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Philanthropy: It's about giving everyone a chance

Two couples tell us giving decisions are about taking risks and proactively formulating a strategy

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Hetal Sheth with Apurva Patel

My grandfather, Chhotalal Jivraj Sheth, was poor and moved from a village near Bhavnagar, Gujarat, to Mumbai in search of a livelihood. His entry into business was facilitated by a Bohra Muslim. While the partnership didn't last long, my conservative Hindu grandfather and his brothers adopted Galiakot, a Bohra pilgrimage place, as the name of our family businesses in a symbolic gesture of gratitude. My husband's family too came from modest means. His grandfather was a teacher and freedom fighter with Gandhian values.

Our backgrounds, volunteering experiences, the exposure to philanthropy undertaken by our grandparents and parents in small and large ways, and our jointly evolving spiritual practices, have influenced our philosophy of giving.

Giving is important because our current place of privilege, we believe, is not just the result of our own actions, but the aggregation of actions of our families, siblings, and known and unknown people. When we start viewing the world around us in a spirit of trusteeship, there is no special or specific time we need to wait for in order to give.

When we started giving meaningful amounts, we did it without much of a view towards a future path or strategy. On discovering that we had accumulated a lot of credit card points, we decided to donate them to the non-profit Akshaya Patra for mid-day meal for municipal schoolchildren. At one point, we simply decided to marry my husband's deep interest in music with promoting upcoming Hindustani and folk artistes by sponsoring *baithaks* at home. Later, we came across the Kabir Festival, an annual festival in Mumbai that's volunteer-driven. What was compelling was that the festival helps people connect through the songs and music of mystic poets, promoting interfaith harmony.

The power of joining hands with a community of givers to put together a multi-day festival across the city was something we were already familiar with. At some point, I started volunteering with Dasra, and their giving model appealed to my husband, who

invests in private equity.

We decided to join Dasra's domestic violence Giving Circle with nine other funders, committing to collectively contribute a predecided amount over three years to TISS-RCI VAW, which provides psychological counselling and medical and legal referral services to women and children who have experienced domestic violence through "special cells" in certain police stations.

We saw value in funding the TISS-spawned field action project to professionalize its team and systems, which would allow it to make an organizational transformation. This change in turn, we anticipate, will enable TISS RCI-VAW to independently and strategically take the initiatives it needs to effect social transformation.

Recently, there has been news about non-profits losing their licence to receive foreign funding despite doing commendable work in areas such as sustainable environment or safeguarding our individual freedoms as guaranteed by the Constitution. Domestic companies and foundations may not be able to easily support such causes because of the risks involved. As individuals, however, we can take these calls in directing our giving and not sit by while our environment and freedoms are being curtailed.

Hetal Sheth is a volunteer with Dasra and Apurva Patel is a private equity investment professional.

Maithili Parekh and Shashank Singh

Supporting a friend running the marathon for disabled children; giving to an orphanage on our son's birth; making a donation to educate disadvantaged girls because a family member worked at the not-for-profit—our giving had been well-meaning, slightly random, reactive and ad hoc. We gave when asked.

In the last few years, however, this has changed significantly. We have begun thinking about philanthropy as a proactive exercise—learning, thinking and formulating a strategy around giving financial resources and our time to specific initiatives, organizations and causes in the social sector.

Dasra has played an immense role in hand-holding us through this process—helping us to learn, shape our plans and define our goals. As we engage more, we have been able to identify our aim more clearly: to invest in capacity building and human resource training within medium- sized not-for-profits that can have a scalable impact on disadvantaged communities.

What do we mean by this? We like to give to organizations that have some track record of success and yet have a bigger game plan that can be achieved with additional financial and specialized resources. We also decided that while backing some traditional sectors (education, sanitation, etc), it is important for us to take a risk with "non-traditional" not-for-profits, especially those battling issues such as domestic violence, child marriage and the like.

An initiative we are proud to be associated with, especially after the 2012 Nirbhaya gang rape, is the programme to pilot and institute special cells at police stations across seven states that will focus on issues around women and children, to provide support to victims of domestic violence. Incubated and led by an inspiring team from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), this fits our criteria of an initiative and people that inspired us and gave us hope of positive change.

Giving has been one of the more liberating and enriching acts of our journey as a couple and a young family. We have met inspiring philanthropists—whether it's Arghyam chairperson Rohini Nilekani's passion for the cause of sanitation or musician and author Peter Buffett's vision based on his father's philosophy. We have heard first-hand accounts from workers at Nobel Peace Prize winning Kailash Satyarthi's Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA) and celebrated Republic Day with our own children at Asha Sadan, a home for abandoned children in Mumbai. We have been able to engage with some of the most compassionate, intelligent and inspiring people in our world, who are trying to drive change, give everyone a chance and keep hope alive.

Maithili Parekh is an art historian and former head of Sotheby's India and Shashank Singh is country head of Apex Partners, a global private equity fund.

All views are personal.

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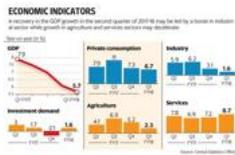
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