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Q1. You have shown great passion for education and its importance. It is essentially a single tool that can empower so many people. However, the current education system of India is flawed at many levels. How do you think that can be solved?

It is not only India that has flaws in its education system; education systems almost everywhere in the world are flawed. In fact, more than 60% of American fourth-graders are not proficient readers i.e. almost two-thirds of American children who can't read properly.

Today we have lost the very purpose of Education. Education is the building block of society. The current flawed education system all over the world is focused on the so-called "3 R's" (reading, writing & arithmetic), two of which ironically don't even begin with R!

The ancient Indian method of educating a child using the Head, Hands and also the Heart is now slowly being accepted as the way forward. In fact, as we move to celebrate Gandhiji's 150th birth anniversary it might be of value to revisit some of his views on education. He created Nai Talim (New Education) where education is

not textbook centred but life-centred, purposeful and productive. Nai Talim sees education for life, through life and throughout life. This resonates deeply with my views that both our initial schooling and the work we do after is all an ongoing process of education.

We need to completely change the purpose and goals of our system, only then can education be of true value for our children, our country and the world.

Q2. India houses the highest number of people who practice open defecation. More than half the women in India do not follow menstrual hygiene. Apart from availability, the notions, beliefs and superstitions play a huge role in people not following hygienic measures. How do you think this can be defied?

I'm sorry but I don't agree with the question which implies that Indian women are steeped in superstition. The problem is they lack knowledge and facilities, we have found that once we inspire them to change in a deeply respectful way, they DO change their habits faster than men. Women & children tend to love their toilets as their safety, dignity and health are safeguarded. The village

communities are deeply proud of the toilets we have made for them, they have contributed towards them and feel a sense of ownership towards them. I need to say that at Swades, we do not believe in community toilets for rural India and all our 21,000+ toilets are individual household toilets. Menstrual Hygiene does continue to be a problem, but it is caused by a lack of knowledge and facilities.

Q3. We have surprisingly heard from several organisations that in terms of environmental sustainability, rural India is leading way ahead of urban India. What are your thoughts and experiences in this?

I am not aware of this statistic as we work exclusively in rural. But if it is true, I would think it is a very natural outcome of being more deeply connected to nature and also dependent on nature. We have multiple eco-friendly programmes in Swades which are taken up with great enthusiasm: new orchards and drip irrigation are among them. We have also built 6 check dams to conserve millions of litres of water besides also increasing the groundwater levels in the region.

Q4. You have mentioned in your interviews that more young people need to take up agriculture. Why do you think this is important?

I think the problems of feeding the world need to be addressed by young, educated farmers who can combine new technologies with old wisdom.

Q5. CSR and philanthropy are often misconstrued as synonyms. How will you explain and differentiate them from one another?

Well, it's really simple, CSR is done by a corporate born out of a government mandate. Although I have met many companies like Tata, Godrej, Bajaj and Birla who have instituted these almost 100 years ago or at the time of starting their business.

Philanthropy is done out of choice and the urge of an individual to help make a better world. Philanthropy comes from two Greek words, 'philos' meaning Love and 'anthropos' meaning Man. Thus philanthropy means the love for humankind. One thing I



want to say is that you do not have to be 'Old' and 'Rich' to do philanthropy, it can be done by anyone. Start small and local, solve small problems you see around you. Give your time if you don't have money. Everyone can be a Philanthropist!

Q6. What are some of the lessons you have learned along the way while creating the Swades Foundation?

We have learnt that there is no silver bullet to poverty and what is needed is a holistic 360-degree solution. Thus, we have created the Swades Model of holistic development, where we take large geography of about half a million people and start to work deeply at the village level, from water to toilets to education, health and nutrition and livelihoods and agriculture. We believe poverty is mental as well as material. We work hard to alleviate both forms of poverty through massive empowerment

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processes.

Our media background has taught us the art of

collaboration and while we are a grassroots execution foundation with over 300 full-time professionals, 280 of which work at the community level, we also partner with the government and other NGOs.

The final lesson is to have an exit strategy. We believe we will have succeeded when, after we exit a geography, the community empowerment processes are strong enough for the work to continue.

Q7. Apart from the Corporates recognising their social responsibility, the country also needs citizens who understand and take up their responsibility towards environment and the country. What are your tips that an individual can follow immediately to participate in national development?

All power lies with the individual, everyone can make a difference, it doesn't matter if it is small or big, celebrated or unnoticed. What is important is to bring a sense of ethics to everything we do. Start small with the day to day activities of your life, for example: how much salary we pay our domestic help, do we look after them medically? Do we solve the garbage issue outside our front door? Then start expanding your vision, volunteer or work with like-minded people and start with what you are passionate about. Solve local problems.

Q8. Applying the '10 years challenge' to national development, what are the changes you would like to see in the country in the year 2029?

I would like to see my beloved country as I would like to see any individual: standing strong and with the capability to look after themselves and others, aspiring to create a better world. By better, I mean a world where the individual acts as he knows to be right. Where we stop being cynical and doing nothing because we believe the problems are too big, but rather where we strive with our best energy to make things better for ourselves and others. Very importantly, progress cannot be measured in purely economic terms but also needs to be ecological, social and beyond.

Q9. How far has the 2% mandate contributed to the success of CSR?

I think it's a visionary and transformative mandate and has changed the face of the sector. I believe truly that today the sector is fast becoming the best place to work. We all seek meaning in our lives and what a joy it is to be helping others and getting paid to do it! My hope is that the very best and brightest minds start applying

themselves to this sector and start to solve real problems. Not just that, I also believe the impact of CSR on the organisations themselves is transformative. If done correctly, CSR can be an amazing team builder, it can recharge the energy and enthusiasm of the team. Also, it exposes the corporate mind to new problems, new challenges and new opportunities which they otherwise would have missed.

Q10. How do we get our youth to participate more in CSR activities?

Not in CSR but to volunteer: it's again a transformative process for an individual. We have a wonderful school engagement/buddy programme where IX and XI grade students from some of the top schools in Mumbai engage with students in our rural schools on a regular basis. It is a 2-day event where students mutually benefit through shared learning, games, knowledge sharing and several awareness-building activities. In 2017-18, we had 255 urban students engaging with nearly 1,400 of students from our rural schools and the outcome was deeply empowering for both schools.



Q11. Do you think there is a need for monitoring of CSR activities?

I can't imagine anyone spending all that money and NOT monitoring. I also believe the CSR teams need to be properly trained.

Q12. What is the message you would want to give to the women of our country?

Not just for women but for all: Believe in yourself, there is more to you and to life than you can even imagine. Work on what brings you and others some joy. There is always a way. In our villages, I have met women who have not only led the transformation process in their own village but have convinced women in other villages to take the lead and work to make their villages better. |