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### EDITORIAL DESK

After five successful releases and an overwhelming response, we are glad to release the sixth issue of “DISHA”, the newsletter of our Guruji Education Foundation.

We hope you enjoy reading it. We welcome your comments and suggestions. Please let us know if you would like to contribute to DISHA in any way.

We thank Mr. Abhay Joshi for the editorial help.

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## CHRISTMAS CELEB. AT SUPER 30, NERUL



## Super 30 Nerul - LEARNING SCRATCH



## Super 30 Nerul - LEARNING & PRACTICING





## Interaction with Mr. Prashant Phatak and Ajanta ma'am

One of the founders of GEF, Mr Prashant Phatak and his wife and best friend Ajanta shared their beautiful thoughts with us. Prashant sir, a computer engineer, works at a law firm's IT department in New York. He is highly dedicated, determined and passionate about his work and GEF. Dr. Pradeep Waychal and Mr. Prashant worked together in the same team at Patni Computers and have been close friends since then.

Ajanta ma'am, an M Tech in Computer Science from IIT Bombay, works in FourSquare in the US. They got married in 1993 and have two children named Siddhartha and Mukta. Mukta studied theatre and computer science and Siddharth is in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. The Phatak family plays an important role in the growth of GEF. They recently organized a fundraising event for the foundation. Some of you may recall that Mukta and Siddharth spoke at our 2017 Annual day. Ajanta mam, being a Rajastani, had to adapt, after her wedding, to two different cultures - Marathi and American. Her world changed 360 ° post marriage, I must say.

Can you please tell us about your early days: school, college, job, etc?

**Prashant sir:** So I was born in Nagpur and then we all came to Kalyan when I was two years old. We were a family of 6 people, Aai, baba, 2 elder brothers, 1 elder sister and I being the youngest. We lost our father when I was just 10 years old. I did my schooling from GEI's Subhedar Wada High School in Marathi medium. I am glad that my Aai enrolled me in that school. Our teacher, Bhalerao baai (mothya baai) provided us real and holistic education. She taught us discipline and I remember her saying "no matter if you sit down on the floor instead of benches, there must be quality education". I am grateful to be one of her favourite students. I did my jr college from Ruia. My elder brother was a topper and took a job in England. My 2<sup>nd</sup> brother looked after me and brought me up. He was and always be like a father to me. My aai and my elder sister were two amazingly, strong women. I am really proud of them. I was very fond of cricket and singing since my childhood. I had already figured out life in my head: I will score very well in 12<sup>th</sup>, become an engineer and take up a job. But things didn't work out as per my plan. I did not score well in 12<sup>th</sup> and was shattered. I then did my diploma from VJTI and did B.E. Computer Science from RAIT (D.Y.Patil college), Nerul. Since Nerul was very far from Kalyan, I stayed near the college. I saved time and invested that in studies and in learning new things. There were no labs in RAIT back then, so we used to go to SP college Andheri on weekends. Everything was in place but I started getting phobic of Engineering drawing and got a KT in that subject. I wasn't able to see any path through it, I was having sleepless nights. I couldn't be this weak being my Aai's son and this realisation transformed me. I worked hard and cleared the subject with 45-50 marks, I was really proud of myself



having been able to clear such a tough hurdle. I became an Engineer with 1<sup>st</sup> class and started a company of software for lawyers. Though I got a job offer from Wipro, the thought of being self-employed and starting my own business excited me more. It didn't work well for me so I thought of taking up a job. I started working in Mastek, Pune where I worked as a computer science Engineer and later joined Patni as an offshore coordinator for the US project. This was my best time as I got introduced to Pradeep here. It was a journey of so much learning and fun. Then I got married and joined my Brother's company which was based in the US. I moved to the US with my wife Ajanta. **Ajanta Ma'am:** To be honest, I have not been so involved with the foundation work, though I always got updates from Prashant about GEF. Pradeep had introduced GEF to me and I blindly trust Pradeep on his work and vision. Recently, Muktha (our daughter) and I got an opportunity to work on the website of GEF and contribute a bit towards the foundation.

Talking about the early days, I was an average student in school but was good in Mathematics. My mother used to teach me but I was not a focused student until I got admitted to Carmel of St. Joseph School, Malad in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. My perspective about the studies changed and I started being more serious and focused. I did my junior college from Mithibai college in Science and then completed my B.E. from RAIT college

and M.Tech in Computer Science from IIT, Mumbai. It was always my dream to be a student of IIT, Mumbai.

I worked for a year in CMC and then I got married to Prashant and we moved to the US.

**In those days Muktha and Siddharth were pretty young, but over time they got involved in the foundation activities. How did you inculcate in them that feeling of commitment towards the foundation?**

**P:** As we stay in the US, I used to take regular updates of GEF from Pradeep and Tyagu over the phone. I used to discuss the work and status of GEF with my wife, Ajanta and children, Muktha and Siddharth. It's Pradeep and Tyagu, because of whom both my children were directly exposed to GEF. The children are not yet completely involved with the foundation activities, they spoke at an annual day and recently gave a few ideas to Pradeep for the Super 30 program.



The commitment comes from within and it's not to be taught or imposed on anyone. The way we are connected to GEF, even they wanted to be a part of it. GEF is like a sibling to them, they all have grown together.

**A:** Observation, more than books and experience, more than persons, is the prime educator. The children got to know about GEF by just listening to our discussions about GEF or to our calls with Pradeep. .

### **What is your vision for the foundation going forward?**

**P:** I would just say that the foundation is functioning brilliantly as it is run by a group of enthusiastic people. My only vision would be to spend as much time as possible and get more involved with the activities going throughout the year.

**A:** It has grown brilliantly so far but my vision would be to help it grow even bigger.

### **What differences do you find in the US and Indian education system? (How do you compare?)**

**P:** The fundamental difference is that in the US, a student has a choice of opting for the subject that he loves and drop the subject that he doesn't. They are given individual assignments, wherein they must work all by themselves. The teachers focus on building a strong foundation rather than just rushing to complete the syllabus. They are exposed to work on projects and gain practical knowledge through them. There is a huge amount of competition right from childhood. The Americans are very competitive; hence the Asians have to pull up their socks really high to compete with them and have an edge over them. The amount of exposure they get during the school years helps them to be smart and confident.

**A:** I am comparing the Indian education system of my student days to the present education system in the US. In the US, the students are exposed to more project-based activities, team work activities and presentation. They have story-writing and telling as well, and their parents are called to attend. This helps the students to be more confident and to build their communication skills. There are a series of tests and quizzes to help students get comfortable with the syllabus and also have fun in interacting and learning. They are shown video films related to the subject to improve their knowledge and understand the subject in a better way. The education here is made more fun and

interactive. The most important thing is the students have the freedom to choose the subjects they love and the freedom and support to pursue that as a career.

### **What are the biggest challenges you face in doing and spreading the work of foundation in the US?**

**P:** There are ample number of NGOs which work in the US, be it Chinmaya mission trust or other NGOs, we have to be patient and keep spreading the good work we do. We need to earn the trust of people towards our foundation and work, we can't expect everything to happen at the speed of light. The challenge is to accept our gradual growth, if there is only 1 supporter then we must accept it and welcome him to the GEF family rather than cribbing over it.

**A:** We had conducted a fund-raiser event for Prashant's music teacher. He, his wife and son are all blind in addition to the son also being autistic. We had invited our close friends and relatives. We gave an introductory presentation on GEF's vision, mission and growth so far. Post this event, we got an opportunity to present GEF on a bigger platform. One of our friend's wife is a dance teacher, they had their dance school's annual day and were kind enough to have called us to present and create awareness about GEF. The biggest challenge comes to reach people's heart and eventually make them contribute their money and time. There are so many international and Indian NGOs which are authentic, certified. We have to compete with them to create our volunteers base.

### **How do you feel to be one of the founders of GEF, having started it from scratch and seeing it grow?**

**P:** I feel good. I got to work with Pradeep at Patni as well as for a noble cause i.e. at GEF. I have been associated with GEF since start but I would say that Pradeep and all the supporters have worked really hard for making GEF grow. I am fortunate to have met and know Pradeep so well.

**A:** It feels fulfilling to see the foundation grow and reach so far. There is a huge contribution of Pradeep and the team from India to help GEF expand so much. We are helping in a way we can, it is still a long way to go.

### **How easy was it to migrate to the US?**

**P:** It was comparatively easier for me to

migrate to the US. I had my elder brother and his family already settled in the US. I got married and moved to the US with Ajanta and started working with my elder brother.

**A:** We moved to the US after we got married. It was extremely difficult for me to get comfortable, took me good 4 to 5 years to do so. Written communication was not at all an issue but when it came to verbal, I was not very confident. I isolated myself from parties, meetups, gatherings to avoid meeting people and socializing. Later, I adapted to the culture, their accent and got comfortable with time. I am not a people's person so I still have a limited number of friends but I have become a lot more confident than what I was when I migrated to the US.

### **What made you think about giving a platform to the underprivileged students?**

**P:** As a family, we have seen good days, my father was a lawyer. Financially, we were good but when I lost my father, we had tough times. My mother had to raise us and guide us to set our paths correctly. Since I have seen good days, I want eligible students who experience trauma, poverty to be able to at least get a chance to build better days for themselves as well as their families. They should be privileged enough to get over the tag of "underprivileged".

**A:** I believe in one thing, if you have then why not share it with the ones who cannot afford?

### **How does starting a branch in the US help GEF?**

**P:** It is the initial stage of our GEF, US branch. It will surely help GEF to reach out to people and create awareness. It is helping us raise money. We can have online guest lectures for our students. We had organized a smaller event of GEF, where we had invited our close friends and relatives. The monetary help from the US would be of great help to us as the dollar to money conversion is big.

**A:** Not only do we get to raise awareness in another country, but it also offers a humungous monetary help to the foundation.

## MY DAY AT SUPER 30 - NERUL

“Education is not a tool for development - individual, community and the nation. It is the foundation for our future. It is empowerment to make choices and embolden the youth to chase their dreams” -Nita Ambani.

We, at Guruji Education Foundation are connected to each other not by blood but by Education. In Issue 1 Volume 3 DISHA, we had introduced the Development Program for Adolescent Students A.K.A Super 30.

The main motive of this project is to build a strong foundation for the students and provide them with resources to match their potential. GEF has developed a framework to build a robust foundation for such high school students. The framework includes physical literacy, psychological strength, intellectual sharpness and entrepreneurial zeal. The implementation of this framework has resulted in a four-year program from 6th to 9th standards that relies on interactive teaching.

In its first iteration for the 6th standard, the program consists of prayers, exercises such as suryanamaskar, English communication, encouraging students to ask questions and discuss their answers, learning creative computing by using the SCRATCH environment designed at MIT, US, interactions with achievers from various walks of life, and sports. We include activities that attempt to develop values such as empathy and teamwork and attributes such as curiosity and critical thinking as well as bibliotherapy. We seek feedback from students at the end of each session, which has been overwhelmingly positive, even though students have to spend 7 hours on Sundays for the program, after 6 days of regular school.

We initiated this program in Raja Shivaji Vidyalaya, Lokmanyagar, Thane in Sep 2018 and at Osmanabad's Chhtrapati Shivaji School in Nov 2018. Both programs have been functioning successfully. After seeing the positive response from students, staff and the volunteers of GEF, we have added two more schools to the Super 30 list, one at Ramgad, a small village near Kankavli, and another at Nerul, Mumbai.

Gopal sir heads the Super 30 at Ramgad. Along with GEF, the teachers and students are very enthusiastic. The resources, in general, are available but the computer lab is not yet functional. Gopal Sir found that the students love interactive sessions and activities rather than just sitting and listening. The attendance is full for every session of Super 30.

Pranay Kalpavriksh and Sharad Hasilkar sir head the PVG's Vidya Bhawan High School, Nerul. I was fortunate enough to be a part of the teaching faculty at Super 30 on 25th August 2019. The energy level of students from the start is so high and, moreover, it goes on increasing as the clock runs. I had a great experience and fun teaching Zumba and basics of English. The sessions are so interactive that you end up teaching as well as learning. The whole day is well-planned and timed and executed perfectly.

The day started with prayers followed by Zumba, SCRATCH by Abhay Joshi sir, English lessons, interactive sessions, distribution of library books, games and fun, feedback and weekly sheets and ended with Pasaydaan. Abhay Joshi sir was in Kolhapur with poor network but still managed to conduct the online SCRATCH session, which was assisted by Pranay. The students understood and implemented the commands and made creative SCRATCH projects. It was so much fun to have lunch with them, they all sat in a circle on the mat and passed their dabba in a circular manner. I never ever had such amazing variety of food. One of the best parts of Super 30 is that there are captains assigned for every task, be it library, food, cleanliness, sports, or anything else and the students do their job with full dedication and love.

The curious minds asking plenty of questions, the screams of laughs and joy, the silence while listening to something insightful, the sharing and caring while having lunch and the amount of warmth and love you receive from the students, all makes this experience something huge. I wish that our mission of “Education for All” reaches all the students not only of rural Maharashtra but all of India.

Education should not fill you with knowledge, it should make you hungry for knowledge and the Super 30 is succeeding to achieve that.