



ONE TOUCH AT A TIME – NOV 2009



**HAPPY CHILDREN'S DAY (NOV 14<sup>TH</sup> - INDIA)**

Photo "Brown Eyed Children"

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MindTree Foundation Journal | Raja Shanmugam

# My Internship at SSK

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*Raja Shanmugam*

When I stepped into MindTree Foundation, Subroto laid down a specific requirement.

He suggested I should spend at least 2 days each interning/ volunteering full time at our partner NGOs – Missionaries of Charity (MOC) and Spastics Society of Karnataka (SSK). Doing what any regular volunteer does – get immersed in the ethos of the organization. Feel the pulse.

Basically, he was telling me to get off my corporate high horse and get to know the real customers I will be serving in this new role!

So we set up a two day slot with SSK in mid Sep' 09. They were adequately warned that I was as useful as any raw volunteer who would walk in to SSK. No special skills 😊

The first class was the “mixed class”. 6 kids. Their disabilities covered almost the full range – Cerebral Palsy to Attention Deficit Disorder to Autism to Learning Disabilities. A class so sensitive where the doors were always shut-even the slightest distraction in the corridor disturbs the equilibrium...

The class started – with a prayer. Thanking the Maker for the night, the day and all that has been given to them. Seeking the Maker’s blessings and support in their actions and words for the day so they can serve their purpose. A great way to ensure that everyone focuses on the positive instead of getting weighed down by disabilities that they can do nothing about.

No instructions to me from the teacher. Just “you can help her” pointing to the girl with CP. I was a bit lost. Not sure where to start.

A helpful hand out reached out and touched me. “Uncle, can you help me with my homework?” Just like that. No hesitations. No doubts. Just a trusting and eager request. And a wide open toothy smile...

Off we went. Helping her write on her homework notebook (till the teacher sternly said “no, no, the rest of the homework needs to be done at home!”), helping her write down the dictation words.

I soon gained enough confidence to reach out and help out the child seated next to her too. But then, when I tried to erase something for with the first child’s eraser, I was quickly rapped on my knuckles for my thoughtlessness – “Uncle, you did not ask for permission before using my eraser for her!”. I profusely apologized. Lesson learnt the hard way.

Next, I was bundled to the computer room. When the lady in charge heard I was from MindTree, she started discussing specific problems to be solved with Assistive technologies and potential solutions. When my technical limitations were quickly exposed, I was relegated to opening and closing game applications for the kids. My one useful contribution in that room was some amateur carpentry in setting right a leg restraint that fell off a chair...

Next was the activity room for the severely disabled. There was this angelic child who took great pleasure in strewing the floor with bits of toys for me pick up all the while I was there. If I do so much bending and straightening during my regular daily routine, at least my waistline will reduce...

Over to the First Grade class – Teacher’s task for me – “Please come up with some homework exercises for the children to do while they are on holidays”. If you think coming up with a relevant set of problems for First Grade math homework is easy, I would recommend you to reconsider. Illusions of being a learned, wise gent dissipate quite quickly...

Next day was mostly spent with children with Autism Spectral Disorder. My first session was with a boy who was working on a predetermined sequence of actions. The entire set up in the form of a board game was hand rigged by the staff and volunteers at SSK. The boy was being encouraged to do this so he can slowly develop association between colors and objects and their respective words. As of now, he can read the words, but may not really know their meanings.

Such concentration. Such happiness when each mission was accomplished. So much anguish when one small step was corrected. He was so inconsolable that he had made a mistake that he had to be given another activity to redeem himself.

Stepped out and went to the life skills room where the children with Autism were being trained for doing practical things with their hands. One of the boys was being taught basic math by his teacher and was going great guns. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, he started rocking in his chair chanting a high pitched sound over and over again. Shook me up. Increased my respect and admiration for the teachers, parents and care givers dealing with this every day. As quickly as it started, it stopped. Back to math. Completed the exercise and went off to play with modeling clay.

Next on schedule was the inclusive school. People with disabilities studying along side with people without any apparent disabilities. Regular schools were not too keen to try this out. So SSK brings the normally able kids from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and gives them quality schooling. This also teaches the differently abled kids to confidently engage in an inclusive environment.

So here I was. Seated in front of 10 kids with an introduction from the Principal – “Uncle Raja is from MindTree. He will talk to you all. Introduce yourself to him. He will give you all advice. You can also ask him questions”. Then she was gone. Talk about tricky social situations. Awkward silence.

Then one girl warmed up. “Uncle, why have you come today? Is it because you have a lot of free time today?” I told her that it is part of my job to get to know them better.

Things got a bit smoother from there onwards. Each child gave a short synopsis of self, what they are studying, when they will be completing their classes and what they intend to do after that. Some IT jobs, at least one Front Office Executive / Receptionist, Radio Jockey, Accountant – the dreams big and hopes bright. What a welcome change from the dull overcast drizzly weather outside!

Ran into the young adults manning the bakery section. They were hawking hot puffs. Neatly packed. Mrs. K, the executive director, did not miss the opportunity to gently chide them for not wearing their plastic gloves....Bought a few to take home.

After a short stint with the Animation classes for the kids (Conducted by a nearby animation training institute), I was ready to conclude my two day internship.

So much goodwill, courage and positive energy in the face such insurmountable adversities.

Here is the prayer they start and end the day with...

*Father, we thank thee for the night  
And for the pleasant morning light  
For rest and peace  
And loving care  
And all that makes the world so fair.  
Help us to do the things we should  
To be to others kind and good  
In all we do, in all we say  
To grow more loving everyday*

# MindTree Foundation - Updates

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It has been a while since we last released this journal. And a lot of interesting stuff has happened in this period. Some updates...

## MindShare

This is the social outreach program that we run to increase the volunteerism among Minds. The key theme is to step out of the confines of the computer screen and spend time with people who are very different from us. In the process, grow into a better human being.

We now have the system in place for assigning learning credits to approved social connect activities. Thanks to Roopesh and Sylvia who engaged in some vigorous system design dialogue for this. Programs have started using this effectively in Bangalore, Chennai and Pune. ***In the two months since we launched this, there have been at least 20 events with almost 200 person days of efforts clocked till end Sep!!!***

- a) TSA Saturday trips, MindTree's flagship program-has run without a break years together. Bands of volunteers visit the Destitute home and Orphanage run by Missionaries of Charity. Spend time and share love. Come back enriched. Many thanks to Moses and team for bringing this into the new framework.
- b) D2R – The program where many senior Minds have taken responsibility to steer the growth path of underprivileged children from the school in Sumanahalli. The MindShare program recognizes the efforts of the “siblings” – Campus Minds who act as the bridges between the children and the MindTree “parents”. Almost 15 children are being supported in this program now.
- c) Yediyur School – Computers available, but teachers not confident of taking computer classes. MindTree Minds have stepped in, tutored the teachers on the basics and built the confidence of the teachers. Second round of classes to start soon.
- d) Uttarahalli – Our latest initiative. For the first time, our volunteers are being formally trained by an NGO to deliver life skills coaching to children from underprivileged localities studying in a government school. Very high commitment from the team – every Saturday between now and February 2010. Great feedback from the first week's session.
- e) Samarthanam – Minds from the Symantec team help visually challenged children to read and learn on Saturdays. They will also be digitizing some of their lessons to machine readable format.
- f) Pune: The Pune team has embraced the MindShare program wholeheartedly. Visits to Missionaries of Charity centers and Wagoli Ashram have become a regular feature. Every visit delivers great experience to both the visitors and visited.
- g) Chennai: The Chennai team has started our local relationship with SPASTN – Spastic Society of Tamil Nadu in right earnest. Hopefully we will recreate some of the Magic we have with SSK over there too!

## **Closing the Gap – 27<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Assistive Technology @ Minneapolis, Minnesota**

CTG is one of the most recognized international conferences of Assistive Technologies in USA. This is attended by product vendors, practitioners, parents, technologists, policy makers and users. The Forum is used to disseminate information, showcase new methods and products, encourage advocacy networks and do whatever possible to integrate people with disabilities into the mainstream.

MindTree was invited to present our initiatives in the AT space along with SSK in this year's conference. Considering that we were less than a year old in this domain, it was an honor to share the conference space with people who shaped this industry over 2 decades.

MindTree, along with PACER Center of Minnesota and SSK, Bangalore presented a paper on *The MN-India Assistive Technology Connection: Dreams and Possibilities*. Our charter to provide affordable and localized assistive technologies to enhance their reach and usage across all sections of people with disabilities in India struck a chord among the listeners.

Some of the comments at the end of the joint session:

- "I was moved to tears"
- "We have never looked at cost reduction so seriously. This is a learning experience"
- "Yay" –reaction from a wheelchair user with CP who was listening to a new product ideas .

The presentation and the accompanying note will be hosted in the news section of [www.mindtreefoundation.org](http://www.mindtreefoundation.org)

### **Funds Disbursement:**

**AHA! International Theater for Children Festival:** This is an international theater festival with almost every aspect of the theater production handled by children themselves. The Foundation's grant enabled a large group of underprivileged children from schools and an orphanage in the Kanakapura area to enjoy the show. The visit was coordinated by Belaku Trust.

**SPARSH Vachana:** SPARSH, the Musculo-Skeletal Unit in Narayana Health City, organized a week long program of free corrective surgeries to severely affected children from under privileged backgrounds. The Foundation's grant supported the complete expenses of one day's operations covering about 40 children.