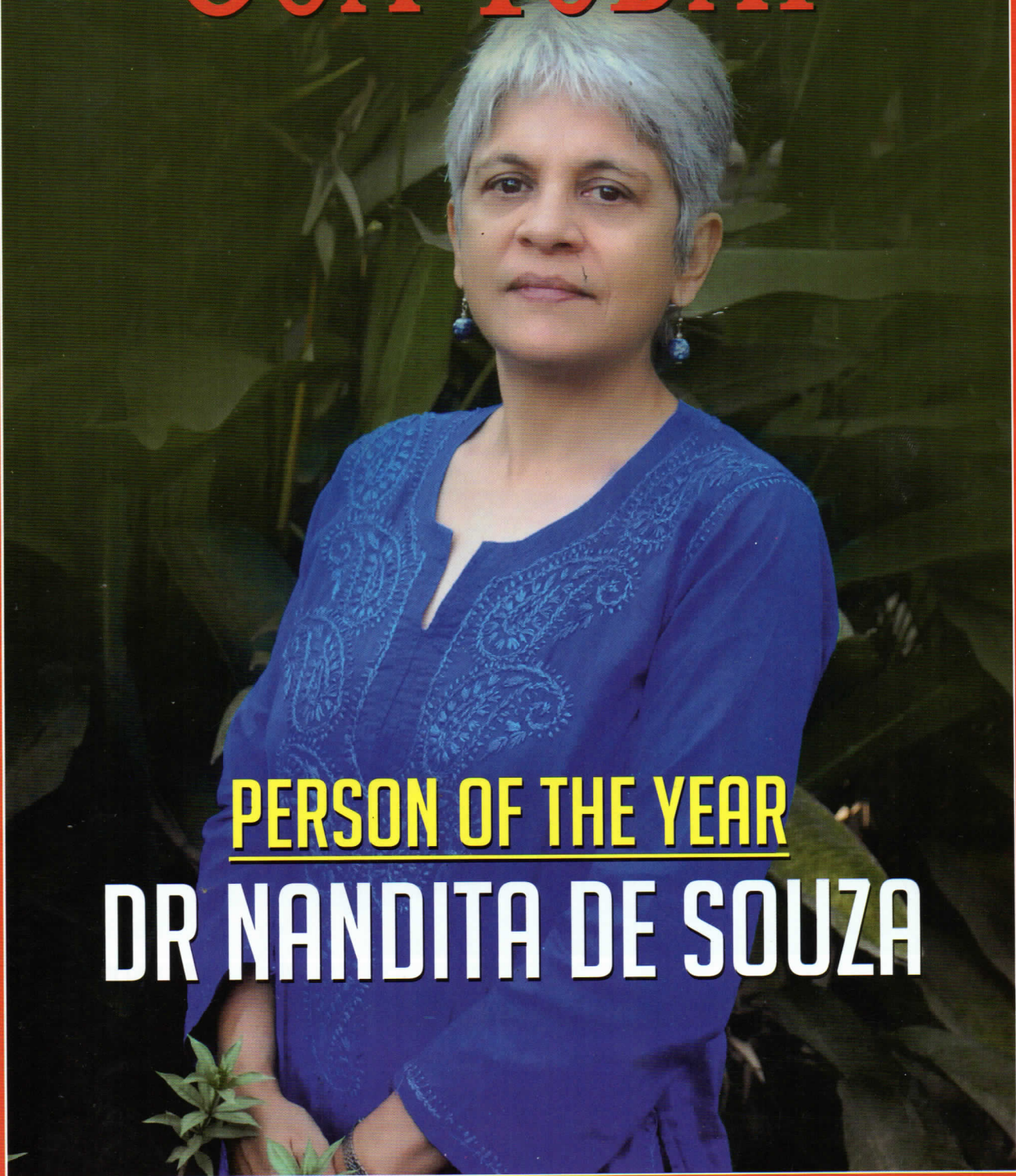


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GOA TODAY



PERSON OF THE YEAR

DR NANDITA DE SOUZA

Editor-in-Chief VINAYAK NAIK interviews *Goa Today's* 'Person of the Year' Dr Nandita de Souza

Paradigm of Paediatrics



Extraordinary paediatrician Dr Nandita de Souza is our 'Person of the Year' on this occasion. Her nomination for our annual title didn't come about, as one would normally expect, after a long round of deliberation. Rather, it happened quite fast, with yours truly propositioning her candidature for the honour, and the ratification for it from *Goa Today's* Think Tank, rolling up in an instant.

By virtue of her choice as our title conferee, Dr Nandita has now joined the coruscant cluster of 33 other Great Goans who have already come in for identical decoration from *Goa Today*, previously.

Incidentally, Dr Nandita has become only the fifth, rather the fourth woman to bag *Goa Today's* award, the other

three to have done so being the late super crooner Kesarbai Kerkar, outstanding litterateur Maria Aurora Couto and an equally outstanding community worker, the late Mangala Wagle. I have not counted chess wizard Ivana Furtado (our Person of the Year in 2007) in this womanly lot, since she was merely a nine-year old girl when she became the recipient of our 'Person of the Year' title.

For me, interviewing Dr Nandita de Souza anew for this special coverage, after a 17-year-long intermission, was truly a delightful experience.

While the previous interview I did with her was principally centred on her paediatric work, this one was substantially different, as it aimed at encompassing every façade of her imposing personality.

A cracking paediatrician, Dr Nandita has been at it bringing cheer into the lives of the varyingly challenged children for over three decades now. She heads



Dr Nandita being feted by the then Goa Chief Minister Digambar Kamat

the institution called Sethu where a continually growing number of kids with diverse cerebral disorders have been getting the requisite guidance and attention to build up their aptitudes to the fullest.

An organisation which had begun operations in 2005 with just about 200 'referrals' in that initial year, Sethu has successfully ministered to over 8000 differently abled kids over the last 13 years. And going by the trend, the number of such kids seeking succour from Sethu is set to rise markedly in the near future.

Before heading Sethu, Dr Nandita had headed another

body of a similar kind – Sangath – which too was endeavouring for almost the same cause as Sethu does.

Dr Nandita's contention is that special children who approach Sethu should be handled with kid gloves. She believes they need to be given a lot of affection to, and taken good care of, in order to exploit their wide-ranging



Dr Nandita, visibly at her happiest, in the company of special children

talents.

Early intervention, Dr Nandita feels, is the key to putting the concealed aptitudes of such children to optimal

use. Especially in dealing with the prematurely born, cerebrally palsied and autistic kids, the early intervention measure does a world of good to the child, Dr Nandita asserts.

At first, Dr Nandita had yearned to become a surgeon. However, she was organically compelled to stifle that desire. Her foray into Paediatrics was for her an inadvertent 'diversion'. Interestingly, the same 'diversion', over the years, has virtually developed into her monomaniacal passion.

A GMC product, Dr Nandita practised General Paediatrics at the GMC for seven years before throwing herself fully into Developmental and Behavioural Paediatrics.

Dr Nandita is married to Mr Luis – owner of a famous restaurant in Panjim – and the twosome have an 18-year old son, who goes by the name, Dhruv.

Based in Porvorim, Dr Nandita, the youngest daughter of Brigadier Inocencio and Mrs Sophia Monteiro, was, in fact, born in Jammu where her father was doing duty for the Indian Army. Her schooling, in fact, had a 'migratory' element in it, since she

was compelled to change her school no less than three times – thanks to her father's recurrent transfers – before completing it.

Right now, Dr Nandita is afire with the desire to see Sethu have its own edifice. And she, along with her likeminded colleagues, is doing her utmost to achieve that objective. With the requisite land

for the purpose

already procured, the construction of the projected building is all that awaits being taken up. And Dr Nandita is hopeful of seeing that happen before



Dr Nandita with her son and hubby

Today office where she had a marathon dialoguing session with Editor-in-Chief VINAYAK NAIK.

Excerpts:

Dr Nandita, it gives me tremendous pleasure in doing this extraordinary interview with you. I have called it extraordinary because it's not the routine type of interview I do month after month, but it's something special, since it is being done to honour the conferee of our annual title. And the person, this time, happens to be you – I mean, *Goa Today's* 'Person of the Year' 2018. To start with, I would be very happy to get your reaction to this accolade coming to you from *Goa Today!*

Of course, I am happy. But since I am a part of the team I am working with, I would not like to treat it as an honour, individually, just for me, but I would consider it as an award for the whole lot of my teammates as well who are

long.

On the 7th, last month, *Goa Today's*

'Person of the Year', Dr Nandita de Souza, obligingly showed up at the *Goa*



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& President of Goa Football Association



Valanka Alemao

CEO of Churchill Brothers
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A Happy New Year 2019

COVER STORY

working with me.

Incidentally, I must tell you that you have become the 34th conferee of *Goa Today's* annual title, which was instituted way back in 1986 – with the honour of becoming its first recipient going to the famed litterateur, Pundalik Naik.

I see. Nice to hear that. *Goa Today*, I know, is a popular magazine. I am aware of its wide reach. It goes across the world. Lots of Goans wait for it.

I am sure you'll recall having been interviewed by me well over a decade and a half ago. That interview was solely your profession-centric, since my focus was to get you to talk chiefly about the wonderful work you were doing at the time with the institution called Sangath. But this being a comprehensive, or rather, an all-encompassing interview, I propose to get you to talk not solely about your vocation, but about all the other aspects of your life as well. But let me, as they say, begin at the beginning by centring on your birth. Tell me, where did it happen?

I was born in Jammu. The month was September. My dad was



working with the Indian Army and he would get posted in different parts of India. I was born during his posting in Jammu. I was told, when I was born, Jammu was going through a spell of freezing cold. I lived the first three years of my life in Jammu.

Could you fill me in about your family, especially with regard to your siblings?

We are four siblings. One brother and three sisters. I am the youngest. In fact, the age difference between me and my eldest sister is 14 years. She kind of became my surrogate mother after I was born, as my mother could not get more than just a month's leave following my birth. My mum was teaching Maths and French to higher classes over there. She was 40 at the time of my birth.

When were you able to catch sight of your much adored Goa for the first time?

When I was three, our family came to Goa. The year was 1964. My father was posted here for a short time.

Actually, I would be glad to hear you recount some of your childhood memories!

Well, I had an extremely privileged childhood. I was everybody's baby. Being the youngest, I was pampered from the start. Personally, our family has been a powerful force behind me right from the start till now.

What about your schooling? Could you tersely put me in the picture about it?

When I was three-four years old, I started going to school. My first school was Cristo Rei at the Caritas building in Panjim. That was the primary section of Caranzalem's Rosary High School. My mum, in fact, was also teaching at the time, but she taught for the higher



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classes.

You must be having some interesting reminiscences of your schooling at Cristo Rei.

Of course, I do have them. Actually, I was quite a firebrand in my childhood. I would just refuse to go to school. Such was my reluctance to go to school that my brother would catch hold of my legs, and the driver of the school bus would catch hold of my arms, and they would both hoist me into the bus which would take me to Cristo Rei School. I can't forget that.

Any other recollection?

Well yes. I had a teacher at Cristo Rei called Rosy Mendonsa. I would tell her that I would come to the class only if she would let me sit on her lap.



Apparently, even as a kid you wanted to get your own way. Tell me,

would your teacher give in to your insistence?

Yes, she would. If they wanted me to go to school, then that was my condition.

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A while ago, you said that Cristo Rei was your first school. How many more schools did you go to during the course of your schooling?

I attended four schools in all. My father was getting transferred time and again. And the family would also go with him. Of course NEFA – which is called Arunachal Pradesh today – was the one place he could not take us with him. That was because NEFA was a non-family station. So, we had to stay on in Goa when he was transferred there. Of course, we did go to NEFA twice, but that was during our summer holidays. We spent two wonderful summers there. Arunachal Pradesh is close to the China border. It was very exciting being there. In 1971, my dad was posted to Delhi. And we all shifted to Delhi along with him. A change of school for me once again!

Which school did you get enrolled in while in Delhi?

From the fifth standard to the seventh standard I went to St Loretto Convent in Delhi. It was a huge school compared to the small one, Cristo Rei, I had attended before. My mum was also teaching in that school. My mum, in fact taught in three of the four schools I attended before completing my SSC. The interesting thing about my schooling in Delhi was the opportunity I got for getting into drama. I enjoyed the stage even though I would stammer those days. In fact, even when we returned to Goa after my dad retired, I would stammer.

Interesting! Now, there is not even a hint of a stutter in your voice. Incidentally, talking about



Dr Nandita, along with the Sethu kids, flashing the 'V' sign

stammerers, I have had a couple of associates who would stammer a lot while talking, and yet they were found to be too good at singing.

That's true. People who stammer can sing well.

What was it that made you opt for a change of school yet again despite doing so wonderfully at Delhi's St Loretto Convent?

It was not the question of opting for a change. I was compelled to change it. My dad was transferred again. He was transferred to Lucknow from Delhi. And we all shifted to Lucknow with him. We were there in Lucknow for a year and a half.

What was the name of your school in Lucknow?

It was St Loretto (Lucknow). In Delhi and Lucknow, I got the opportunity

to learn Hindi and Sanskrit. In fact, I studied Sanskrit for three years. I was pushed into that environment. That helped me learn these two languages. Before going to Delhi and Lucknow, I was very weak in Hindi. Later, when I came back to Goa and resumed going to school, Hindi, which was my weakness at one time, had actually become my strength.

Really very intriguing! Your expertise in Hindi must have been the 'object' of envy in your class!

I don't know about that. But, at St Mary's high school in Mapusa where I did my IXth and Xth on our return to Goa, I would not be allowed to sit and answer the Hindi exam with the other students. I was made to sit separately.

That arrangement was made to prevent those students from copying. In the eleventh and the twelfth, my second language was not French but Hindi.

What about your college education? Which college did you join?

I was a student of Dhempe College. I did my 12th standard there before going to the GMC to study Medicine. Ours was the first 10th standard SSC batch.

The eleventh standard would mean SSC prior to that, isn't it?

Absolutely. Ours was the first 10 plus 2 batch.

Later, you opted for Medicine. Tell me a bit about that 'medicinal' journey of yours.

Those days, the two options that one

Pix: Govind S. Poteker

would mostly consider after doing Inter Science or the XIIth standard in the science stream, were either Engineering or Medicine. And I took up Medicine. My wish was to become a surgeon.

Actually, both my grandfathers – my maternal grandfather as well as my paternal grandfather – were allopathic doctors. Of course, my paternal grandfather who had started allopathic practice, later gave it up and got into nature cure.

My immediate family as such did not have any doctors. My mother, as I told you, was a high school teacher and my dad was in the Army.

What made you cast your lot with Paediatrics?

That's an interesting story. It just happened. Actually, as I told you earlier, I wanted to become a surgeon, but when I did my internship, I realised that I was not made for surgery. My hands would tremble. With trembling hands one can't do surgery. So, I had to think of something else. That is when Paediatrics came into the picture.

You mean to say, you were a rather tentative entrant in Paediatrics!

Well, you may say that. But once I took



it up, I started enjoying Paediatrics. We had a very good professor at the GMC. His name was Majumdar. I got along with him very well. I would sort of hero-worship him. Maybe I even had a crush on him. His presence was an important reason for my taking up Paediatrics. We had some other good professors too. Sunita Gaunekar, for instance. She

too was very good. I really enjoyed my paediatric study, although, I had taken it up because I had discovered that surgery won't suit me.

Your entry into Paediatrics, in my assessment, was virtually by default.

You could say that.

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Going by your high-scale achievement in that field, I am pretty certain that you couldn't have ever regretted your decision to embrace Paediatrics?

Regrets? What for? I think I was very blessed to find my niche with Paediatrics. It just happened very serendipitously. I really enjoyed my posting in Paediatrics, although I must admit that I was not very fond of children as such before getting into Paediatrics.

I started as a junior resident. Dr Silveira was the best teacher you could find. He was the Head of the Department of Paediatrics. After I finished, I worked in the Department itself as a senior resident. In 1985, I got married.

Would you get paid while you did your internship?

Of course, I would. They would pay me. Rs 400 per month during my internship. It was a princely sum those days. Later, as a junior resident, I was paid Rs 995. Not a bad payment at all at that time.

How was it like working at the GMC? You worked there for several years, if I can recall correctly.

That's true. I worked there for seven years. It was a great experience. In GMC, I worked as a Pool officer. Over there, I was exposed to different environments, and in the process I learnt a lot. I was the only Pool Officer to have applied for the CSIR post. That allowed one to stay for a year in the institute of one's choice. After I applied and got that post, my head office was NIO, but I was posted at the GMC.

I had a wonderful exposure to Child Psychiatry. We had a fabulous library. That's when I decided to get into Developmental Paediatrics. I also worked at the Directorate of Health services. There were just the two of us there – a junior paediatrician and a senior one. There, I had a very good exposure to the administrative work. It was a very good learning experience. I enjoyed working there. But one thing that I always had in mind once I got into Paediatrics was to do full time Paediatrics. And that was not possible

there.

So, I quit and started doing private practice of Developmental Paediatrics. When I look back, I think if there had been a lecturer's post available at the GMC, I would still have been at the GMC.

Why did you choose to go it alone for a while, professionally?

I had this bug in my head to get into full time Paediatrics. For three years, I did private practice. Meanwhile, in 1993 my son was born. He was my guinea pig and also my professor. You may treat the world, but when you treat your own child, it is a different ball game. Working all alone was not my lifetime goal. I always wanted to work in a team. I had decided to stop private practice after some time. And I did stop it. And I am into developmental paediatrics along with my teammates from that time.

You were heading the organisation called Sangath when I interviewed you in the early part of the New Millennium. Could you succinctly sum up that stint?

I worked as Sangath's director for eight years. I was the front, or the face of Sangath, you can say. I realised that I had to move out of there to make children the focal point of my work.

I can see that focus squarely on the children at Sethu. You are doing a fabulous job for the cerebrally troubled children for so many years now. Tell me about the genesis of Sethu. How did it come into being in the first place?

My first task was to find fellow managers who shared my vision. What I was trying to do after I left Sangath was to again build a team for the cause I have been working for. The main reason was to work in the best interest of children. I was on the lookout for fellow villagers who shared my vision. I was interested in forming a Trust. And with several people sharing the objective joining us, the formation of the trust became possible. Six of us started it – three

trustees and three others, working. We were able to form a good team. And we were able to enter the field of children and family guidance.

Sethu was launched on the 1st of June in 2005. The premises were made available to us by my brother. He had an unoccupied flat at Miramar. He said we could use it to start our intended project. And that's how we began. We used that flat for two years to carry out Sethu's activities. We started with 215 children. Today, that number has gone up to 8000.

Which means, Sethu is on the up and up!

Every year we have about six to seven hundred new children. Sethu has now completed 13 years. It is now a teenager.

What is the strength of the Sethu staff?

We are 24 in all. Fourteen of us are full-time staffers, and 8 are part-timers. The remaining two are volunteers.

I can see how passionate you are about the task you have undertaken. You are seemingly putting your heart and soul into the evolution of Sethu. Enthusiasm is writ large on your face. You don't seem to be ever getting bored in dealing with children. In my reckoning, your determination to confront the hurdles head-on is just what has made the success of Sethu possible!

That's the only way you can do it. We work with a mission. We don't let ourselves lose sight of our objective. As for your mention of boredom – no way! In fact I would love to see that boring day. It has not yet happened. Perhaps, it never will.

The name of the institution you have floated is indeed very interesting. Could you delve on the etymology of Sethu?

Sethu means a bridge. We wanted to build bridges with everyone who

was willing to work for children, who cared for children – people from any field, in fact. That's why we named it, Sethu. Everyone can be a part of our bridge.

For us, every child is a seed to grow a better world. Children have always been our focus and not just a sideshow. We work in the field with such special children from birth till they reach the age of 19. Of course, even after that age they don't become strangers to us. They are always our children. They still come to us for guidance even after having turned 19.

How do the Sethu staffers deal with them?

What we put in their minds in the first five years is critical to adulthood. The child's potential can be achieved that way. We want to identify if there is any struggle. Early intervention can benefit the children. We assess their strengths. Every child is doing something right, we find. We show interest in their talent. When we do that the whole mood lifts.

By the way, is your husband also connected with Sethu?

He is not connected like we are. But he supports our cause. He runs a hotel in Panjim. We are married for the last 33 years now. Before that, there was an eight-year period of courting. That makes it 41 years. Wow! 41 years of togetherness!

In thought and deed, are you both on the same wavelength?

In thinking, of course, we are on completely different wavelengths. We are both headstrong and opinionated. His take is generally different from mine. I get carried away and show excitement and enthusiasm about something that I have liked and which I want to do, but he looks at the same thing with a different perspective. And he is generally right.

What about your hobbies?

I like gardening. But I am not a gardener in the conventional sense. I am more of a flash-in-the-pan gardener.

Going by the chaste English you speak, I can easily infer that you are a voracious reader.

I was a voracious reader. I used to read a lot of fiction, but I don't get the time now for reading as I used to. Now my reading is related more and more to my work.

How do you relax when you are at home?

I always watch a serial on TV from 8 to 9 in the evening. That's my daily fix. That helps me relax.

Are you very rigid about your time to hit the sack – I mean, to go to bed?

Not really. I need at least six hours sleep. I adjust accordingly. My best work happens late at night. At times when I am tired I start dozing after 9. If I get past the 9 to 11 period, I can work for several hours more at night.

Have you written any books so far?

Not yet.

Do you intend to write any?

I would like to write, but I am not sure whether it will turn out to be a book or just a brochure. That's in keeping with my nature. I like to be brief when I write. Jokes aside, yes I love writing. In fact, I encourage everyone with us to write. I get them to write a Facebook post at least periodically.

Your idea, obviously, is to trigger their thinking ability!

Absolutely.

What about your future plans for Sethu?

We have plans to build the premises of our own. We have already purchased the land for that purpose.

The building part remains. We were able to raise Rs 1.5 crore for buying the plot of land. We will have to raise another 3.5 crores to build. And I am very hopeful that we will be able to raise that much amount. I am sure there are enough people with money who would like to support our cause.

Do you accept donations from just about anybody?

Not really. We are very careful. We don't want any contribution from a person having a vested interest in contributing. We are very careful in that respect. We don't want someone to contribute to Sethu and then dictate the agenda of our institution. So if someone comes up with a donation, we want to make sure that it has not been done with a vested interest.

Finally, do you have the satisfaction of seeing Sethu's good work getting duly recognised?

Oh yes! Because of the way we do our work, the Indian Academy of Paediatrics has given us the sanction to run the fellowship in Developmental Paediatrics at our Institute. We are one of the nine institutions running the fellowship in Developmental Paediatrics. We got a paediatrician from the GMC who did the fellowship programme with us for a year. In fact, she bagged a gold medal for her effort. Her name is Aparna Wadkar. She is now back with the GMC. This year, we have a paediatrician from Asilo. It's the post-graduate training programme for them.

Here at Sethu, we do training programmes for pre-school teachers. We train them in child development. This year, we have gone into schools and observed. We work side by side with the teachers. When a school is on the path of 'inclusion', it becomes a role model for other schools. We have several schools now on this inclusive path. And that's something to feel happy about.