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## Change looms with the young



*This year's Change Looms award goes to five organisations of young people, who have worked for communal peace, helped save tigers and tribals and set up peace cells.*

The voluntary sector has its gurus. But it needs young leaders. Where do you find them? Pravah and the Ashoka Foundation decided go out and look. This year's Change Looms Award goes to five organisations of young people from across the country. They have worked for communal peace, helped save tigers and forest dwellers, resolved tribal conflicts in the northeast and sponsored entrepreneurship among children.

"In our experience youth can lead change but they work in isolation and get no support," says Meenu Venkateswaran, CEO of Pravah. "This award is an endorsement that they are on the right track."

### **SAHER: Amity in Mumbai**

Having grown up in Jogeshwari East in Mumbai, Masood Akhtar was no stranger to communal hatred. He had seen its ugly face many times. But when the 1993 bomb blasts shook Mumbai, it was quite a different thing.

Like many Muslim young men he was picked up by the police and beaten and thrown back bruised and battered. He was 19 then and there were hundreds of others like him who carried the scars of the aftermath of the blasts.

Akhtar went to Delhi to recover from his bitter experience. He returned to find Jogeshwari East more divided than ever. The aged shook with grief, the young seethed with anger.

Akhtar wanted to heal these wounds and he chose the balm of sport. He and his friends started a cricket team which went here and there to play matches. Young boys who would normally brood now had a wholesome way of spending their time.

The team then began to help children who were badly off. It collected money for books and school bags. In 1997, the cricketers formed the Navjawan Ekta Committee. Its youngest member was 14 years old. They staged street plays on communal harmony, drug addiction, education and dirty drains.

In 2002, Rama Syam then a second year student at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) arrived as an intern through the Mohalla Committee Movement Trust. The Navjawan Ekta Committee decided to work more systematically and re-named itself

SAHER. It identified the divide between police and youth and started police- public interactions. For Eid and Diwali it set up a community kitchen and invited the police to join the celebrations.

In 2004, SAHER formed the Jogeshwari Sports Association and brought together all the youth groups including social work groups, Navaratri committees, Waz committees and Ganapati mandals in Jogeshwari. A three-day sports meet was held for the 20-odd schools in Jogeshwari. There were both Muslim schools and Marathi medium schools. "Sports promote brotherhood," says Akhtar.

"Today there are at least 50 or 60 young people of both communities who are willing to put their own lives at stake to prevent communal riots at any cost in Jogeshwari," says Akhtar.

After the Godhra incident in Gujarat, it was SAHER that stopped rumours from floating and worked with the police to prevent communal conflagration. This July, when serial bomb blasts devastated Mumbai, Akhtar got off the train at the Jogeshwari East station and immediately phoned his friends. They arrived at the station and helped with first aid till the police and ambulances turned up.

"We pacified people and asked them to go back," says Akhtar. Soon after, representatives of SAHER's youth groups met the police at the Meghwadi and Jogeshwari police stations. They informed them about their plans to reduce rumour mongering. They also left a list of names and phone numbers of all their youth members offering help for information gathering, investigations and first aid or blood donation.

### **Save Satpura: Tigers and tribals in Melghat**

Vishal Bansod was in school when he went on a bird-watching trip into the Melghat forest in Maharashtra. That excursion converted him into a passionate wildlife conservationist. The National Conservation Society of Amravati (NCSA), an organisation started by Kishore Rithe, an Ashoka fellow, to save tigers in the Satpura Range, had organised that trip. Bansod now works for NCSA.

A year and a half ago he and Pratap Khare started a movement called Save Satpura. The movement is aligned with the NCSA and has 50 young volunteers.

The young conservationist ardently believes that saving tigers means saving the entire ecosystem. He devotes two-thirds of his time to projects for improving the lives of people in 39 villages bordering the Melghat Tiger Reserve. This is a difficult terrain where there is no infrastructure. Nineteen villages are asking to be settled elsewhere.

The Save Satpura movement has sought the resettling of these villages. In 1990, the villagers around Melghat, sick of the tension of living in a Project Tiger protected area where grazing land had vanished and very few owned land, started a dialogue with Praveen Pardeshi, an IAS officer who headed the Amravati Zilla Parishad. The villagers were willing to resettle if they were provided good facilities.

Bansod explains that a committee was formed to resettle 22 villages in 2000 on Pardeshi's request. But only three were resettled. On March 26, 2001, the villagers of Bori finally left their old homes to build a new life at Rajura Girwarpur. The Maharashtra State Electricity Board and the agriculture department started providing services to the village. Two more villages, Koha and Kund, were also resettled in 2003.

The resettlement package consisted of some cash for building a house, a school, a hospital, drainage, a playground and a temple. The landless were also given land. The three villages that moved are now relatively prosperous. But after that resettlement, the collector and his team were disbanded.

The other 19 villages now saw what could be done for them. They also want resettlement.

Bansod has identified four needs of the villagers: employment, health, education and legal help. At first he got engineering companies and hotels from the nearest city to recruit youth. "But tribal youth are not happy living far from their roots," says Bansod.

He is now examining self-employment opportunities and government schemes.

According to Bansod, the Chikaldhara hill station has enough tourists for five photographers to earn a living. Some boys have been trained in screen- printing. Bansod is working with the tribal department and Project Tiger to see if any funds are available for other cottage industries. So far 40 boys have found employment.

The Born Free Foundation has funded a healthcare programme which is being managed by Bansod. The project has an ambulance and Ayurvedic doctors from a network of doctors called Nima (National Integrated Medical Association). "We maintain health files on every villager," says Bansod.

Bansod has roped in the mechanical engineering department in the Badnera Engineering College to generate electricity for Kandha village using biodiesel extracted from mahua seeds. "There are 45 families in the village. The college is designing the generator," he says.

### **Chamna Thuptep: Peace cells in Manipur**

Rebecca Haokip has started a peace programme in Manipur called Chamna Thuptep, which in Thadou dialect means Promises of Peace.

She trained as a schoolteacher in Churachandpur district, but the Kuki – Paite conflict turned her family into refugees. The experience left her with a resolve to bring peace to her strife torn state.

"It is hard for an outsider to understand what is really happening," says Haokip.

"For us culture is very important. In Churachandpur, people speak eight dialects. There are 61 denominations, some with just five households. There are clashes. Each of these ethnic factions wants to dominate and have security forces of their own. As a result, drug dealing and addiction have become big issues."

In 2002, the NERYC (North Eastern Regional Youth Commission) identified peace building as an issue to be tackled by the youth. Rebecca was identified by the NERYC as a facilitator. She was sent for training in conflict management. That helped her understand how to work for peace.

She and other youth volunteers started bringing ethnic tribes together. They got some of them to talk. "I have gained the confidence of most of the tribes over the years," says Rebecca.

Rebecca has also succeeded in including the need for dialogue and understanding in the curriculum for young school children. The NERYC works with schools and churches of all denominations.

After a year's research, Hoakip is setting up peace cells at locations where there is a lot of conflict. Each peace cell has 10 to 30 members. "We want to empower the cells to raise their voices for peace," she says. So far there are eight peace cells – five of Kuki tribes and three others.

### **Dhriiti: Early entrepreneurship**

"The right time to foster the spirit of entrepreneurship is in childhood itself," says Nidhi Arora.

She is one of the founders of Dhriiti, which means inner courage. Dhriiti was started by Anirban Gupta, Arindam Dasgupta and Arora in 2005.

"The only way to tackle underemployment, unemployment and frustration is to get the youth to dream. Provide a support system to help them start-up on their own," says Arora who graduated along with Gupta from the Xavier Institute of Management, Bhubaneswar in 2004.

Dhriiti has an entrepreneurship development cell where opportunities for start-ups are identified and young people are assisted in launching their own businesses.

Dhriiti holds workshops of different durations for private schools, street children and rural youth. Dream-building exercises are in the first part of the workshop. Participants play an exercise called Five Whys. Each time a child says something others ask 'Why?'

The Ideaslab workshop gets children to think up new business ideas. "They come up with the whackiest ideas," says Gupta. "One boy wanted to make clothes that grow organically as you grow up. Another wanted to start a business in killing mosquitoes. One child wanted to eliminate corruption in India in a day. His solution was an injection that would remove the corruption gene. We list these ideas and try to build a story around how to make the idea possible and the alternatives available."

For city schools Dhriiti uses a simulation game called Bandhustan. The game was first tried out at Ramjas School. Bandhustan is an imaginary country between Pakistan and India. There is a need for friendship bands. Over four days, children were encouraged to design, patent and start a mock general store.

Children have misconceptions about running a business, says Gupta.

They believe they need lots of money. For instance, one boy said he wanted to start an automobile business but since it would require lots of money, he would settle for a business in auto spare parts.

"Now how much is lots? If he spends time at an automobile workshop he might just like to design," says Gupta. Another child said she wanted to start an Internet café with 30 computers but that needed lots of cash. Dhriiti advised her to begin with an old computer from a street corner and then expand.

Parents and teachers wrongly believe only children in Class 12 taking commerce or arts should attend Dhriiti's workshops. Science students, they think, don't need to be entrepreneurial.

"We want to start with children in Class 2," says Arora. "That is when a mindset begins to take shape. We have now convinced some schools to hold workshops in Class 9."

Dhriiti's members believe most vocational courses run by NGOs are not helpful. "They are not market driven," says Gupta.

### **Alternative Realities: Shelter for the homeless**

Abhishek Bharadwaj did not look for a job after he graduated from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in 2004. Instead, he spends time with homeless people who sleep on Mahim beach, in Crawford market or at Santa Cruz. According to him, Mumbai has at least 100,000 homeless people.

"I imagined that the money capital of India is like New York or Shanghai, but that is not so," says Bharadwaj. "There is not a single night shelter in all of Mumbai for the homeless."

He has started a society called Alternative Realities to fight for the rights of those without shelter. Bharadwaj works with the police, the administration and companies. His goal is to create night shelters for 10,000 people in the next one year. These shelters would be carpeted and equipped with bedding, sanitation facilities, drinking water and first aid. He wants to make sure that state policies provide for low cost living places within working distances. The homeless should also get healthcare and ration cards.

Who are the homeless? Bharadwaj says 50 per cent are from rural Maharashtra.

They are political orphans because the Shiva Sena's "Amchi Mumbai" campaign does not allow NGOs to make them comfortable.

The homeless get treated badly because they are often filthy. "They look filthy because they don't have a place to wash their clothes except the sea and no place to hang washed clothes," says Bharadwaj. They spend all the money they earn for fear of losing it to pickpockets. Some save with local shopkeepers who charge them an interest for safe keeping and sometimes cheat them.

Once seven of them decided to save with Bharadwaj. They would deposit between Rs 100 to Rs 500 a day. "So you see these people can pay," says Bharadwaj.

If night shelters charged Rs 8 or Rs10 a day, there would be takers. It is profitable for banks to extend services to the homeless. What needs to be worked out is some form of identity.