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Dr. Abhay Bang and Dr. Rani Bang are global heroes in healthcare who started their journey in working for the tribal people of Gadchiroli back in 1986 after coming back from Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. Their efforts in reducing the infant mortality rate (no. of deaths of babies within 1 year of their birth per 1000 babies born) in Gadchiroli from 130 in 1986 to 25 by 2000 (far better than the country average now) has been globally recognized. Their home-based newborn care model (HBNC) has been replicated in India and in 77 countries globally. Their efforts have resulted in the initiation and training of 1 million ASHA (Accredited social health activists) and community health workers, who now are the first point of contact for healthcare services for India's rural population. Their HBNC research was published in a special edition of The Lancet, "Vintage Papers from The Lancet", which had other landmark papers such as Alexander Fleming's penicillin discovery, Watson and Crick's DNA discovery paper among others. What made the Bangs leave the US and come back to serve Gadchiroli, one of the most impoverished places in India, plagued with myriad health and socio-economic problems apart from being a conflict zone?

We can be living comfortably on our couches in our plush homes in a bubble, ignoring the problems outside. But there are problems all around us - in the cry of the malnourished baby, in the womb of the dangerously anemic mother, in the beatings of the alcoholic husband and the father, in the draconian policies of the state, in the tribals who have to walk 100s of kilometers to reach a health centre, in the distressed farmers ignored by the state, in the slum kids who struggle to read a book, in the people with disabilities who have been "disabled" by the society, in the indignity of the people living on the streets because the society is so unequal, in the humiliation of the people who are denied basic rights, in the horribly hierarchical society which casts a divide among people based on money, caste and religion, in the toil of the labourers who work in the hot sun and die of starvation, in the hunger of millions of people who can only imagine food but not eat it, in the illiteracy of thousands of people and in the victims of communal disharmony.

Rising inequality and income disparity has always been devastating for India. The top 1% richest Indians own 58% of the total wealth in the country while 75% live below Rs 150/day and 40 crore people live below poverty line i.e. Rs 32/day (World Bank data). Accessing healthcare for these people is an illusion. Every year, 4 crore people in India are pushed below the poverty line because healthcare is highly unaffordable. The rising income gap is just contributing to the problem and healthcare today has become highly discriminatory where the quality of care is based on the amount of money one has in his/her pockets. Statistics have shown that unaffordable healthcare leads to poverty and poverty leads to diseases (TB, AIDS etc), and it becomes a vicious and a vitriolic cycle. Inaccessibility is another cause of concern. In some areas of Maharashtra and India, patients have to travel more than 100 km to access a health centre.

To address these situations plaguing the country and to empower the youth, Dr. Abhay and Dr. Rani Bang started a youth initiative “Nirman” in 2006 which sensitizes the youth to the problems of the society and encourages them to work towards solving social problems and lead a more meaningful life. Nirman is a journey of knowing one’s identity, of self-realization, knowing one’s role in this vast cosmic arena. How can one lead a meaningful life if s/he cannot see the bigger picture of one’s relevance and role in the universe and lives in his/her own bubble? Nirman is the bridge which connects the educated youth to a bigger purpose: to realize that the whole human race is a fraternity and not separated from one another, that their suffering is not their suffering alone, it is ours too. It is a bridge which connects our education and our skills to the bigger questions like “purpose” and “meaning”. Nirman is a journey of looking beyond oneself and working for others. It is the journey from “Me” to “We” and from “I” to “They”! For me, Nirman is a philosophical journey, a journey of finding perspective, a journey of finding my significance (or rather insignificance in this infinite space), a journey of realizing how petty and minuscule my ambitions are when compared to each element of this never-ending totality, a journey of asking myself what I can do about the problems rather than just feel bad about it.

Buddha once said, “The greatest illusion is that of separation”. To consider oneself a part of the human fraternity and the macrocosm and work towards a higher goal rather than a personal ambition. To look beyond our imagined self-importance and the illusion of our privileged position in the universe and be more empathetic and compassionate towards our fellow beings. To work towards the ultimate truth i.e. a unified consciousness rather than an individualistic living!

So what is your idea of a new civilization? A civilization of an equal society, of a just society, of an empowered society, of a harmonized society and of a decentralized society. A civilization free of poverty, free of inequality, free of injustice, free of exploitation, free

of communal hostility and feudal mindset, free of hunger, free of illiteracy, free of unemployment, free of humiliation and free of discrimination.

Let's create - Nirman - a new civilization! Let's ignite the feeling of fraternity. Let's connect with the fellow beings. Let's connect and be one with the universe.

Mahatma Gandhi, after coming back from South Africa in early 1900s, felt that India was an alien country to him, and that he knew nothing of it. And so he ventured out to discover the real India, not what he saw in the cities, but in the rural areas where most people resided, to understand the torment Indians were going through at that time. So how do we see the problems? By staying in our comfort zones? Or by going to the places where there are people but no services? And as Dr. Abhay Bang says, "Go where the problems are, and not where the facilities are!"

Let's stop indulging in "armchair and academic discussions" and create a real change. Social problem solving is as intellectually satisfying and gratifying as building a spaceship, if not more. So let's not just feel bad when we see a problem. Let's ask ourselves what we can do about it. Let's relinquish our identities of that of a doctor, engineer, lawyer, entrepreneur etc and don a new identity. Let's be change-makers!

If you're searching for your role in the universe, if you're searching for the answer to the question "Who am I", if you're searching for what it means to be a part of this vast cosmic darkness, if you're searching for an avenue to serve the marginalized, if you're searching for a meaningful and a purposeful life, let your search begin at SEARCH, Gadchiroli!

And as Gandhiji once said, "Be the change that you wish to see in the world".

Join Nirman – youth for purposeful life. Join this community of change-makers and let's empower the world together, one step at a time!