

The simile of the coconut tree

When we tell people that Vinimay helps needy children and youth, the most frequent question that we are asked is “Do the children and youth whom you help pay back when they are well settled in life? Do they participate in your social work? Do they feel like helping other under-privileged children...” Our reply to all these questions is an unqualified “YES”.

However, we should do some deep thinking on this question: “Should we at all expect any thing in return from these children and if so, what?”

This introspection takes us to another question: “Why at all do we help them? What is the motive behind our ‘social work’?”

For Vinimay, social work is not an act of generosity or sympathy.

First, Vinimay believes that social work is ‘social participation’. In a family each one contributes according to one’s capacity and receives according to one’s needs; so also in society, which is but an extended family, we help the weaker members by sparing a part of our resources for them; that is social participation.

Secondly, Vinimay also believes that social work is ‘social repayment’. We are in a stronger and better position than many others in society because we were fortunate enough to belong to the upper strata of society or we had so many persons to help us. While growing up to the position we occupy now, we have already received a lot from the society. We are already debtors! And, it is our duty to ‘repay’ to the society.

Finally, what could we expect from a hopelessly sick person whom we are helping? We would simply hope and pray that we would have the ability to help the patient, that the patient would listen to our advice, respond to the treatment, get cured and live to enjoy a normal life as any of us would like to. There would be no room for any other thought while attending to such a patient.

The children and youth whom we are helping are people with deep problems, which are not superficial or momentary. They are people who have had terrible trauma in their early years

which perhaps would never stop haunting them; people who have lost their childhood; people who have never cried helplessly like a child would do but have learnt to bear their problems with fortitude beyond their age; people who never had a chance to laugh whole-heartedly as children; people whose innocent trust has been betrayed by inhuman and insensitive parents, relatives or other adults.

Therefore, it would be unfair on our part to expect these children and youth to pay back their 'debt' as soon as we have lifted them up to their bare minimum level of existence. They should relax and catch up with their lost childhood; just the same as a patient who has recovered from a serious illness should be asked to convalesce.

Thus from any point of view, it is not proper to expect anything in return from the children we help. We help them because we ought to help them, we are able to help them and we feel happy to help them.

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However to our great surprise and satisfaction we find that these children do contribute back to Vinimay. They do so in spite of our explicitly telling them that we do not expect anything in return from them. We marvel at the innate goodness that has survived in these children in spite of all the misery that they have undergone. It is this fact which has sustained our enthusiasm in our work and has made Vinimay what it is today.

There is a Sanskrit verse which says that when you do a good deed, you always get good things back; for does not a coconut tree give us sweet water in return for the ordinary water it gets from us?

Like the coconut tree, the children and youth whom we help, help Vinimay back. We are not talking here of monetary contributions alone. More, the youths give us their time, talents and energies whole-heartedly. They join our 'shram daan' work; they shoulder responsibility as full-fledged volunteers in various camps and excursions for children; they help in the tutorial classes; during Bal-Mahotsav (which is a five-day sports and cultural meet in which more than 1000 children from child welfare institutions participate), these youths carry out more than 60% of the work! They do not even claim their incidental expenses incurred during this voluntary work; some even forego a few days' salary for participating in Vinimay's activities.

In a Tamil verse there is an extension of the simile of the coconut tree. We feed the roots but the 'fruits' appear somewhere else. Similarly, when we do a good turn to someone he/she may spread the goodness somewhere else too. That is what Chandrakant Bhopi, a member of Tarun Vinimay, did. Inspired by Vinimay's methods, he gave a completely new direction to the Ganesh Chathurti festival in his locality. You will be reading about it in his own words elsewhere in this issue of Vinimag.