



# A ray of hope

## DR R BALASUBRAMANIAM

**M**y editor subtly asked me to be on time for the interview. Prior to fixing the appointment, Sheetal, his personal assistant, too insisted the same. This insistence not only gave me a cue into the person I was to meet but also strengthened my resolve to know and understand his thoughts and actions. And I did make it on time for my interview with Dr R Balasubramaniam, Founder and Chairperson of Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM).

The quietude of the SVYM office at Hebbal in Mysore cooled my otherwise flustered nerves due to the afternoon sun. Dr Balasubramaniam's simple and casual appearance, however, settled me and I was set.

Dr Ramaswami Balasubramaniam in 1984 led a team of young medical students of Mysore Medical College who having realised the stark difference between what was taught at the medical school and the ground reality wanted to make a difference in the lives of the poor and the marginalised. Bound by the common aim they set up Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement at Saraguru, a small town in Mysuru district, with the aim to provide cost effective treatment to the tribes and the dispossessed.

What was then a small initiative has today snowballed into a movement that covers more than half of the state and works in the areas of health, education, economic generation, training and research.

Today, SVYM has completed 31 years and has left its founder with mixed feelings.

"While I am happy that SVYM and I continue to grow, learn and evolve, I am saddened by the

skewed concept of development professed by the state," said Dr Balasubramaniam.

Stressing on the need to redesign the paradigm of development, Dr Balu, as he is fondly called, noted that the state government had lost its way.

He said he was unhappy about the government's insistence of attaining a higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at any cost to the utter neglect of developing the human and social capital, which was one of the indicators of true development.

Expressing dissatisfaction about the path of development chosen by Karnataka, Dr Balu rued that the state was either barking the wrong tree in the name of development or making its citizens parasitic by providing free ration, thus, robbing the poor of their dignity and self determination for growth.

Though Swami Vivekananda's influence on Dr Balu is palpable, I was curious to know about specific principles and teachings of Vivekananda that made him dedicate his life and channel his energies towards the growth of the poor and the disempowered.

Delighted to field the question about Vivekananda, he said Swami Vivekananda's teachings were more relevant today than ever before. "His teachings should be made a compulsory read for every youth," he said. Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of action, his brand of nationalism that stressed on working towards providing food and education to the last of the person, self discovery through service to others, compassion, humour, belief in the extraordinary capabilities in ordinary people, practical Vedanta



“

The whole medical system today has boiled down to sickness care industry than health care, he added.

that urges one to serve the god in man continue to inspire me, noted Dr Balu.

Calling him a master experimenter, the developmental activist said if not for Swami Vivekananda's emphasis on the need to be fearless, he could not have journeyed on this path for long.

Noting that his life would have been a zero without the realisation of Vivekananda's message, Dr Balu corrected that he was not iconising him but stressing that his teachings be not viewed in a narrow sense.

On his work with the tribes, Dr Balu, noted that state and the forest department instead of protecting the tribes have turned their enemies. Having worked with the tribes in H D Kote, Saraguru and Chamarajanagar for more than three decades, he said that the state machinery which has turned the greatest exploiter of the tribes does not tolerate when you highlight the injustice meted out to them.

Vehemently opposing the yet to be implemented one year compulsory rural medical service for students, Dr Balu wondered why medical incompetence should be transferred to the rural poor and the tribes.

Unlike medical students of our time, students today are worried about clearing their entrance for MD in their final year. Thus being the scenario, they are not trained in patient care. So how can the state treat the poor and dispossessed as guinea pigs for their ill trained students to experiment on, he said.

And pointed that the medical colleges and hospitals that have turned into crass money making centres should first teach medicine with ethics. He highlighted that AYUSH instead of being made a part of the mainstream medicinal system should be treated as the mainstream. The whole medical system today has boiled down to sickness care industry than health care, he added.

Explaining how schools run by SVYM has no doors and windows, Dr Balu said schools should be treated as learning spaces. Also, the stress should be on emotional and social intelligence and not mere cognitive intelligence.

Quelling my doubts about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) being a mere synthetic endeavour of the corporate, he said that CSR should not be reduced as mere philanthropic management.

He said CSR was a much broader concept and encompassed how a company treated its own employees, work practices and its responsibility towards the society.



“

I was curious to know about specific principles and teachings of Vivekananda that made him dedicate his life and channel his energies towards the growth of the poor and the disempowered.

### I, the citizen

The book 'I, the citizen—unraveling the power of citizen engagement,' authored by Dr R Balasubramaniam which was released in the US recently will be released in Bengaluru on September 28 at Gandhi Bhavan.

"Also, I believe every corporate should be socially responsible and can play a key role in sustainable development," he said.

Referring to the late Achalananda Swamy as his Guru, Dr Balu said that without him he would not have realised the importance and potency of Swami Vivekananda's teachings too.

And stated that when's one hunger for teacher is intense and true, the teacher would

find his student.

What is his call to the youth?

A passionate orator Dr Balu urged the youth to follow 3 Hs— Heart to feel, Head to think and Hands to work, and 3 Ps— Putity, Patience and Perseverance. He urged people to find a purpose and then dedicate their whole life towards its realisation.

Dr Balu who enjoys watching TV shows such as The Monk with his son and whose all time favourite show is Tom and Jerry said he did not divide his life into watertight compartments of work and leisure.

A reader of Sidney Sheldon, Perry Mason, Frederick Forsyth and Robert Ludlum, Dr Balu said nobody ever wrote like P G Wodehouse anymore.

With Dr Raj Kumar as his personal favourite, he said he caught up with movies on his flight journey to the US to deliver talks. However, he said he has no appetite for Kannada movies now.

Demystifying what the people, media and the society at large portrayed about him as one who has sacrificed his life for the others, Dr Balu hinted that he was but privileged enough to be bestowed with immense opportunities to serve others.

"Living every day of my life on my terms infused with the teachings of Swami Vivekananda is being spiritual for me," he concluded.

— R S Ranjeetha Urs

### Recognition, awards and accolades...

Dr R Balasubramaniam was appointed as the special Investigator for the Karnataka Lokayukta.

He co-founded Vivekananda Institute for Leadership Development (VLEAD) in 2002, and Vivekananda Institute of Indian Studies (VIIS) in 2008, in Mysore. VLEAD offers training programmes in management, community development and leadership.

In 2011, Balu founded a public policy research institute called Grassroots Research & Advocacy Movement (GRAAM).

In 2012, Dr Balu was inducted to serve as the Frank H T Rhodes Professor at Cornell University, NY, USA, in recognition to his work in development, public policy and bridging gap between academic research and practice.

In January 2014, he received the Vivekananda Award for Human Excellence from the Ramakrishna Ashram.

In May 2014, the Society for Indian Medical Anthropology awarded him the Swasthya Seva Ratna Award for outstanding medical service to indigenous tribal communities.

