

'ATMA NIRBHAR – EK CHALLENGE'

Kaushik Das

Atma Nirbhar Ek-Challenge is a voluntary organisation founded by Sri Kaushik Das who opted out of his lucrative career as tea executive and decided to work as a full time social worker. He started his work with a new idea of making physically handicapped self-reliant through packaging and marketing of tea. Given below is the story of his work of past 8 years and the progress he has achieved.

The name of our small Organisation is 'Atma Nirbhar Ek Challenge'. It is working since 1996 for the welfare of the weaker sections of the society, specially, the disabled, and, the people living in residential social welfare institutions. With our limited resources, we try to improve the quality of their life. Our organisation also tries to support any other good cause to which it can contribute something positive. It is a small endeavor, a continuous journey. We have 2 programmes:

PROGRAMME No. 1:

Atma Nirbhar – Ek Challenge' means 'Self Reliance – a Challenge'. It works for the economic rehabilitation and empowerment of the disabled and the less fortunate persons, through a small 'no profit, no loss' tea and spices packaging and marketing unit at Guwahati, Assam. The primary objective is to offer to a few disadvantaged persons an opportunity to work with dignity, earn a living and, if possible, become economically self-reliant. At present, there are only 12 workers – 5 of them have speech and hearing impairment, 5 are mentally challenged, and 2 are widows, with dependent children / grandchildren. They are happy here as they are making a useful contribution and are working under stress free conditions. Perhaps, even more than them, their parents/ guardians have been able to appreciate the rationale of this project better.

The brand name of our products is 'Nav Jeevan' — meaning 'new life' for the beneficiaries. We also wanted to sell/market our products through similar disadvantaged persons in the other parts of the country — however, this has not been a success. In fact marketing is a weak point of the programme. The products are supplied to a selected few canteens and co-operative stores of a few socially conscious institutions like the Assam Carbon, India Carbon, N F Railway, South Point School Hostel etc. A few nearby Air Force Stations also procure their spice requirements from our unit. We also generate some income from doing job-contract work of packaging teas for a few other small local tea packeteers.

The project was started in by pooling-in contributions from

friends and well-wishers. In the absence of any financial assistance from the government or any donor agency, the Organisation has not been able to develop, and, help a larger number of disadvantaged persons.

It received the NCPEDP-Helen Keller Award in 2000 — a national award for promotion of employment among the disabled. The award was presented by Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson. However, this does not mean that 'Atma Nirbhar – Ek Challenge' is a success story — on the contrary it is a daily struggle, a continuous journey to improve the quality of life of a few disadvantaged people.

PROGRAMME No. 2:

'Spreading Sunshine': Recently we started another programme named 'Spreading Sunshine'. It is operating under the banner of 'Atma Nirbhar - Ek Challenge' as the latter already has the necessary registrations and tax concessions — which take a long time to process. The primary objective of 'Spreading Sunshine' is to improve, in small measures, the *quality of life* of the residents of all the needy residential social welfare institutions (e.g. orphanage, school for the blind, women's remand home etc.) in Guwahati by providing 'outside' assistance. There are 13 such institutions in Guwahati, with approximately 766 residents. However, due to paucity of financial and other resources, the facilities being provided in these institutions are not adequate. The residents are facing considerable hardship — they feel helpless, marginalized, and, at times, virtually abandoned by the society. Therefore, to improve the morale and quality of life of the residents in these institutions, some private initiative and regular outside humanitarian assistance has become very necessary. We feel it is our moral duty to reach out to them and lend a helping hand — to improve the quality of their life in small measures.

As mentioned in the very beginning, we also join hands with other like-minded organizations to support socially positive programmes. For example, recently we came to learn of 'Locost' Medicine from a friend in the voluntary sector. We were very impressed by the whole concept. We decided that we will help to popularise and promote 'Locost' Medicine from the 'outside' in this region as it would help a lot of middle and lower income people. Similarly, we always try to participate in programmes, which try to promote peace and amity in this disturbed region. We feel our programme is a judicious blend of Gandhian simplicity, frugal operating systems and a professional attitude.

To expand our programmes and activities, we started construction of a three storied building named 'PAROPKAR' ('Welfare of Others'), in November 2002. It will have a total area of 3,904 sq. ft. A part of the building may be rented out, preferably, to other welfare organisations, to generate funds for our programmes. All benefits accruing from

'PAROPKAR' will be utilised only in the welfare of the needy, for all times to come.

A WORD OF GRATITUDE: We are grateful that we got this opportunity of being of some humble service through our various programmes. This project has been possible because of the support that we have received from many avenues. We express our sincere gratitude, and, are thankful for all the assistance that we have received to carry on these programmes and service activities. We also

pray that we have more faith, capacity to work hard and perseverance to develop our programmes to help more people in need of some additional support and consideration. ✨

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