days, I made lots of relationships. I met the kids and had a relationship with them. And, I had to go there.

The first year of my working was pretty much head, head, head, even though I knew personal transformation was important. I thought, I will give two years of my life to this place and we will see what we can do and we will try and change it. I did everything that I could - rebelled, fought, gave love, listened to lots of people.

And then, there came a point where I felt that no matter what was going on outside... Of course a lot of good things were happening. We managed to get around 100 odd volunteers to come inside the children's home which is unthinkable because nobody ever enters this place of incarceration without permission and here we were bringing 100 odd volunteers so that, the children experience what does it mean to eat a meal with dignity. We got volunteers every Sunday.

Sunday is a day of lock-down. There is no one who enters the children's home and somehow we managed to get permission to get volunteers on a Sunday. This is not staff. These are volunteers. You see new volunteers every week and the staff was okay with it. So somehow, we managed to do all these things but at the same time inside, I was fighting. I was like this is not happening and that is not happening. I was wondering, I started this work so that I could focus on personal transformation and this work could be my tool but it's not really doing that and so how do I change that. And the last 2 years have been years of practicing watching and saying okay fine. And that's changed quite a bit in the home.

For example, earlier we would say children are our stakeholders, so we will work for children. But, slowly, I started realizing that the guard is also a stakeholder. And this is the guard who handles 400 kids. It is not an easy job. So we started talking to these guards and spending time with them -- and not because we wanted to break the system, but it was more because I wanted to build a relationships with them. And so the same guard in the first year who used to check me completely and say "get me the permission" and would make me call the superintendent 3 times and ask me to get permission, actually just one month ago, he told me, "Can you please not call me 'saab je' [which means 'sir']? Can you call me 'kaka' [which is 'uncle']?" So it was really beautiful. Of course with the kids we see magic happen all time - a deaf and mute kid will all of a sudden start talking and say my name. And you wonder, Oh! my god, I thought you were mute! You couldn't speak.

I particularly want to share a story about one of the kids. He is this young angry man in for sodomy and half murder. I have known him for almost six months. He was transferred to a correction home which I also visit there. That day, when I went there, he had hit someone's straight on his head with a plate. The guy was bleeding and he had many stitches. And of course, you know we did a circle and I asked him there and he said no, I didn't do it.

Then I took him on the side, after all these people had gone and I asked, "What happened. Did you do it?"

He said, "Yes, I did it."

"Why did you do it?"

"Everyone is frustrating me, everyone is beating me up." He removed his t-shirt and he showed me all the marks that the guards have been beating him up. And he said, "I am tired of this place. I just want to get out of here. I am not this person."

Somehow, I didn't do anything at that time but he was released after that and he went back home. Then we called him to Awakin Talks, which we organized in Mumbai and he met Nipun-bhai (brother) and he heard a lot of other speakers who were amazing and shared their personal stories. He heard Sister Lucy and Mamoon-bhai and many other and that night there was an opportunity where there was a couple who was deaf and mute. They couldn't tell the taxi driver where they had to go. So Varun goes out. He helps them.

Then he comes to me and said, "This felt really good."

And I said, "Great." I asked, "What did you like about this experience?"

He said, "I don't know but I felt I was useful. I felt like I could do something."

"Great. That's awesome. Should we continue this? Should we both go on a 21-days kindness challenge?"

And we both did a 21-day kindness challenge for the last month. And everyday on Whatsapp we would share a kindness stories. So now my conversations with him is:

He will say, "Didi (sister), what did you do? Did you do any kindness?"

I'd say, "No, today I missed it, but what about tomorrow we do this?"

And he'd be like "Yeah, sure we will do it."

Systems Edge: Engaging the Whole Child

So to summarize, this is really magical. To see someone in a space of incarceration who is so aggressive and constantly angry and now to have a completely 360 degree turn around. We are creating systems or our systems are such that they are preparing our children to be criminals. And we are treating all our kids equally when actually what they need is to be treated individually, where, we really need to look at each child's needs and each child's strengths and weaknesses. And amplify their strengths so they can become better human beings. That is one question I am holding.

Operations Edge: Volunteers or Staff?

The other question that I am holding is personally in my journey, I am at a place where I have this - we are working in two children's home and there is a hybrid model where we have volunteers and staff and I don't know which way to go. Whether it should be fully volunteer-run or whether should we have staff and then having staff means collecting more money and paying their salaries and all of those things. Vinoba-ji also said that organization is a form of violence. So I am very confused on those lines. What is the correct way to go? I have no idea. But I do know that if we do manage to create organizations, initiatives, projects which are rooted in personal transformation. That would be amazing.

## Impact Edge: Depth and Breadth of Listening

We are a very different organization in a way because we don't say that this is our agenda. We would spend hours helping the superintendent write her letters which she has to forward to other people and no organization does this. Or we sit with guards. We had a probation officer last week who got a show cause notice because he submitted some submissions late. He came to me and said that I don't know what I want to talk to you about but I just want to spend 5 minutes with you. I said okay sure, I will come and listen.

I don't think any organization who is working in these children's home is doing the work of listening, and so then how do we scale this up because the need is a lot. Do we really scale this up? Do we need to scale this up?

I was just talking to Sister Lucy before this and I feel the same. In this other Children's Home, we started working because it used to pain. I would feel the hurt of these kids. It would bother me that I am not doing enough. So, what is that line of doing enough? When is it enough? When can I say that's it? I will just focus on this one home and make sure that these 300-400 kids or should I add another 100, or another 100. Is that seeking? Is that greed? I don't know. That's my thought and the last thing is that my hope is that we can create these spaces of incarceration into gardens where we can remove the weeds and tend the flowers.

Thank you. Thank you for listening.  
Read reflections and stories from Sachi Maniar's service journey here.

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For more inspiration join the upcoming Awakin Call this Saturday with Nilima Bhat, on Shakti Leadership: Exercising Power Regeneratively.