

The 360-degree sweep of philanthropy

How lessons from being a first-generation entrepreneur have helped Ronnie Screwvala transform rural life in Raigad through his Swades Foundation

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Zarina (centre) and Ronnie Screwvala interacting with the Gokulwada village community, which received drinking water at their homes for the first time with the support of the Swades Foundation. courtesy swades foundation

Sanjukta Sharma

At 56, seven years after he divested his media and movies conglomerate UTV Software Communications to Disney for an enterprise value of \$1.4 billion (around ₹10,000 crore now), Ronnie Screwvala is one of the few Indian philanthropists who has created his own not-for-profit, 360-degree model of rural development that can have a multiplier effect. The Swades Foundation has been working in more than 2,000 villages in Maharashtra's Raigad district since 2013.

Screwvala doesn't live or talk like a billionaire and doesn't like the word "philanthropist", he says, when we meet at his office an unassuming sprawl built around basics, in Worli, Mumbai. "Philanthropist sounds ponderous. It seems to mean you have to mature, above 50, with a fat bank balance to give. I believe you don't need to necessarily have a lot to give. We started very young, in our 20s," he says. By we, he means his family: wife Zarina Screwvala, co-founder and managing trustee of the foundation, and daughter Trishya Screwvala, who is also a social entrepreneur.

The office is home to Swades Foundation, his online education venture upGrad, sports company U Sports, private equity label Unilazer Ventures and a digital content company RSVP, which produced, among other films, the year's very successful Hindi film Uri: The Surgical Strike. The office also belongs to the seven-member team of The Lighthouse Project, a non-profit mentor-mentee programme of 700 mentors and 700 mentees that Trishya founded and runs.

Both Ronnie and Zarina come from middle-class households, which, he says, has something to do with their interest in giving back to society. "The first 18 years of my life were in Grant Road, in a building which was like a long community room. When you come from there, there's a certain grounding that you have. I think your background has strong connections to why you may have a sense of empathy and sense of awareness of people around you," says Ronnie. The Parsi genes too, he adds.

Rather than focusing on just one issue, the Swades Foundation works on every aspect—water, sanitation, health, education and livelihood. A 360-degree sweep is an uncommon model for a non-profit. But the foundation works in a concentric geography of about 3,200 sq. km, covering 2,200 villages and a little over half a million people, in over seven blocks of Raigad. It has a team of about 300 full-time employees and about 1,000 part-timers. In the last five years, the total outlay of Swades Foundation's work has been around ₹450 crore, of which ₹225 crore has come from donors. Zarina, who spends 100% of her time on the foundation, says she simply executes her husband's vision for rural development, and that's her full-time job.

Swades works on solutions that leave a permanent impact so that people are empowered and do not need its intervention five-seven years down the line (after five years, they go to new villages). Its approach doesn't have precedents. "A benchmark is always very limiting," Ronnie says. So they train teachers, set up new classrooms, get water taps in each household, set up sanitation facilities and upgrade irrigation facilities. He says lessons learnt from being a first-generation entrepreneur helped him think non-linear, and take the risk of abandoning a narrow focus for their work.

"Non-linear is my operative approach to everything I do. The word 'disruptive' is passé. In the rural and social space too, we take risks. Precedents are mostly irrelevant; lessons learnt are good, but even they need a new context. So I am a firm believer that if we want to bring change to rural India and to the not-for-profit sector, we need to think non-linear," he says.

They wanted Swades to be an execution foundation from Day 1. "We were not cutting a cheque to anyone. We wanted to build a team, execute on our own," he says.

In 1990, after pioneering cable television in India with the company United, Screwvala founded UTV (United Television) with Zarina Mehta and Deven Khote. It produced a quiz show for Doordarshan called Mashoor Mahal, for which Ronnie was also assistant director. In non-fiction programming, he created, directed and produced the game shows Snakes & Ladders and The Mathemagic Show, the medical drama Lifeline, the quiz show Contact, in which Ronnie himself was the quiz master, and Hip Hip Hurray, a show for teens. In the early days of UTV, they started Share, an old-age crèche and orphanage on the premises of their office.

Ronnie recalls, "As first-generation entrepreneurs, we had to work with very little. There was no concept of private equity or capital or bank loans at that time. Because we were a small team, the company represented a system of core values of the founders. Instinctively, in the early years itself, we decided that 10% of what we made, we would give to charity.

"It was a very symbolic gesture at that time because we were not making anything, we had not raised any money. We had to live up to that statement from Day 1. We had a 10,000 sq. ft office, and we allocated 1,000 sq. ft to Share. It was a culture-setting thing for the organization. It had nothing to do with UTV, it was my

personal foundation.” Like UTV, Share too grew in scale.

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The first employee they hired specifically for Share guided them to the next step—rural India. The rationale was that although there are numerous problems in urban India, there are also many people solving them. Zarina and her team travelled across India and Bangladesh and realized, as they spoke to not-for-profits, that most issue-specific work was stuck because they could not control other areas of development. If you have a water problem, you are not going to get girls to attend school. Everything was interconnected, so they decided to solve the overall problem. “Our entrepreneurial experience came into use because as entrepreneurs you are used to solving a problem holistically,” says Ronnie.

Most rural migrants leave for cities not only owing to the lack of basic amenities and livelihood, but also natural factors like droughts. Many migrants in Maharashtra are climate refugees. Raigad, for instance, is in the Deccan plateau. Even if there is rain for five months of the year, it all dries up two months later.

Swades’ success, and the reverse migration it has resulted in, proves that if basics like water, sanitation, education and livelihood are in place, villagers would stay in their homes. “We couldn’t be looking at stopping migration because that’s what is supposed to build aspiration. But the truth is, only in countries where there are developed cities is it aspirational. We don’t have developed cities. Our cities don’t have the infrastructure to handle large-scale migration. Rural migrants aren’t happy here, but going back to the village is like admitting defeat. It took us time to change this perception,” Ronnie says.

When Swades started, 30-35% of the houses in the villages were locked. For four years, the foundation has been hosting community meetings in Mumbai with migrants from these villages, updating them about developments in the village. “Building trust with the community is very important. You can’t go thinking I am doing social work and everyone will welcome me with open arms. Not at all. The trigger for people to come back is either strong school education, which they have seen after our intervention, livelihood options in agriculture and dairy, and jobs,” Ronnie says. Water has become the big catalyst for reverse migration, as each household in these villages now has one-two water taps, with 200 litres allocated for each household for everyday use.

On Republic Day, the Swades Foundation signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Maharashtra government to identify 650 villages in Raigad district that can be turned into “dream villages” in terms of livelihood—this would include large swathes of the Adivasi population. The signing of the MoU is a culmination of their work since 2012, when Share became Swades, a name change prompted by the film Swades (2004), which Ronnie produced at UTV.

Ronnie recalls: “When we finally exited UTV, we had some sense of liquidity. Till then, I was functioning on borrowed money. During that period of transition, Zarina did a Teach For India course, came back and said, ‘I am joining Teach For India.’ We hadn’t worked apart from each other ever, but she said she wanted to create some impact here and now. I think as a retention strategy for my wife, I uttered a larger vision statement: Why don’t we look at lifting a million people out of poverty every five-seven years? At that point, we didn’t know much about the social sector, but we were clear that we weren’t going to just cut a cheque no matter how much we scale up. We had to create a not-for-profit model that if we got right, others can replicate.”

Over the past two years, Swades has worked closely with the government—to solve the problem of anaemia among rural women, conduct workshops for schoolteachers, and create sustainable livelihoods. “The trust element with the government is low from the community. And in many ways, we have been a catalyst to build the trust. I have got two water taps for every household. But in seven years that mountain spring may go dry.

You have to work with the government to keep your mountain spring going well. So I think while you can't have any expectations from the government, a full initiative effort works. More so at the ground than at the policy level," he says.

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