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On the occasion of Children's Day, which falls on 14 November, we salute the NGOs, who continuously strive to better the lives of the less fortunate children by not only offering them basic amenities like food, clothing, shelter, but also enriching their lives with other art forms.

Across the globe, Children's Day is recognised on various days. Women's International Democratic Federation during its Congress, in Moscow, on November 22, 1949, declared June 1 as International Day for Protection of Children. Even the United Nations at the General Assembly in 1954 declared November 20 as Universal Children's Day. Universal Children's Day is not simply a day to celebrate children for who they are, but to bring awareness to children around the globe who have succumbed to violence in forms of abuse, exploitation and discrimination. Children are used as labourers in some countries, immersed in armed conflict, living on the streets, suffering by differences or disabilities.

In India, Children's Day is celebrated on 14 November, on the birthday of the country's first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru fondly called *Chacha Nehru*. Nehru emphasised the importance of giving love and affection to children, whom he saw as the country's bright future. He wanted to enhance the progress of the youth and established world class institutions like AIIMS and Indian Institute of Technology. On this day, most schools hold sports day or cultural performances, while the governments organise Children's Film Festivals. This year Hyderabad will be buzzing with activity as it is the venue for the International Children's Film Festival scheduled to be held from November 14-20.

We look at some of the NGOs working to bring smiles on the faces of children. In this context, we spoke to Chaya Pamula, founder, Support Organisation For Kids in Need (SOFKIN), a non-profit organisation registered in Hyderabad, India and New Jersey, USA.

Following is a tete-a-tete with Chaya Pamula:

What motivated you to set up the NGO?

Having lost my parents at an early age, I experienced the deep pain and emptiness in my heart throughout my adolescent years. The lack of a safe environment and the dearth of opportunity made me resilient as I endeavoured to live up to my vow to my mother that I would grow up as an independent and successful individual. I longed to give some kind of help or support to others who also had no parents. Over the past four decades, I have overcome numerous hurdles as I established myself as a corporate executive, an entrepreneur blessed with a beautiful family. All of this was made possible because I was presented with ample opportunities along the way to excel that was fuelled by my astute determination. The notion of being able to provide a similar forum to the less fortunate had always been at the back of my head.

As I began to investigate, I realised that children from impoverished families do not have the requisite environment that promotes a healthy lifestyle and prevents abuse and exploitation and neglect. Access to quality education was not easily affordable and opportunities were not common. It also dawned on me that the few that had the exposure and the opportunity and the attitude were able to rise and shine only when given a secure environment filled with love in abundance. After hearing to the heart rending stories and experiences from many of the less fortunate and orphan children during my visits to India, I decided to take the first step towards my ideology and launched SOFKIN.

My mission was to "Support the upbringing of under privileged children, irrespective of name or nationality, caste or creed, race or religion by providing basic amenities, education and medical aid in a secure and healthy environment." I was aware that there were many organisations already in that space but felt that there was a need for more. My quest to find a suitable model to adapt and adopt ended with a visit to Maher where a simple concept of a "a home" fascinated me. It is a concept where a small group of children are nurtured in a safe family like atmosphere and provided the basic

amenities, including education, medical facilities in a homely setting.

What work do you do?

We work around meeting the following objectives:

1. We create safe and secure homes for orphans, destitute and under privileged children and to extend support to other global and local



organisations undertaking similar activities across the world.

2. We feed, shelter and educate underprivileged kids and enable them to become self-respecting members of the society and to help create a healthy and a safe environment for the kids. The endeavour is to try and

make a little difference in the lives of a few unfortunate and underprivileged children of the world.

3. We provide financial support to children needing medical aid, including but not limited to surgeries and providing equipment deemed necessary to carry out normal functions such as providing hearing aids and speech therapy.
4. We rehabilitate destitute women and widows by providing them opportunity and employing them as house mothers to take care of the kids.
5. These children are treated no different from our own children.

How do children come here?

We had set up the first SOFKIN home as a trial with three kids and a house mother. This was primarily supported by my own funds. The kids were chosen based strictly on need basis after an evaluation process and a home study. The children demonstrated exemplary attitude and used the opportunity to excel. The success of the first couple of years in being able to maintain the venture encouraged me to expand and grow. We added 10 more kids during the second year and a second house mother to help run the home. The work done by SOFKIN and the benefits that the children were getting was spread by word of mouth and the influx kept growing and growing.

The children's overall improvement in nourishment, health, behaviour and their academic achievements are the witness to the good work which increased the credibility of the organisation and attracted more children to approach us. The children are inducted after a thorough screening process undertaken by trained social welfare professionals.

What kind of facilities do you provide?

SOFKIN provides a safe and secure home with basic amenities like food, clothing, shelter, education, and medical attention and most important of all, a loving family. I am involved in their day-to-day activities giving them support and guidance, inculcating leadership skills and ensuring there is no scarcity in resources provided to them. The children are sent to regular private English medium schools and are provided with the tools and technologies to perform better in the modern world. The children are encouraged to use computers under staff supervision.

The children are provided medical care from both preventive and a cognitive context. The Health of the kids is continuously monitored by reputed doctors of the local community and appropriate medical records are maintained. All necessary vaccinations and medications are provided. Utmost care is taken to provide nutritious, healthy and a balanced diet to the children. Sports and exercise are encouraged and the children have an opportunity to participate in various community activities.

The house mothers and the social workers promote and maintain family and moral values through constant interaction with the children. They mentor the children and also tutor the children and enable them to excel at

school both at curricular and extra-curricular activities. The entire SOFKIN team is committed to maintaining safety while promoting and encouraging moral values such as honesty and integrity and giving back to the community. We recognise and motivate the children demonstrating these values. Besides supporting the children, SOFKIN also encourages house mothers and caretakers towards higher education so that they may contribute better.

Till date how many children have benefitted?

Today, SOFKIN supports over 90 children in five such homes in Hyderabad and Pune. SOFKIN ensures that the children, teens and young adults are all comfortably placed and are completely self-sufficient throughout their stay.

From the children who have benefitted, have they paid back in any form?

The children live like a family and the older ones train, teach and mentor the younger ones. The sense of responsibility demonstrated by the children is exemplary. The older kids help in the daily chores (cooking, cleaning, teaching etc.). It is their way of contribution to keep the engine running. SOFKIN teaches children the importance of giving back to the community.



In your opinion what is it that the society can do to help the less fortunate ones?

The society should realise the social in-equality and social injustice and work towards eliminating those. It is the responsibility of each and every one of us who are privileged to help uplift the under privileged in some form or the other and bridge the gap between the haves and the have nots. Organisations such as SOFKIN should work together to strengthen their services and extend the reach. Value based education allows the children to appreciate the need to give back and stand as leaders in the community. Therein lies world peace and eliminates the need to have these types of organisations in future.

How can they be integrated into the society?

The society should accept these children and provide equal opportunities to them. The society should foster compassion and love towards these children and make them feel welcome without adherence to race, religion, and nationality. Proper education and career growth eliminates the discrimination and encourages equality among the communities.