



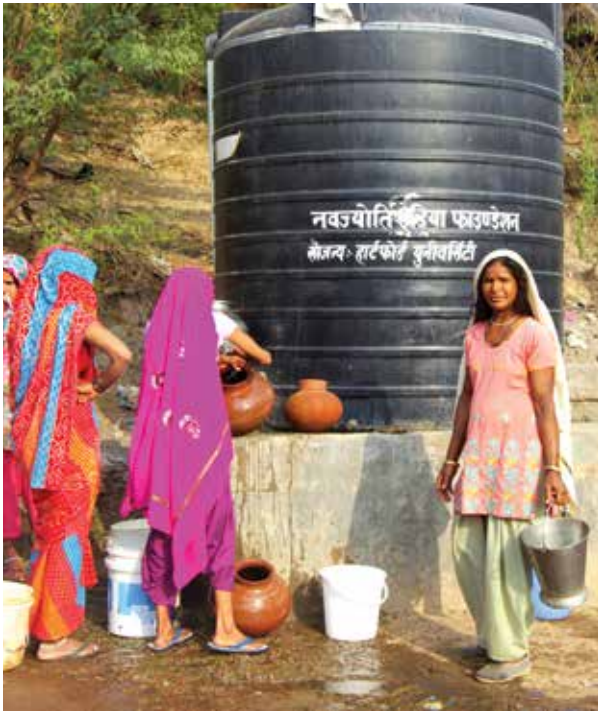
LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR A GOOD LIFE

Navjyoti India Foundation's targeted interventions are helping marginalised communities get back on the road to self-reliance and community development.

BY SANGITA THAKUR VARMA

In June, Punjab's ignominious drug racket, under national and international scrutiny for many years, finally came tumbling out in the open and a major operation clean was begun in the state with many policemen too being taken in for de-addiction programme. While it exposed the politician-policeman-businessman nexus behind the drug cartel, it also sadly pointed to the extent of the problem—at least one member from more than 66 per cent of rural households in Punjab is a drug addict. Delhi has much to be glad in that department. It had a saviour police officer who took up the cudgels to clean up the state of drug menace way back in 1986.

Dr Kiran Bedi was then the Deputy Commissioner of Police (North), Delhi Police. "She discovered that there was a nexus



- ▲ **FOUNDER:**
Kiran Bedi
- ▲ **ORGANISATION:**
Navjyoti India Foundation
- ▲ **FOUNDING YEAR:**
1988
- ▲ **WEBSITE:**
<http://www.navjyoti.org.in/>

between crime and drugs, but she did not want to put all these people behind bars,” says Chandni Taneja, Executive Director, Navjyoti India Foundation.

Dr Bedi wanted to strike at the root of the problem. Her first initiative in this direction began as a drug de-addiction programme. “It started as a counselling centre at one of the police stations and later moved on to cover seven police stations under Dr Bedi’s jurisdiction,” says Taneja. Basically a daycare counselling of drug addicts, the programme fleshed out into a full day plan providing holistic development, skilling and counselling to the addicts. “Eventually, we wanted to consolidate our efforts and we came up with a six-month residential treatment programme in one of the police stations in Sarai Rohilla,” Taneja continues.

The de-addiction programmes became the first major step towards crime prevention. The detoxification initiatives that was community supported through professional services became a haven for poor addicts who could ill afford private medical care and flocked to these centres.

The project led Dr Bedi to some startling discoveries. For instance, that drug peddling was not just a male-dominated occupation, but many women too were into it for want of

other employment opportunities. Then, there were young children being used as conduits and active drug peddlers. The social malaise was rampant. “This was the foundation for two of our projects started from the *jhuggis*. The idea for the vocational course came from a police officer when a thief ran away and the juggi was evacuated, while surprisingly, the idea for Navjyoti Pathshala was mooted by one of the woman drug peddlers,” Taneja smiles. “The people and the police officers decided to begin with women—a correction based rehabilitation centre. There was another project on children—Child Education Programme. That’s how we started—with some flagship projects. So, the entire foundation of Navjyoti India Foundation is mainly for crime prevention and social development,” Taneja sums us the history.

The initial experiments were a huge success and the public support overwhelming. The diverse programmes were institutionalised in 1988 under a registered society called Navjyoti-Delhi Police Foundation for Correction, De-addiction and Rehabilitation. Dr Bedi found support in some 15 like-minded officers for her endeavour. “At that time, the police force was looked upon by society with a different perspective,” says Taneja. The image of the police was largely

negative and the initiative was to bridge the gap between the public and the police.

The then Delhi Police Commissioner Ved Marwah supported the cause becoming the president of Navjyoti India Foundation. As the work of the society expanded the name was shortened to its current Navjyoti India Foundation in 2007. The organisation had only police officials as members initially, but later the board had a mix of serving and retired police officers. Doctors and other prominent professionals and citizens too volunteered, changing the contour of the Foundation. Bedi though remains the Founder General Secretary and continues to supervise it in an honorary capacity.

Taneja explains the shift in the Foundation’s perspective and work. “Why social development? Because we found that the entire family was disintegrated and the environment was not conducive for their rehabilitation.” Hence, Navjyoti widened its focus from drug de-addiction to include a wide-ranging social development programmes for the community that would ensure long-term rehabilitation and mainstreaming of the criminalised marginalised poor. “Currently, we are working on child education programme and skill upgradation programme for women, the latter to create employment opportunities; and it’s only because they were involved in drug trafficking.” The effort is to wean them away from drugs through positive counselling and gainful employment.

The effort started showing huge results with targeted interventions. But in 2004, the slums in Yamuna Pushta were relocated to Bawana. “When we began community cure programmes, there was no relocation plan by the government. Unfortunately, the entire base of Navjyoti was demolished,” says Taneja. But the Foundation had the steel of its founder running through its veins. It relocated to Bawana along with the community and began more focussed interventions. “We had to start from scratch. In Yamuna Pushta we were mainstreaming children to the school. But in Bawana there was no education plan and they were dumped on a barren piece of land.”

Navjyoti went to government departments in search of justice for the relocated slum dwellers and filed an RTI. “We learnt that there was a plan and schools were being con-

structured, but we didn't know what the quality of the proposed schools was." But Navjyoti never had an agenda to run a parallel administration to the government. "We wanted to add value to a programme or improve the quality of already running government initiatives," clarifies Taneja.

The Foundation then took up the cudgels to ensure that every child in Bawana goes to school and does not drop out. "We began with remedial education programme. While in Yamuna Pushta we had a school at every doorstep, here we brought schools to every bylane," says Taneja. The ambit of programmes now expanded to include health intervention. Education focus took a turn and became 'play-way' activities. Skill upgradation began in *jhuggis* with a stitching unit and was upgraded to impart professional skills like typing and computer training, etc. "In 2010, we made our programmes more structured and set up Navjyoti Vocational School as a part of skill upgradation for underserved." Skill upgradation became a value-based programme and many youths volunteered for it. The community meanwhile had become so progressive that some youths while attending the vocational programme were also involved in activities for community development.

"We have structured school programmes, for 6-14 years age group, and skill upgradation for 15 and above. For children, we have exclusive interventions under the 3S Model—Shiksha: giving children education through play activities; Sanskar: valued based education; Skills: where we think that skill upgradation shouldn't be imparted later than 15 years, that is when a child passes out, he should be very clear on what he needs to do. So, that's how the programmes have been structured under the education vertical," Taneja explains.

An ambitious project of Dr Bedi is Navjyoti Bal Gurukul for children from class 1 to 12. "We are now telling the children how they can contribute to society." It wouldn't be surprising for a visitor to the Gurukul to find a class 6 student teaching a class 3 child. "The experience is beautiful," declares Taneja passionately. And why not? It is through this visionary programme that Navjyoti has increased the reach of its education platform. "Today, we are reaching out to 2,000 children



▲ LITTLE LEADER KULSUM:

Impressed by his daughter's progress as a community teacher, her illiterate father overcame his apprehensions regarding educating her and became one of her pupils

▲ RIGHT TO SKILLS:

Skills lead to empowerment



PHOTO BY NAVJYOTI INDIA FOUNDATION

Here Child is the Father of the Community: A unique experiment under which little children of the underserved community are being encouraged to teach and serve their own people

under this banner. We have 150 children teaching 1,600 other children. This is what Navjyoti Bal Gurukul concept is all about," says a visibly proud Taneja. Under this unique concept there is no need for infrastructure. Children teach other children on the footpath, at home or other places wherever they find space. They teach whatever they

have learnt like dance, music, arts or specific subjects. They are assigned the role of vice-chancellor, head of department, etc. "We are replicating this model in other areas of Delhi like Karala and in Gurgaon," Taneja informs.

Navjyoti has now branched out into environment protection and rural areas and community development programmes like family counselling and women's empowerment. "We are working with 1,500 women in rural areas and self-help groups (SHG) towards their socio-economic empowerment." Apart from northwest Delhi, Navjyoti now also works in Sohna block of Gurgaon, a conservative patriarchal society. "They still live in *pardha* (veil). The SHGs have given them a platform to voice their opinions as each SHG has a strength of about 10-15 women. They take loan for their activities and create assets and empower themselves. They create savings and linkages with the bank. Now we are seeing a lot of change in them. They step out of the house and go to markets and even to Delhi to buy raw material for their products. They are working against child marriage, filing RTIs, working on environment as water is a major problem. Now, they have formed a federation and a separate society that is registered. They are finally self-dependent," Taneja encapsulates their progress. From a slow start in 2003 with no support from men and even the elderly village women, the Sohna women have come a long way.

Each year, Dr Bedi sets a mantra for her Foundation. For the current year it is 'expanding horizons'—going back to the community and reaching out to more people—exactly what Navjyoti is doing through its various efforts. Like the mantra she gave her executive director, a young Taneja a decade ago—"work with the people and not for the people." At Navjyoti India Foundation, every member has to go out to the fields to do *shramdaan*; the same way that a whole community's *shramdaan* helped create a check dam in water starved Sohna village.

For Taneja, who joined Dr Bedi in her mission as a volunteer fresh out of college, and her colleagues, community work is a panacea to all the challenges thrown up in their path. "Whenever we feel challenged, we go back to the community. It's a very satisfying experience. We have so much to do." Many flames of new life still need to be lit, as they say. 🕯️