

personal histories

‘YOU CARRY A LAPTOP, YOU MUST BE WORKING FOR A REALLY COOL NGO’

BETA, AB settle ho jao. Aur pehle comfortable hona zaroori hai. Yeh sab baad mein karna.” (Son, settle down now. It is important to first get comfortable in life. You can do this work later.) “Bahut accha kaam karte ho beta, garib logon ko khana dena acchi baat hai.” (Son, you are doing very good work. It is good to feed the poor.)

I often hear such comments whenever I meet my extended family. It's the same with my friends; the only difference is that they don't address me as “beta”. I've found that it is always interesting to see how people react when you tell them that you are working for an NGO. More so when they find out that you left a high-paying job in a sought-after company for this. “Why did you do it?” says the look on their faces.

The expression often changes from one of sheer disappointment to thoughtfulness. I can easily follow the trajectory of their speculations. He must have done it because he could not take the pressures of the job. He must want an easy life. Probably comes from a rich family. More questions follow — who will marry you? How will you pay the bills? After all everything is so expensive — from mangoes to going to watch a film.

People, it seems, don't realise that many NGOs are professionally run, result-oriented organisations. They have come a long way since they were charitable organisations that relied solely on the efforts of a volunteers.

There isn't enough space to list all the reactions my choice of career elicits, though the “beta” ones mentioned above are without a doubt my favourites. I like to call these comments, perspectives.

I had originally shifted to Mumbai from Jammu to “get exposure” and to become independent. I have no qualms in admitting that I was pretty successful and became well versed with the cooler things in life. Exposure implies things like learning to travel without your family, making friends, developing a sense of confidence and responsibility, learning to live by yourself and hanging out at the right places. But during all this, I would feel that something was amiss.

Why was going to Kamathipura or Dharavi in Mumbai not part of the exposure? Now, that would have been real exposure. It would force you to see things that are usually completely missed, ignored and forgotten. People tend to think that it is okay to let the road be dirty as long as their homes are clean and free of garbage.

As we walked from Churchgate station to college every morning, street kids would accost us asking for money. What was most annoying were the commuters' retorts: “haath



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mat lagana. Lagaya to haath tod doonga.” (Don't touch me; if you do I will break your arms.) I stand there ashamed. You think you are being macho to a kid a third your size, naked, starving, wet from the early morning showers, his bones showing. Every day I hear commuters commenting on “these people”, overlooking the simple fact that “these people” are hungry children first and beggars later, and are being stigmatised for absolutely no fault of theirs.

It is common for college students to work for an NGO. It is often compulsory, but even otherwise, the benefits are many — after all it is a huge plus if you want to study abroad, and always makes an impression on your resume. Usually the NGO experience ends right there. With skyrocketing corporate salaries, it hardly strikes anyone to consider making a career in the social sector.

When I was working we used to get interns and I had had family members

who would say, “Dhruv, his college has asked him to do this, can you please get this over and done with.” Nothing wrong I guess, but I feel that people need to realise that “this” kind of work helps develop a certain perspective — a certain sensitivity towards things that are not right and a sense that each individual can do something about it.

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When he reached there, he “couldn't imagine that a place like this existed in Mumbai.” If you don't see the poverty and disparity endemic in India with your own eyes, these will remain abstract issues for you and you'll always find someone else to blame — the government, politicians, local leaders, others. Somewhere along the line we forget that we

choose the politicians who govern us and we can make a difference.

Three months after the tsunami, I flew down to Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh as part of my first relief assignment. I had already been branded an idealist by then. The reaction I got was: you are flying, you carry a laptop, you must be working for a really cool NGO, not some small time outfit. Yes, just because I work for an NGO doesn't mean I can't fly, can't have a laptop, can't go to a nice place to eat, can't buy expensive stuff. “Forget little luxuries if you are going to help the needy and the poor” — so goes the mindset but that is not necessarily true.

Immediate relief-work for tsunami victims was already underway; equally pressing was the need for long-term rehabilitation. I tried to involve friends and family in Mumbai. The immediate response was: “Nothing reaches the people... There's lots of funding. People from all the over the world are pouring money. What difference will my Rs 2,000 make?” This from people earning over a lakh a month.

I did realise that it is not for me to judge anyone. People have problems. They have their priorities and that is fine. What is annoying is when, without bothering to check, people undermine the efforts of those who choose to work in this space.

AN ELDERLY lady once told me, “I gave so much money to this cause and don't know what happened to it.” I asked her if she had bothered to check with the organisation what they had done with her money and the answer was a shameless ‘No’. Donors are equally responsible for the bad name the social sector attracts in India, as they are seldom concerned about how their money is being spent. What they are interested in is the 80-G tax benefits.

“Do you have any plans for the future,” someone asks me. She reminds me that all my friends have MBAs, cars and big flats. I want her to stop, so I tell her that I too am going to study for an MBA. “Thank God, some sense has prevailed over you,” comes the reply. “But, who will pay for your education since you have been working so long for peanuts? Had you worked with a company there wouldn't have been any problem.” I tell her that I have a full scholarship. “All the good work that you have done has finally paid off. We always knew you had it in you and you have made us proud. We need more people like you,” she says.

I have come to realise that there are always those who will encourage you and those who will discourage you. I have stopped listening to the latter. As the lady leaves she says, “So now you can go back to investment banking and make money.” I keep quiet. It's all about perspective. ▀