



SUDHA MURTY
Chairperson, Infosys Foundation

ONE-ON-ONE

CSR funding came as a boon to us

The philanthropist on the journey of the Infosys Foundation and measuring the impact of CSR

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MUMBAI

Sudha Murty, 65, who runs the Infosys Foundation, the non-profit arm of the IT services company, saw a huge inflow of money for corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities last year. In its 19 years of existence, the foundation has spent ₹450 crore and more than half of that came in 2014-15. The increase in the CSR kitty helped Murty and the foundation to expand and cover educational institutions in the North-East and Jammu. Travelling 20 days in a month, Murty believes in measuring happiness of all her beneficiaries to see if true impact has been achieved. Edited excerpts from an interview:

How has the journey been for Infosys Foundation?

It has been a great journey for me, personally. I took up this job as a 45 year old. I am an engineer and not a trained social worker. When my daughter asked me the question, "Amma what is your duty?" it made me think about what I had to do. Until then for me, India was a country with many states, with a certain GDP, but once I began working with the poorest of the poor, my thinking changed. India has many people below the poverty line who are as bright as we are. But they lack the opportunities we have. Their helplessness made me realize what the country really requires.

Though Infosys is our only donor, we face no pressure from Infosys whatsoever. They don't dictate what causes we should support. It is entirely up to us.

We have spent whatever money we got so far. Mr. Murthy [N.R. Narayana Murthy] in fact calls me a spendthrift wife. He says, "Whatever money we give, you still say I have no money." When we started the foundation in 1996, we had ₹9 lakh to spend. In the 19 years of our existence, we've totally spent about ₹450 crore. Interestingly, in the last year alone we spent ₹243 crore, surpassing what we spent all through the 18 years, thanks to the CSR law.

When you set out, what was the vision, what did you want to achieve?

We didn't set out with the thought that we want to make a difference. We want to help people make their own changes. It is they who want to make a difference to their lives.

Seventeen years ago my father, a doctor, asked me a simple question, "What is your first priority in Infosys Foundation?" I laugh when I think of my answer. I said I want to change the life of sex workers and eradicate their plight. He said I won't be able to eradicate, but I can help in reducing their misery.

Have you reached where you wanted to reach?

I think that depends on the projects we undertook. I wanted to change at least a 100 active sex workers in my lifetime. To my surprise, we have changed 3,000.

I was thinking the foundation should establish 10,000 libraries in Karnataka alone, we have done 60,000.

So we have exceeded on some initiatives and some we did not. We don't keep a goal like sales. I will try to help them and then see the results. Not the other way

around.

You are one of the companies that worked in the North-East last year.

All these years I wanted to work in the North-East as they don't have that many industries and resources. But we didn't have the money then to go there. When we got the 2% CSR funding, it came as a boon to us. The first thing I wanted to do then was go to the North-East.

When we were searching for worthy projects there, Ramakrishna Mission said that its school in Aalo, in Arunachal Pradesh, is the best place to work. It was the best because it was in a very bad state.

In 1963, Indira Gandhi went there and she asked Ramakrishna Mission to start a school there, and asked the government then to give 50 acres of land. After that no one has gone there. We helped the school with computers, smart classrooms and mid-day meals. We also sent a set of surgeons from Bengaluru for eye operations as cataract operations cannot be done in Arunachal and people have to go to Guwahati for it. We have spent about ₹15-18 crore in the North-East so far. We will spend similar amounts this year also.

So how would you describe your geographical reach?

Initially, when there was a shortage of money, we set up wherever Infosys was present—in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and a bit of Kerala and Punjab. Now, we have the freedom to go anywhere. Jammu was a dream. And since Ramakrishna Mission has a hospital there, we bought a mobile van so that they can go near the border and treat the poor.

CSR has been a boon you said, but how difficult was it to ramp up?

The first thing I said when the law was announced was, I wish this happened 18 years ago. I could have got so much done. It was not difficult to ramp up as we execute projects directly or through NGOs. Even if we work through NGOs, we have built a database through these 18 years and we have put in place a rating system to measure them.

How do you measure impact?

When a mother feels cold, she asks the child to wear a sweater. Our concept of poverty is that way. When we do a project and people receive our help, we may think that they are getting benefited, but is this what they really wanted? To know if they are really happy with what we've done for them, this year onwards we've begun measuring the happiness index of receivers when we do our impact assessment.

Last year, a lot of institutions like the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and Institute of Mathematical Sciences got a lot of funding from the foundation, why did you choose them?

My brother is a scientist and is head of the department at Caltech (the California Institute of Technology). When I asked him, in India which area is highly neglected, he told me "If you want the country to grow, science and innovation should grow. Work for the poorest of the poor, but keep some money for the intelligent people also."

Interest in math is taking a dip now, as people think it is hard, and there are not that many great teachers. Moreover, people prefer to take a four-year BE degree and make money. So, over a period of time, we lose

good mathematicians. And losing intellectuals is not good for the country.

So we created a corpus for Institute of Mathematical Sciences so they can give scholarships to bright students and also increase salaries of professors.

We gave some money to AIIMS [All India Institute of Medical Sciences] so that young doctors can go abroad to present their papers. Similarly at IISc, we created a chair of ₹22 crore so that they can get Nobel laureates to teach here for a year.

Have your personal philosophies reflected in the way you do CSR?

My personal philanthropy is by and large the same as the foundation. Every philanthropist has a soft corner for one issue. For me it is health, because my father was a doctor. For Murthy, it is education as his father was a school teacher.

This is a complex work. When there is money, there is also greed. Everyone wants to talk to you when there is money. Only if you have the passion for it, you must become a philanthropist, else it'll become a headache. Wherever you go, people come with applications. We spend 60% of our time checking which cases are genuine. It is necessary to do the same due diligence when you give personally too.

Giving is a science and art. It is the art of understanding difficulties and it is the science of deciding how much to give.

Who is your inspiration?

I always looked up to the Tatas. Their work has influenced me. The areas they have worked in are immense. We have collaborated with them in the past and look at them with awe. It is said that Jamsetji Tata divided his wealth between his sons Ratanji and Dorabji, and IISc. He considered it as a third child. That shows the real love for the country. It is my aspiration for Infosys Foundation to be like the Tatas.

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AMRUDDHA CHOWDHURY/MINT

Taking inspiration: Murty says it is her aspiration for Infosys Foundation to be like the Tatas.