

# **The Good Samaritan—Sitting Down With Seemantini Khot**

With the vision of a better world for every human, Mrs Seemantini Khot built her career in social service. She decided to guide and uplift communities with the best of her skills at a very young age and carried forward the same determination through thick and thin. The MIT Post had a chance to talk to her about her accomplishments and contributions to society. Read on to know more.

**You studied Rural and Urban Community development at TISS. This is seen as a fairly unconventional career path. How did you develop an interest in this, and how did your friends and family feel about your decision to pursue this?**

During our times, it was even more unconventional for a student who scores well to take up social service as their career. My parents were educated but I realized that there were many who weren't as privileged as I was. My father insisted that I put the knowledge that I had attained at school to some use, this groomed for the path that I chose in my life. I left home when I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade to live with a nomadic tribe and I started teaching the children in the tribe. I started making birth certificates for them, conducted health checkups, and tried to get some basic medication for them.

At my college, TISS, I learned a lot from my seniors and the years of experience in social service that they had. My contributions towards providing relief to the victims of the Guntur floods taught me a lot and equipped me to be able to point out the problems in the way that society functions. The area that I came from had a lot of instances of inequalities and certain classes lacked the opportunity to improve themselves. I really wanted to bring about some drastic

changes to improve the way our society functions. My own inclination, my colleagues' experiences, and the encouragement from my family were the driving forces behind my decision to pursue my vision to contribute to the betterment of those in need.

**Of all your different social initiatives, are there any you would say have even the most successful or fulfilling? Or any that were substantially more challenging?**

I formed a student-union to help women who were grass-cutters. They didn't even know how to weigh the grass that they would sell and people would bargain with them which led to a lot of losses that these women would incur. I bought a weighing scale and since they didn't know to manage their money, I handled their finances as well. All the profits made were rationed out throughout the week to ensure that they all had enough to eat and I set up a few savings accounts for them.

During the emergency, their actions were labelled as anti-government and were asked to relocate but they refused to do so because they felt settled down with their children going to school and their newfound financial stability.

I was put behind the bars at the age of 17 because I was the reason behind their defiance. I applied and studied for my board exams while I was confined in jail. Despite this, the fact that I had changed the lives of the members of a community that was once neglected made my stay in jail relatively easy.

**A common perception is to see large companies as adversaries to the environment since they put profits first. In your opinion, how responsible would you say most corporations are when it comes to keeping the larger good of society in mind?**

The corporate world hasn't been able to relate to the primary sector and it continues to live off of the surplus labour from

the primary sector. In fact, there are many negative impacts of industrialization on agriculture, such as effluents being led to rivers, pollution, land acquisition, and labour pricing.

The fertilizer and pesticide industries have direct inputs into agriculture but they look at it as a market, and at farmers as consumers of their goods instead of food producers. Their entire focus is into manufacturing chemicals that farmers would buy and the idea of what is safe to use is not in the radar yet, which is a matter of concern. Subsistence farmers by default have a low external input because they can't afford it so their produce is generally chemical free. Once the farmers become capable of affording chemicals they will definitely buy urea to increase their produce.

Government subsidies on hazardous chemicals is another issue because it makes chemicals cheaper and easily available. It'll also deter farmers from organic farming because making a slurry out of cow dung costs more and it is an extremely tedious task when compared to buying a cheap bag of urea and dumping it in the fields.

**Do you think that food production will take a hit due to the growing focus on blue-collar jobs and migration to cities?**

On the whole in India, we might not fall short on food cultivation. When people take up blue-collared jobs they move away from villages and farms which leads to the land being less fragmented, which is actually an advantage. Farmers have better access to good quality agricultural equipment and seeds. Government programs make basic equipment like sickles, sprayers, and cutters fairly affordable for the farmers and this promotes food production.

Although food production may not take a hit, food quality probably will, due to the addition of growth promoters. This isn't that big of a problem in India, because subsistence

farmers eat what they sow and sell the food only if they have a surplus, so they try to limit the use of chemicals. I think that the country's produce is relatively safer in terms of chemical and mechanical farming.

**You've travelled around the world, leading a lot of social initiatives. While you mostly travelled for work, is there any location you enjoyed more than the others? What set it apart?**

I started travelling when I was 22, and I've been to about 67 countries till now. Rwanda has become my favourite country, it has transformed its society in the past ten years especially after the genocide ended. If a country wants to, it can really reform itself no matter how poor it may be. Rwanda ranks fifth in the world on the gender index, which is a huge achievement. They've proved that even if resources aren't in your hands, human well-being is. Another country that I have worked at, is Lao which ranks high on biodiversity. They have around 7000 varieties of just rice. They eat a lot of insects and reptiles, but I found it really hard to get myself to try eating cockroaches.

I got to work in countries like Mozambique and Burkina Faso., which fall under the category of Least Developed Countries. I specialized myself in this aspect through my experience of working with people who were much under the poverty line. My aim was to motivate them to build solutions by consulting them and helping them to lead that process of finding solutions.

**You lead quite the busy life and you're constantly occupied with work. It sounds quite stressful, what do you do to unwind?**

I like calling my friends and talking to them. I enjoy music and dancing as well. I was classically trained for some time and now I take a class for therapeutic dancing. I love cooking too—I have quite a few favourites but I enjoy making traditional dishes, like *Puran Poli*, the most. All these

recipes take a lot of time, but preparing them is almost like a spiritual experience for me.