



HEALTHCARE
CLEANING UP ACT
M B NIRMAL



As I drove past the ever hectic Koyambedu Bus Terminus to meet this person, I noticed a couple of big, overflowing garbage bins right near its entrance. People walked in and out of the terminus unmindful of either the stench or the swarm of flies flying around those mounds of 'kuppai' though some would occasionally close their nose as they walked past in a typical style that you get to see across Chennai. I did not realise at that point in time, that the overflowing "kuppai thotti" would never be the same again for me. At the end of an hour long discussion with this person, I realised how health, hygiene, nature, climate change & bio diversity were all intertwined.

Not many amongst the millennials would know of this person – a person who dreamt of a clean neighbourhood, a cleaner Chennai some 30 years ago, a dream which he turned into a reality through his sheer belief

in People Power and sustained advocacy. The person am referring to is Mr. M B Nirmal and the organisation am talking about is ExNoRa.

The fact that so much could be achieved through volunteerism & word of mouth - with no financial support from the government, with no advertisement spends, with no viral videos in the social media makes this person and the movement an interesting case study.

EARLY LIFE

Nirmal grew up in a joint family environment and did his schooling and college in Chennai. He was an ordinary student with an equally ordinary expectation on him from his parents. He graduated with a degree in commerce & joined Indian Overseas Bank at the age of 20. Here again, he did not show any extra ordinary capability and his days

were as mundane as that of any clerk of a bank in the 1960s. To quote him 'was never brilliant at school/college or at work, in fact I was mediocre'

INFLECTION POINTS

Nirmal considers two incidences as inflection points, or, as he would like to call them 'sparks' that changed him forever. Coming from a very well to do family, circumstances forced Nirmal & family to move to an ordinary slum kind of an area. Though a big climb-down, the family took the change positively and went about their lives normally until one day his aunt came visiting them. Watching bootleggers, pimps, brawls happening around, she asked him "Can't you go to a better place?" This question acted as a spark and Nirmal replied to her "I can't go to a better place, but I can make this place better!" Once during his early banking days, the manager asked him "unakku ellam yaaru velai koduthaanga – Who gave you this bank job? Again, this question acted as a spark and Nirmal went on to become one of the best PR faces for his Bank and ended up getting the Indira Gandhi Memorial award for Excellent Bank Manager of India and also the best banker award from the then Finance Minister Late VP Singh.

SEEDS OF EXNORA

Returning to India from his overseas assignment, Nirmal was posted to the Nandanam Branch in Chennai. The innovator in him introduced concepts like loans to street children, payment of vehicle tax through bank counters etc – things that were unheard of in those times. He realized how ideas if made practical could turn out to be extraordinarily powerful. Those banking days helped him master the technique of stimulating others into making an idea a reality.

Back then and to a large extent even now, we urbanites are apathetic about the city's poor and their quality of life. We all assume it is for the State and the municipal

corporations to handle these, not realizing that improvement in their standard of living is in our own hands. This thought process formed the basis of the birth of ExNoRa. As someone who sees opportunity in challenges, Nirmal felt it was time to start something in that direction. Thus was born ExNoRa in 1988. To quote him, ExNoRa stand for "giving voice to EXcellent ideas, and trying NOvel approaches, we can achieve RADical changes"

THE EXNORA JOURNEY

Use citizens to sort citizens' problems – was the dictum that guided Nirmal & ExNoRa. The Project was launched in Kamaraj Avenue, Adyar in 1989. For those residents who were used to piling garbage with nobody to collect them, a 'street beautifier' with a mobile dustbin, clearing garbage every morning was a welcome relief. Structurally, each ExNoRa unit covered a street or a set of 2-3 streets and would have a President, a woman representative and a senior citizen driving things.

Things started falling in place. Residents started taking ownership of their streets, got their garbage cleared, liaised with civic officials and eminent persons of the neighbourhood volunteered as presidents. In just five years since its inception, the number of Civic Exnora units grew to a staggering number of over 3,000 in the city and was collecting over 30% of the total garbage that Chennai generated. Nirmal realized the power of children and the influence they wield in decision making of their parents. He made them his most effective cleanliness campaigners and many of them addressed him as 'Garbage Uncle'!

ExNoRa turned out to be one silent revolution that engulfed Chennai in no time – a movement that was built around volunteerism, service and the pride in taking charge of one's neighborhood. Other than the obvious benefit of clean streets



and healthy environment, the collateral benefits were community building, communication and problem-solving in an otherwise indifferent urban community!

WASTE MANAGEMENT & ENVIRONMENT

Nirmal believes that 'waste is not a waste until it's wasted'. He pioneered ideas like 'waste to wealth' through which he promoted waste management as an income generation opportunity that eventually lead to better, sustainable human settlements. A simple composting technique was something that Nirmal took big time to the residents of Chennai and introduced home gardening which became a huge success. As early as 1997, ExNoRa introduced concepts like source segregation, zero waste management and recycling. He believed that sustained efforts towards source segregation and recycling organic, green waste could potentially reduce 50 % of Chennai's total garbage generation/ collection.

ExNoRa was instrumental in bringing about the enactment of Municipal Solid Waste (Management and Handling) Rules 2000 through a public interest litigation it filed in the Supreme Court. The Rules provide guidelines for municipal authorities to follow in waste management.

Over time, ExNoRa metamorphosed into a holistic body covering waste management, green coverage, rain water harvesting, and restoration of urban estuaries and also served as an advocacy on sanitation/ environment related issues.

The concept of source segregation came down drastically when a large private conservancy operator in 2000 was appointed by the Chennai Corporation, covered a large part of the Chennai's neighbourhood at no cost to residents. ExNoRa believed that it can work together with the operator. However things did not work out as planned as there were ideological differences. Nirmal believes that the concept of civic



ExNoRa is still relevant and can add much more value and is fully enthused in reviving it again. He believes that he can rebuild the community movement that integrated contribution of people from all sections of the society.

In pioneering path breaking concepts like source segregation, waste management, creating dignified income generation opportunities for a section of the city's marginalised society, weaving together people from diverse backgrounds for a common cause and demonstrating the power of volunteerism, Nirmal's contribution in creating quality sanitation & hygiene ecosystem in Chennai is immense & massive! He is a true Champion of Chennai!

R Manikandan