



PUSHING
FOR SOCIAL
ACCEPTANCE
SAHODARAN



Necessity is the mother of invention they say and this might hold true for Mr. Sunil Menon, founder of Sahodaran. Being a part of the LGBT community himself, Sunil saw the stark reality and the huge gap in the society. “Coming from a privileged background, I didn’t quite face the discrimination that the general public did, and that was what prompted me to start Sahodaran – to reach out to the LGBT and the transgender communities at large”, clarifies Sunil.

Sunil’s academic journey through zoology and anthropology, led him towards primatology. But fate intervened and he volunteered at the Dr. Sundaraman AIDS Research Foundation, where he met a WHO anthropology consultant who invited Sunil to join him in the AIDS/HIV research in the marginalized communities. “This led to research and a paper on an ethnographic study on same sex behaviour of men and the risk of HIV in Chennai, something

completely new to the country, and I went on to present the paper at the International AIDS Conference in Berlin in 1993, which prompted the Government to look at intervention and prevention with HIV in the marginalized communities, where it was accepted as a behavioural issue, and not as an identity”, says Sunil.

Sunil went on to present the paper on a scholarship with Dr. Robert Oostvogels (an independent consultant), at the WHO headquarters to probable donors, and it was well received but politics forced Sunil to quit the project which forced him to come face-to-face with discrimination. He then plunged headlong into fashion – choreography, photography, runway shows, Miss India training – and had a parallel life.

But Sunil still felt a calling and with the return of Dr. Shivnanda Khan in 1996, they formulated the idea of a support group,





then, the community was all about sex workers and so was shunned at all corners. This led to a lot of effort to redefine their identity and to be accepted as human beings with talent and individuality. And Sunil says, “We had to stick our necks out for these boys otherwise they will just wither away, and that was my guiding force through Sahodaran”.

When asked about bridging the gap in society through information and awareness, Sunil points out that his battle was about legality, and the constant fear of being criminalized, the status of which that changed only in 2018. “This new generation has not lived in fear about their identity and Sahodaran educates them about all the issues faced previously”, says Sunil, being the face of Sahodaran in the vernacular media. Basic rights that are still being denied – right to live a decent life, right to healthcare, right to education, right of being a citizen accepted by society – the list goes on”, an anguished Sunil says. “And this is not just in India, but even in a so-called progressive country like the US, where transgender people fear for their lives”, an emotional Sunil says.

“The media has been extremely supportive to the movement in Tamilnadu, and the vernacular media has helped us reach the society in the smallest of towns. We have had many sensitization workshops with the police and that has helped a lot!”, a relieved Sunil says. A Madras High Court Judge has publicly admitted to being uneducated about the LGBT community, and that was appreciated by the public at large and giving the much needed boost to the community. Negative reports and portrayal of the transgender community in television and cinema still demeans them, and Sunil hurts with the flippant and comic way they are shown. Sunil goes on to express his grateful thanks to the Tamilnadu Government for all their support and facilitation and the continued belief from IAS officers.

which Sunil insisting that it be run by the community itself, along with training and platform required for taking it forward. Sunil recounts how difficult it was to get space in a hotel to conduct their first workshop thanks to the prejudice that existed then. He points out that they were working with very economically backward section of society along with external societal pressures which Sunil calls visual harassment.

That led to the start of Sahodaran in 1998 – a safe space for the community to come to, a sense of belonging without fear, and a place to be themselves. Sunil mentions that back

The Padma Shri award to Narthaki Natraj was a huge beacon for the community with talent and efforts being recognized at the national level. Her subsequent position in the Development department in the Tamilnadu State Government was another shot in the arm for the LGBT community in general, and the State setting high standards for support to the marginalized communities, allocating 280 houses for homeless transgender women, introducing transgender identity cards, are some of the initiatives from the State Government.

Sunil very proudly talks about Jaya, the general manager of Sahodaran now, who has transitioned from being a staff member to running the whole outfit. The journey from being an educator for the trans community to earning her college degree to taking over the mantle, Jaya is now a well known personality in Tamilnadu today. Sunil teared up talking about Jaya and Sudha, his two trusted managers who have stood by him taking Sahodaran to greater heights. He says, “If only everyone can spend money to make a difference in someone’s life, it’s the greatest reward one can wish for!”.

The Drop-in Center was created for the community members to get together, engage in activities, get counselling, relax and exchange ideas. The Crisis Support Hotline started as a health helpline to educate the community about the HIV risks, but it gradually grew to cover a wider area of issues like housing, domestic issues, harassment, legal problems, and such. There are doctors, lawyers, police and other professionals who lend their expertise to the entire community.

“My pet peeve is the education sector. The bullying and harassment that the boys go through just breaks them, and there is no counselling to find out the cause and I can say 1 out of 3 boys are sexually abused. They come to us broken and their mental



state of confidence is non-existent. I wish the education sector is more inclusive and supportive all through school and college, so that they get decent jobs and income”, pleads an emotional Sunil. The era of tokenism is slowly coming to an end says Sunil, and that many corporates are coming forward to actively engage and educate themselves and their staff about the LGBT community. “The need of the hour is to include sex education, gender equality, gender sensitization, sexual identity and all related issues in schools, and across ages to be more aware to create a more inclusive society, and along with family support will give so much confidence to those boys!”, emphasises Sunil.

Sahodaran he says will be a platform to close the disparity between the haves and have-nots, and Sahodaran as a team will be a foundation for all those in the community who have any kind of issue. “We hope to set an example for other communities in other districts and states to emulate and learn from Sahodaran”, says Sunil.

Oh, just to mention Sunil has been conferred an Honorary PhD by the University of St. Andrews in Canada in 2017, for the tireless work done by Sunil and his team at Sahodaran. “Its been an emotional and rewarding journey and I give full credit to the team! I have been very fortunate to have worked with such talented and amazing people, and am very proud of their achievements!”, says Dr. Sunil Menon.