'Our role is to be a catalyst'

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A S Chairman of the Srinivasan Services Trust (SST), Ashoke Joshi has the complex task of shaping and implementing programmes that touch the lives of roughly two million people in 3,000 villages across five states in the country.

Joshi is a retired IAS officer with a formidable reputation for honesty and efficiency during his many years of service. At SST he emphasises focus and impact in the trust's social initiatives.

Joshi has helped Venu Srinivasan, Chairman and MD of TVS, build a team of 250 professionals who work almost entirely in rural areas to improve the lives of communities.

In this interview, Joshi talks about what corporate social responsibility (CSR) means to TVS and how Srinivasan's vision of giving back to society has been implemented.

You have headed the SST for around 11 years now. How do SST and TVS define corporate social responsibility? Has there been a lot of learning over this period?
We started off as a charitable organisation. We wanted to help places of worship — temples, mosques and churches — with the expectation that once these places became better and more people went there it would result in economic and social bonding in villages.

We did that but the expected impact was not there. It did economically benefit those who were closely associated with these places of worship. But, by and large, the community did not participate as actively as we thought it would.

So we moved on and changed our style. We decided to support government schemes — no scheme is bad, it is the implementation that is often wanting. We decided to work towards making implementation more effective so that the government's resources are better utilised and the community gains.

To cite an example, repairing an *anganwadi*, making the place a little more attractive, getting the parents to know what is happening. Like with many other government schemes, with *anganwadis*, too, there was the problem of last-mile connectivity. We provided that.

The physical infrastructure improved and awareness grew, but the participation of the community was still lacking. So we decided to call the mothers to come and help the *anganwadi* teacher. That brought a lot of results. The mothers worked and were busy, but we convinced them to take turns on different days of the week.

Then we took up malnutrition. One of the goals of the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme) is to provide nutrition. It was happening under the ICDS, but we felt we could contribute to speeding it up. The mothers were requested to bring some supplementary food from home. Nothing extraordinary, but something they could spare. Maybe a few bananas, maybe some groundnuts. Today, in 1,300 or so *anganwadis* where we are involved, more than 80 per cent of the mothers volunteer. They regard it as their responsibility. They look after not just their own children but also the other children of the village.

The results are fantastic. Malnutrition levels are down to four per cent or less. There are many *anganwadis* where there is no malnourished child. The teachers are happier and practically no child stays home. They all go to the *anganwadis*.

So you have moved from charity to engagement with government schemes and community involvement.
Yes. And at the ground level when schemes are successful and local government officials get recognition, they automatically come forward with a large number of skills to reinforce our efforts. We would otherwise have been hardpressed to get those skills. Our approach is to be a catalyst for a whole lot of participation by community and government.

What is the relationship between SST and TVS, the company?
CSR in any company is top-driven. Middle-level functionaries see their main role as making profits for the company. We are fortunate to have Mr Venu Srinivasan, who believes in making communities healthier, vibrant and self-reliant. It is his dream to make villages as they should be.

What is the interaction between the company and the Trust?
In the Trust we draw on the company's experience and expertise in matters relating to finance, human resources, policy, planning, quality control and so on.

Take the Village Buddha initiative. Prof Shoji Shiba, a renowned quality expert in manufacturing, suggested making CSR more effective through TQM (total quality management) practices. Village Buddha shows how to measure impact and not just activity. This kind of relationship between the company and the Trust has helped improve our functioning a lot.

How do you choose the geographies you work in? Companies tend to work around their factories, among their direct stakeholders.
We firmly believe that communities should be healthy, educated and vibrant. That should be so around your factory and everywhere else. Initially, we started with two villages. One was the ancestral village of the TVS family. The other was near our Hosur factory. Seeing our work, demand has increased and we have grown in concentric circles. Today, we are in about 3,000 villages.

How do you choose programmes? Are there any specific areas you have shown preference for?
We believe in holistic development. We learnt a long time ago that if you focus on only one aspect of a community's life then you tend to leave out a large number of people from the development.

If you want ownership of the project to go to the community, you have to touch every individual's life. For us the five focus areas of environment, health, education, infrastructure and economic development are interrelated. They are all equally important.

When we move into a village initially economic development and child welfare get priority, but that is to build trust. As trust grows we take up the other three development activities.

Now we have a sixth focus area — developing social leaders. It would not be possible for SST to reach out to so many villages if we had to do all the work ourselves. Today, there are 700 villages that are self-sufficient and the people are empowered. We go to such villages just once a month. The community has taken over the responsibility of development.

SST seems to have a preference for recruiting ex-government officers.
We look for passion among the people we hire. Retired government officers are recruited because they understand how the government functions. We are not at all in conflict mode. Our approach is participatory. We consciously support proper implementation of government schemes.

In SST we have a strength of 250 people of which just five live in Chennai and the remaining 245 in villages. We also impart a lot of in-house training to upgrade technical knowledge, improve and learn team building and conflict resolution skills. More than qualifications, what we look for is passion to be an effective agent of change. ▪

LAKSHMAN ANAND

Ashoke Joshi: 'We support government schemes and make their implementation more effective'