

Giving is Receiving

Mrs. Meera Shenoy



FORUM
OF FREE ENTERPRISE

“Free Enterprise was born with man and shall survive as long as man survives”.

- A. D. Shroff
Founder-President
Forum of Free Enterprise

Editorial Introduction

We are, indeed pleased to publish this very captivating and inspirational script of the 30th Bhogilal Leherchand Memorial Lecture delivered by the eminent scholar and social change maker, Mrs. Meera Shenoy. She is an exceptional person, who has for many years dedicated herself to the cause of skilling the underprivileged youth with disabilities for jobs. She firmly believes that an organized sector job to one youth in a poor family takes the entire family out of poverty in a sustained manner.

In the prevailing socio-economic scenario of our country, her work and contributions are of enduring relevance, especially to policy makers, those at the helm of corporate affairs as well as a host of honest social workers running institutions and NGOs devoted to the cause of uplifting the underprivileged youth, and in particular, those with some or other physical disability. For fairly a long time our eminent experts have been lamenting about India's challenges of "jobless growth"; and at the same time, Indian industrial and business enterprises perennially complain about the shortage of skilled labor-force in the country. One, therefore, wonders about India's tall claims of *advantage demographic dividend (!)*, unless we are able to deal with the humungous task of

skilling our growing labor-force. Witness, our current massive army of youth population of about 450 million – in the age group 15 to 34 years! And in the midst of all these, there are huge challenges of dealing with youth with some disability or other.

In the short time span of six years, her organization Youth4Jobs has acquired a creditable record of training around 12,500 youths with one disability or other. All of them have secured jobs with 65% of them placed in the organized sector, 15% in local organizations, and the rest in government jobs. Indeed, Youth4Jobs is a unique concept, implemented with high degree of professional expertise. By doing so, she has created a new sense of confidence, hopes and aspirations among the disabled youth from poor families.

What does Mrs. Meera Shenoy seek to convey from the theme of her lecture “*Giving is Receiving*”, which, indeed, sounds so very evocative and meaningful? Undoubtedly, the centrality of her message is that there is “Ability in Disability”. For unraveling such hidden or subdued ability, she has conceptualized and executed a unique model of offering holistic training for skilling such youth with disabilities, which covers, among other things, the art of communication in English, knowing computers, typing, how to save money, Yoga, control over body and so on – and all of that to

make them not only employable, but to live life with dignity and honor. Her model is constantly evolving and she is always in search of innovative ideas and innovative ways of doing things. She is fully convinced that her model of training is “scalable and replicable”.

In her characteristic lucid conversational style, she narrates in her lecture the real-life stories and experiences of many of those with disabilities emerging not only successful in their life, but also making or wanting to make wholesome contribution in their own ways to support others placed in similar situations. Mrs. Meera Shenoy has gathered rich experience over the years by working at divergent layers of the society from villages to schools and colleges; from government institutions to corporate enterprises; and from local situations to global setups.

This makes her lecture and this booklet extremely useful and inspirational; it would induce many more people to be givers; it would provide the essential benchmarks to conduct the initiatives concerning the youth in general and of disabled in particular with compassion and dedication; it would stimulate the opportunities for networking with like-minded institutions dedicated to the cause of disabled youth; and more importantly, drive those disabled in and around our society to participate in

skilling themselves and live life with self-esteem, confidence and dignity... our special hats-off and best wishes to Mrs. Meera Shenoy for all that she has done so far and promises to do in future!

Sunil S. Bhandare
Editor

Giving is Receiving

Mrs. Meera Shenoy*

I am honored to be here to deliver the 30th Bhogilal Leherchand Memorial Lecture. I think the values which he stood for need to be reiterated again and again in today's society. I am also humbled to be here among people who are all givers to various causes. Personally, I am happy to be here because Forum of Free Enterprise was dear to my father-in-law, the Late Prof. B. R. Shenoy who was an eminent economist.

I worked in the field of skilling under-privileged youth, those from villages and tribal areas, for over a decade before skilling was fashionable, before the government spoke about demographic dividend. And the work was always, linking the youth to jobs after skilling them. Six years later I decided and setup my own organization,

* *The author is Founder, Youth4Jobs, Hyderabad. The text is based on the 30th Bhogilal Leherchand Memorial Lecture delivered on 5th December 2018, in Mumbai under the auspices of Bhogilal Leherchand Foundation, Forum of Free Enterprise & The A.D. Shroff Memorial Trust.*

Youth4Jobs. I was very clear about three things. One, I did not want to repeat the work I had done in the past. Two, I wanted to continue skilling youth because if you catch them at the age of twenty you influence the next, at least fifty years of their lives. And third, more importantly, I wanted to do work which embodied compassion. I was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's values particularly that of compassion. I don't know how many of you know the story of why Gandhiji chose Sabarmati as his Ashram. Let me narrate the story, which I really love. He told people that besides the location being near the river another reason for his choice of Sabarmati, was that if he was going to continue the Satyagraha journey, the British would have to put him in the jail. Thus to save them the trouble of taking Gandhiji far away, they could put him in Sabarmati jail which was close to the Ashram. He further said that when he died his friends who would have to cart his body need not have to take it too far as the cremation ground was nearby. Such compassion, I told myself, and that is how we zeroed down on disability, to skill youth who are from the vulnerable and neglected section of society, and then put them into jobs.

There is a close connection between disability and poverty. Most of the people who are disabled are poor because they do not have sustained livelihoods. And when I saw statistics it simply

amazed me. As much as 80% of the world's disability population is in developing countries like India. So, I knew that if I created an impact in India, I would actually influence the globe and that is what is happening today. Six years back we set up our first training center for youth with disabilities from villages as India is 69% in its villages. It was easier said than done. We went to the villages to find the youth with disabilities. Yes, there were youth without disabilities. When we found the disabled, the parents looked at us as if we were crazy. They told us, "What? Jobs for these useless children of ours? Not possible." And when we began the work many parents would actually come to check out if we were for real. The enrolled youth had incredibly low self-esteem and confidence levels. Disability is one word but there are various kinds of disabilities. We had to customize the curriculum for each of the different disabilities. The special educators are trained by the government, of which the best go abroad and the worst do not understand markets. Then, we thought that hiring by companies would not be a problem. But, when they came to our centre, their jaws dropped and they asked me, "Madam can you give me youth who look like you and me?" It was then I realized that the journey with companies is going to be a long and difficult one. The government believes in giving subsidies and doles, which during elections are very large.

For example, some give them land, some a TV, or even computers. So much so, that both the parents and the youth have no incentive to work. These were the multiple challenges we grappled against and I wondered, “Gosh! Have we bitten off more than we can chew?”

To energize my own batteries, I travelled across the country to meet persons with disability who were successful entrepreneurs and corporate leaders and who had combined business with disability and compassion. This resulted in the book “**You Can**”. It was released at the Jaipur Literary Festival. I was lucky. Before me spoke Karan Johar and so there was a huge audience to listen to him. They all sat back to listen to me. My book became one of the top twenty bestsellers at Jaipur. The Hindi translation of the book was published last month, for a grassroots audience. The book in its second edition now, has inspirational stories like that of Arvind who was born without a disability. When he was sixteen, on a picnic, he fell on a slope and the doctors told him that he would never walk again because he had broken his spine. However, he turned around a loss making one crore company to a successful Rs.365 crores company. Not that he did not have challenges. When the hurly-burly North Indian workers saw this new young leader on a wheelchair, they immediately went on strike. The security guards in the airport asked him to

stand up, even though he could not. Once he noticed that the food packets on his flights were marked Bombay, when he was actually going to Delhi. They had put him on the wrong flight! And when he came back with a disability, his swimming membership was taken away by his prestigious club. He told me laughingly, "As if my disability is a disease". As I was walking away Arvind told me, "Meera will you help me setup a foundation for my older workers? You know these people have talent. They just need to be retooled". And then I realized the success of Arvind's joy was the fact that he was not absorbed with his own challenges but he was constantly finding ways to improve the life of others. The other half of the book talks about corporate leaders who had combined business with compassion like Niren Choudhary. Niren used to be the former president of Yum which is the franchise of KFC. When Niren was posted to India he was clear that as he extended his business, he would combine it with a cause and the one he chose was that of the speech and hearing impaired. When you go to the most prestigious locations of KFC, we all have to adjust to the world of those who cannot speak and hear, because the people who serve you are speech and hearing impaired. Niren told me that the customer matrix was the best in those stores. His once empty visitors' book overflowed. "Why should I not extend this to more

locations”, he asked. Listening to all these stories energized me. **The message for me was, if They can, I can, and I told my readers therefore, so can You.**

Many of the earlier challenges we had in job-linked skilling have been overcome now. Advocacy is the heart of our work. We’ve touched about 2,75,000 households, villages, schools, colleges, societies, with the message that there is “Ability in Disability”. We work with rural youth, educated youth and with companies. We work in schools because the root of the education system begins in schools. We work in a girls’ blind school. We do a lot of work with companies so that our skilled disabled youth get hired. We also do studies. We have just completed our study of inclusion in the banking sector which will get released at the Bombay Stock Exchange, in Mumbai. These studies give a way forward to the people in the banking sector on how to begin their journey of inclusion. We also nurture startups. The first one is my own startup. **It is called Not Just Art** – the world’s first portal of Disability Art. When you look at it you will be stunned by the kind of talent that artists with disabilities have. When I travelled across the country, parents used to meet me with their son or daughter and asking if they could get a job through the organization. Also, there were youth whom I actually could not help because the market was not willing to accept them. They would

bring to me little pieces of paper with art and that is when I thought of connecting them to some portal. I looked, researched and found there was none and so, I created one. I am hoping that in five years we will mainstream disability Art and then we will not be needed. Two days back, I spoke at UNESCO where they had invited me to talk about - **Not just Art**. The director was excited after he saw the work and said that UNESCO would be our first partner.

We are six years young in this space but the largest in the country. We have twenty-five centers, spread from Guwahati in Assam to Trichy in the South. These centers have now become demand driven. For example, the governor of Nagaland has invited us there, the commissioner from Haryana called me last week to meet them and the government of Kerala has also invited us. We work with about 550 companies out of which 200 are first time hirers of youth with disabilities of which 30% are girls. In India if you are a girl, poor and disabled, you have a big burden on your shoulders. Parents hide you thinking it is a curse on them. They do not let them out of the house as they feel worried that the siblings will not get alliances for marriage. We want such girls to get a job and stand on their own feet. Our first global center is in Mauritius with a local partner. Our whole model is scalable and replicable. And we are constantly invited to conduct workshops globally. However, our heart,

not just mine but that of my whole team, lies in India as there is so much to do in India. Hence, we are still thinking on how to take this work globally, as there is so much interest in it. We have won awards, the highest government award and also the highest international award in the UN Headquarters. Awards indicate, to some extent, that we are working in the right direction.

The flagship of our work is skilling youth with disabilities from unreached villages, from tier II towns. We spent 1 year in just building this template for scale so that it can be taken to any part of the country with a little bit of customization. We are in the metros, in Nagpur, in Coimbatore and Ahmednagar and we can take it anywhere. We are also in Mauritius. It is this template which can be customized and so we spent a lot of time on creating the same. What it does is that it gives the youth what they do not have. We teach them communication English. When you hear them singing you actually cannot even understand what they sing but they sing with such pride because they know English and that gives them confidence. They know computers, typing, we tell them how to adjust to the new work environment, how to save money, mobility, etc. Then we put them on the job training and companies come to interview them and employ them for entry level jobs. We teach our speech and hearing kids in sign language.

We begin with teaching them yoga as we think the first job is very difficult and they need to learn to relax. For the visually impaired there is a lot of technology which needs to be taught. There is a software called Jaws which is a speaking software. We teach them mobility, technology and orient them for government exams. We teach them control over the body. I used to wonder why the mother of a girl with disability accompanied her all the time and realized that she was wanting to protect her daughter from the sharks outside. There is also a lot which we need to do in the field of visual disability in which we are making small breakthroughs.

I always thought that if a youth with disability is educated, he would not need organizations like Youth4Jobs. Wanting to test this, I went to the most upmarket college in Chennai where my friend was volunteering to help with placements and asked her what had happened to her students with disability. She said, "Everyone gets placed". When I pushed and requested to be introduced to three such girls and spoke to them, I found that the story was the same. They were bright and did their online entrance exams perfectly. But when the interviews were conducted, they said, "No jobs for you". I, on the other hand, was so excited after seeing all our rural youth with no English, no computers, and meeting these girls with disability who knew

computers and English. I called up an MNC and requested them to arrange a special interview for this one girl. She got the job. Her father had retired and her sister was working in a public sector bank. This girl got a higher salary than her elder sister who was non-disabled. This really gave tremendous confidence to that kid. In this way, we are still learning our lessons in this program which is just one-year old. Our founder told us that many had failed in this, but we told them to give it to us to try. Thereafter, we signed MoUs with colleges that are very keen like University of Bombay, University of Chennai and others who have come on board. The problem is that in India the more educated you are the less you know. These youth have their degree in hand. They are engineers, they are MBAs, but their technical knowledge is low because the faculty does not know how to train the disabled. Their aspirations are high because they have the degree in hand. They all want MNC jobs! My team is still struggling with these issues but have now found some answers, like tying up with the MNCs and companies and then working backwards with their help to build the trainings. Our recent major breakthrough was in Mumbai where we did a company workshop with CII and DFID where the head of one of the private sector banks was present. He was so inspired seeing everything, that he said, "I will take 50 interns who

are blind.” So, that was a breakthrough and right now my two colleagues are working towards this. However, it is not an easy task. What we are also doing is setting up this new concept called Smart Inclusion Center which are experiential zones for companies. When companies come, we orient them to some technologies which help youth to be productive and also to the best practices in the industry.

Our long-term strategy is working in schools. We work, for example, with a government girls’ blind school. Our aim is to improve learning outcomes through technology. To do so, we have introduced computers from class VI. We teach them English as it is a vernacular medium high school. I am happy to mention that the government teachers, who were least interested initially, are requesting us to teach them Jaws and NVDA! Besides teaching them computers, we engage them in fun activities for which my whole team volunteers. We teach them painting, colors through smells in different spices- like, orange is cinnamon, black is cloves, etc. What these girls tell us at the end of this workshop is that for the first time, things which they were always told till then, they could not do, they too could do. They were told that they could not paint and we told them to paint. They said that they could not do clay workshop and we showed them that they could. That itself gave the

girls great confidence. We have a lot of company volunteers coming in to do various workshops. We plan to start a coding workshop. The first batch of girls have all passed and we propose to put them into an English medium college so that we can work with them through the graduation and then get them into jobs.

The heart of our work, however, is in companies. There is a large difference between working with a non-disabled youth and a disabled youth. The difference is in the work you have to do in companies. Every time the company asked a question, “How? Is it expensive? What do I do?” We introduce a service in that space. We have now developed a whole series of services and have become like a one stop shop for companies, pan India. For example, we did a sensitization workshop for Google, Hyderabad. What we do is through fun and games, we make them experience disability and then you realize for yourself, By Jove! Yes! I am not completely disabled! Because if one sense gets taken away your other senses help. I told them that learning sign language is like learning Italian. They immediately asked us for a sign language workshop, and today it has led to one of the largest hiring campaigns. It’s amazing. The chef, who earlier hesitated to take youth with disabilities, said that the two youth with him, who are speech and hearing impaired, cook so well. Their sense of

color, he says, is so beautiful, though they do not have a degree from Taj or the Oberoi. In the dance school, our speech and hearing- impaired girls have enrolled and the dance teacher tells me they dance very well to a tune, which they cannot hear. A film producer had recently come to the Google campus and all the Googlers were standing in a row to take his autograph. Suddenly he saw these girls signing and he asked if they hired youth with disabilities, to which they responded with a yes. He asked if he could take a photograph with them. This, for Google, was an enhancement of their brand image. It was a win-win for both sides.

We do innovations to enable our youth to have an interface with the customer rather than be at the back office. We thought about a cashier's job to be done by a speech and hearing impaired as it is present in malls, hospitals, etc. However, the retailers hesitated because it was considered to be a very crucial job, in which accuracy was important. We persisted and one of the largest retail group agreed to accept this suggestion of ours. In a mall in Chennai, we piloted the first cashier who could not hear and speak. My team sat there, understood the work, put in the workplace adaptations. After three months the company ran a survey to see what the customers wanted. Did they want a speaking cashier or a silent one? What do you think was the answer? As many as 97% of the consumers said,

they wanted a silent cashier because there was no chit-chat and there was accuracy. Today this simple pilot of ours has resulted in unlocking the potential of over 75000 jobs for the youth with disabilities. It does not matter who does the skilling, but the position of a cashier has been mainstreamed for a youth with disability and that was our aim. It was not necessary that we did it ourselves, but it was to unlock the potential of the job.

Like retail, we also looked at the beauty and wellness as it is a high growth industry. Our vision was to have one parlor, an upmarket parlor, manned only by people with disabilities. Naturals and we created one such parlor in an upmarket part of Chennai. In fact, their hair cutter is a girl who is a burns' victim. The popularity of this cutter is such that there is a two-day waiting list to get the hair cut through her. The visually impaired do acupuncture and acupressure, here. I was present at the inauguration and was really amazed at the buzz around. Everyone around said, "Finally, our manicure and pedicure will be done in silence, without any chit-chat." I realized then that silence is golden amidst the noise pollution around us. We, now use this point very successfully in companies to drive the advantage which our kids naturally have. In another company, the CEO of Valeo called me to say, "Meera you know your work is good Karma. Can you give me one receptionist?"

I told him to let us do our processes. Then, we put twenty speech and hearing-impaired youth into a manufacturing plant. It worked so well. They started winning the productivity award every month. Accuracy was great. It spread to the Pune factory. When the first inclusion award was constituted in France, among the global plants, our work won the first inclusion award. Not just this, when the new Chairman came, the only person he shook hands with, was one of our alumni in Pune and that I was told, was because, he managed three operations simultaneously, something which no one else could do. That is our work. In the manufacturing sector, we encourage companies to measure the impact. The positive impact on attrition and productivity has resulted in our work in Valeo being showcased and opening up of the entire auto industry segment for us. The Caterpillar team came from US to look at our work. We work with the Japanese market. In Amaraja batteries, after a sensitization workshop which even their Chairman attended, we were asked to map all their eleven business divisions. I still remember when we began our work, the speech and hearing impaired used to work in an exploitative manner in the unorganized housekeeping industry. Today we've really opened up the sector and the scale has increased as our work has helped business.

What energizes our batteries and keeps us going is stories like Mekhala. Mekhala lost his leg due to an accident and of course the company threw him out of the job because he was from a village and had no insurance. We retooled him and placed him in a gaming company. When we spoke to his mother she cried on the phone because she had not heard of so many zeroes in a salary. She was the wife of a marginal farmer. Few months back there was this Telugu film in which actor Nagarjuna let us show our alumni as a businessman on a wheelchair. Mekhala came up to me and said, "Hello madam, how are you? Now I have so much money." I said, "Good. What do you do with it?" He replied, "I send money back home. But I still have money. What I do is when I go back to my village, I buy slates, books, rubbers, for all the kids who don't have." And he added, "Now I feel so happy because when I arrive on the bus in the village, all the kids come and cheer me, they hold my legs." So, this is Mekhala, when he gives, he receives. Friends asked me, again and again, especially when my husband was posted in Italy for a long time with UNESCO, what was I doing in India working with youth with disabilities. It's hard to explain. It is mothers like Indiramma, the mother of Vinod, who makes me happy. Mothers, as they grow older, worry about their child with disability. They worry because they know the sibling is going to throw this child out

of the house. She was telling the minister, “Bless Youth4Jobs which has given this child of mine a job. Now I can die in peace”, not just that, she said, “None of my other sons have thought of giving anything back to me. This boy Vinod, sends part of his salary and has given me a modern phone where he can video chat and speak to me.” This is what I see and hear every day, wherever I go. Kiran from Bihar, whose father was a mill worker, was thrown out of job. She was a young, blind girl who was always told to shut her mouth. She passed her tenth class with great difficulty, doing embroidery. We placed her in one of the large supermarkets over there. Today she supports her family, spends on her brother’s engineering education. The whole social situation has turned upside down which has given her a Voice. Gopal from Bombay, has cerebral palsy and speaks with a lisp. His mother told us that he was always confident that he could get a job. He would pick up the phone, looking at the newspaper job postings. But the minute the person on the other hand heard a strange voice, they would disconnect. He came to us and we placed him in Tata Star Bazaar. People who go to Andheri’s Tata Star Bazaar tell us that he is always there at the entrance to greet them with a smile. Lulu, on a wheelchair, is so severely disabled that even my team struggled again and again to get her a job. We tried twice but she kept sending

messages to us that she still did not have a job. Our team persisted and today she has a job where she gets three lakhs per annum and does not have to worry about tomorrow. Anurag has low vision and is almost virtually blind. We helped to place him a mid-manager's job in a Bank. The story is same in Guwahati, Nagpur, Warangal and Trichy. Some like Shanmugham come to show proudly his orange scooter bought out of his own earnings and extra amount he made by winning the productivity award. The story is the same in every part of the country where we run our training centers. **They come to us like chrysalises, they fly out like butterflies. So beautiful. We only give them the first window of opportunity. But do not forget that the ability is theirs. We are only facilitators to bring out that ability which is hidden and the society cannot see.**

How do they spend their incomes? The first thing they do is, most of their parents being in debt, they return the high cost debt. Girls save for their marriage. They buy assets. Some of them also take things like the largest color television and why not? They always educate a younger sibling. More so, if they are not educated, they educate a younger sibling or after working for two years, they return to enroll in higher education because they realize having hit a block in their career path. These same youth will get married and educate their kids too.

They will make sure their kids get better health.
So, I know with certainty that I leave behind a better India, and a better tomorrow.

I want all of you to think a minute about what His Holiness, The Dalai Lama said. He said “Be selfish, Be generous, Be selfish, Be generous”, because, when you give, you receive in abundance.

The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily those of the Forum of Free Enterprise.

“People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good”.

- Eugene Black
Former President,
World Bank

FORUM

OF FREE ENTERPRISE

The Forum of Free Enterprise is a non-political and non-partisan organisation started in 1956, to educate public opinion in India on free enterprise and its close relationship with the democratic way of life. The Forum seeks to stimulate public thinking on vital economic problems through booklets, meetings, and other means as befit a democratic society.

In recent years the Forum has also been focusing on the youth with a view to developing good and well-informed citizenship. A number of youth activities including elocution contests and leadership training camps are organised every year towards this goal.

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