

Interview with Mr. Mathew Cherian

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Mr. Mathew Cherian, a well renowned name in the NGO sector, is the Chief Executive of **HelpAge**, India. He also serves on the international boards of HelpAge International and Guide Star International. He has founded Charities Aid Foundation in India, Credibility Alliance, a network for accountability and Resource Alliance and also founded the Human Rights Network. He also served as a Member of the NGO Task force of the Planning Commission, Member of Grants Approval Committee of the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment and Member of Core Committee of National Human Rights Commission.

The following are excerpts of a talk with Mr. Mathew during his visit to IIM, Bangalore for the launch of his book, "**A Million Missions**" that talks about the journey of the NGOs in India.

- **Mr. Cherian, please tell us about your journey from engineering to working for the society.**

I had always been a city guy, born and brought up in Chennai. Being part of a well-provided family, I never had an insight into the hardships faced by those that weren't as fortunate.

In 1980, I passed out of the beautiful campus of BITS Pilani, after which I worked with Schlumberger at various locations – Norway, the Middle East and also at Mumbai. Working at Schlumberger was enriching, both technically and financially.

Working there also got me significant free time, during which I thought of extending small help to the underprivileged people around me. Little did I know the stark differences between their and my life. I had never thought there were people who struggled that hard even for the basic life needs. It was in this time, that I came in contact with Mr. Sanjay Ghosh, who was still pursuing his studies, and had similar thoughts about these issues. We decided to commit to this cause full time. This was a tough decision, switching from the certainty of a job to the uncertainty of social work. The decision was made easy though by the unconditional support from my family.

We also came in contact with Baba Amte, who was then working for the leprosy affected in Chandrapur, Maharashtra. He was very supportive of our cause, and acted as a guide and mentor thereon.

- **There so many NGOs dedicated to a particular cause in India. How can they be brought together? Can they be made more efficient?**

Though the underlying objectives of the NGOs are largely same, each NGO differ in their processes, ideologies, their intended subjects and in the way they acquire funds and resources. This leads to significant differences in the ways each NGO operates, each targeting a specific, generally disjoint, strata. Each NGO tries to be the king in its own area. This differences make it very difficult to get them to work in sync.

We had taken a step in bringing them together in the past. A “Credibility Alliance” was formed, of which I was the Chairman, to make a national database of the various NGOs working for a particular cause. This would help them collaborate and better align their objectives and working ideals. Also, a formal body as this, would ensure greater accountability and responsibility to the various NGOs.

This could never really pick up. Most NGOs had their own terms for joining this alliance and some denied. So, we let them maintain status quo. Hopefully, we shall have such an ecosystem in the future, which would get us better and more directed results.

- **We hear so much about misuse of funds by NGOs. Doesn't that reduce their collective credibility?**

It is actually saddening to listen to such instances where NGOs act as medium for money laundering or conversion of black money to white. But such instances are actually very rare, and are probable outliers in the whole system. These instances must not be used as indicative of a system failure.

- **What would be your advice to MBA students like us, who would like to get into social service?**

People talk of how and when to enter this field, but I personally feel there is no fixed formula for this. You must join this field only when there is *a true inner calling*. That may be now, after 5 years or even at 50. Just to quote an instance, John Rockefeller, gave up most of his wealth to philanthropy at a sudden calling when he was ill.

Many people join in early and dedicate themselves fully, while others only contribute financially, all of which is good. It is all about having the right intentions, the right drive at the right time. Every little that is done matters.

- **Given the large number of NGOs that serve a particular cause, how do I choose a particular NGO to associate myself with?**

I personally believe that the best way to judge the performance of an NGO is to actually visit the areas that the NGO serves and look at the ground realities there – get a feedback from people, talk to the volunteers or also temporarily get associated with it.

Further websites such as CSRIidentity.com, VoiceofBharat.org, IndiaVolunteerPortal.org and IndiaDonationPortal.org provide a wealth of information on the various NGOs operating for the different causes, their effectiveness and credibility measures.

But do remember that personal belief in such an activity is the primary requirement.
