

ChildFund India

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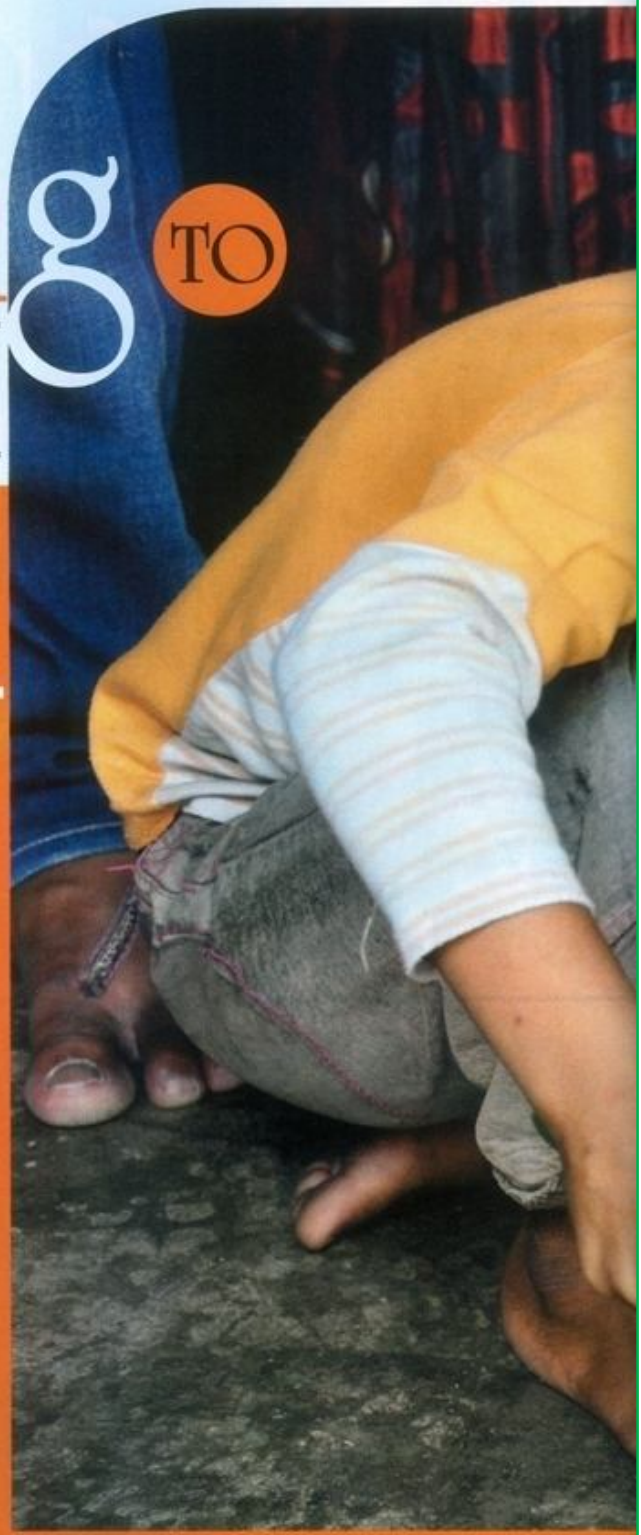
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Daring TO DREAM BIG

Neelam Makhijani is putting her head and heart into Childfund India to make India a better place for underprivileged children

| By RAHUL PAUL |





A Delhi girl at heart, Neelam Makhijani started off as a journalist in New York writing on South Asian political issues for eight years, only to come back and work with HelpAge Asia. "They were looking for a communication director and I applied as being a journalist it comes naturally to me, I didn't get the job as I was returning to India after a long time and had not worked here as a journalist. Instead, they offered me the job of fundraising which was very new to me. But, I took it, as I liked the work the organisation was doing," she remembers.

Within a period of few months, Neelam was doing both the jobs—fund raising and communication. The bosses were happy and she was eventually promoted to regional director in just a year. "I loved that work, and at once knew I couldn't work for any other sector," she asserts. Neelima was transferred to HelpAge UK in 2000 where she worked for many other organisations for 15 years. When she returned in 2014, owing to her mother's illness, she fell into the laps of Childfund India and that changed both their destinies.

Childfund India is a non-government organisation that works for the development of unprivileged children by improving the environment around them in terms of education, safety, cleanliness and financial stability, among others. Childfund India has many flagship programmes like Building Basic Skills, under which parents, communities and teachers participate in the child's learning, and the Community Based Learning Centre (CBLC), under which children's community members educate and learn through training programmes. Now under the dynamic leadership of Neelam, Childfund is going through its most successful phase and growing rapidly.

When asked about the change she has brought to Childfund, she hesitates to take credit and calls it a collective dedication of many people. Though Neelam does





reluctantly agree to have brought a very western-Indo way of working through her experience in UK in terms of strategic planning, collaborations and fundraising. "We are now dreaming even more along with our children. Now, the whole team is very ambitious—the organisation, management and the volunteers," she says.

There are many organisations that offer child sponsorship. Is Childfund like one of them? "I'll say, Childfund is a child development organisation. We do have child sponsoring, but it is just the means through which people support the organisation financially. We believe that the best child development happens within the communities the child lives in, so instead of just working for the sponsored children, we work on everybody in their vicinity. We look at it as holistic intervention. Our supporters also agree with that and that's why they support us," she explains.

Talking about the collaborations that Childfund has with other NGOs, Neelam says, "We work in half of the country and support around 50 local partners. Having a grass root NGO is very beneficial as we work in many tribal and Naxal areas. We need someone who can help us reach them and know their language, the socio-fabric and cultural issues. It's a very big advantage and since we are a deeply learning organisation, we learn so much from them and use that in the implementation of our own programmes. Though it's not always a happy ride, sometimes we come across partners who need a lot of training and capacity building."

Collaboration is one of the most important aspects of an NGO's functioning. We witnessed the association of Childfund with another grass root NGO, Pride India, in the latter's Mahad centre in Maharashtra. A training and resource centre is set up in between the small town which looks exactly like a community centre.

Inside, there are centres for all practical purposes, starting from a game designing room, where a dedicated team sits for the formation of interactive games for pre-school children. There are two technical skills developing centres, which are a part of their project called *Daksh*; there's a beauty centre for teaching make-up skills to girls, owing to which they mint a good amount of money at the local weddings, and a computer centre with high-end systems and professional teachers helping children learn the Tally software for accounting. Here too, most of the beneficiaries are girls. Another establishment holds the accounting and financial record rooms along with a medical centre and a project development room. We got a look at the files of the children and how they have been interacting with their sponsors.

We then moved to a nearby village, Varandoli, which is adopted by Pride India and is one of the 'ideal villages' under the project. There, we met the women of the village in their community hall and heard stories of how they got a grant of two lakh rupees from the government under the *Nirmal Gram Yojana*. The lady from the village, who went to Delhi to get the award, recited the whole story about winning the grant through struggles and with guidance from the NGOs with uttermost pride and happiness. She even took us to the *Gram Panchayat* office and made sure we saw all the awards. Their thoughts were so progressive that for a moment it felt like there was no difference between rural and urban India. We then moved to a primary school in the adjoining village and were welcomed with a cultural performance by the students. They took turns to tell us about their school, village and the rallies and drives that were conducted. Even their ambitions and confidence levels were not hindered by their geographical location and they dreamed big. They even made



a Ganapati statue with wool thread and beads to give us as acknowledgment.

After this fulfilling stop, we visited a sculptor's shop. Interestingly, the owner of the shop was a sponsored child throughout his school and college and when he passed out, was supported by the duo NGOs with a grant of Rs 25,000 to start the idol making business. Thereafter, we returned to Pride India's centre to meet the Youth Club of the organisation which consisted of some very young and dedicated members. The members dictated their chores and meeting schedules, with some of them even learning new skills of video shooting and editing.

Most of the sponsors of Childfund are from the US and Europe and very few are from India. Why is that? "India was never targeted before, at least not in the way we are starting now. Since we have stabilised ourselves and have fully efficient and tested programmes and partner NGOs, we will be starting our campaign for sponsors in India," says Neelam.

Apart from the NGOs, Childfund has tied up with many corporate partners too. Talking about the effectiveness of CSR, Neelam believes, "I was fundraising in India before and I think corporates were doing enough then too and the new CSR bill has not made

much of a difference. I am not a very big fan of it because it has actually made it difficult for corporates to decide what they can and cannot do. Although we have very good corporates supporting us, like Bajaj and ONGC, but a lot of time goes into deciding what initiative will pass under the bill and what won't. Then, there are other corporates, who don't want to help, so they start their own foundation and mint money."

Any partnership has to be mutually beneficial, so what is it that Neelam has got back from Childfund? "A lot! On a personal level, it gives me an amazing amount of fulfilment and happiness when I go to visit the project fields and see the work we have done with the children and their parents. There are young girls and boys earning their living through jobs and entrepreneurial projects, and the children in the school with their storybooks, which they didn't have before, reading it out to you. I believe in blessings, so I have gotten so much that I cannot even begin to talk about it. Professionally, it has added a lot to my experience because I haven't worked with many implementing organisations in India. I have worked for older people in HelpAge and now I am back working with children,

so it's a whole transformation. Also, working in UK is one thing but working in India in such a dynamic environment is a different experience altogether," Neelam says.

Childfund is growing along with all its children and this child has some big dreams. Neelam agrees, "Our new programme models are very exciting. We are working on smart classes and smart schools to bring our children into a better education and sustainable livelihood structure. Also, our new partnerships—we are talking to UNICEF, the state governments and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). Our alignment with government policies is getting stronger through RTE. We now try to identify strategic partners who bring technical skills to the ground and we have been conscious and purposeful in identifying them. Our thinking has evolved now and we have understood the fact that we need different kinds of partners, not only NGOs, but other educational institutes and technical partners and government organisations too, to fully develop ourselves." You can also contribute in building a better generation by supporting Childfund at indiaoffice@childfund.org or office@childfundindia.org 