

Change agent

In the cozy cottages of the 'Casa Piccola Cottage' heritage hotel, adjoining the narrowing lane of Clapham Road in Bengaluru, the 58 year old Benjamine Oberoi is having a busy morning with her clients checking in and out.

Dressed in a salwar kameez and talking bits of Hindi to her staff, her entrepreneurial spirit sparkles as she provides personal attention to every customer. As a French national settled in India for 30 years and who travels to remote corners of the country to work with NGOs just because she "feels good" and gets to "meet nice people", expecting no monetary returns, she is truly unconventional.

She has contributed in the social sector over three decades by being the bridge between international fund donors and NGOs in rural parts of the country. Currently, she works in villages around TamilNadu with prominent NGOs such as SEVAI (Society for Education Village Action & Improvement) and Gramiyam. In this interview, the unassuming Oberoi talks about her shift to India and her role in the social sector. Excerpts:

Can you tell us how you came to India and what prompted you to settle down here?

I was 21 when I visited India first. At the time, I had a scholarship from the Indian embassy in France to do my Ph.D in NIMHANS on the subject of acceptance and integration of handicapped children. I also got an opportunity to work with a French NGO that worked in rural development and I really liked the work. It was a time when India was not as widely explored as today and I had no idea what to expect. After that, I went back to France but kept returning several times for work. I met my husband the first time when I came and eventually I settled down in India to be with him.

How did you meet your husband?

Well, he was the owner of the Casa Piccola restaurant chain and he gave this French girl a welcome break from roti and dhal by offering cheese (*laughs*). He had an understanding of the West as he had lived in Austria and Denmark in the past. At the time, I had an organized life in France, so it was a huge decision for me to shift here, but things have worked out well. I was always independent by character and wanted to continue my work in India.

Tell us about how you got involved in funding space in the social sector.

I had been working with NGOs for a while then. A Swiss international funding agency got to know me and asked me to be an intermediary between them and the NGO. The agency had no idea of the ground realities and wanted my assistance in assessing the NGO and whether the cause was worthy enough to fund or not. They also wanted me to understand if the NGO was capable of executing the project and needed my help with reporting and process management.

That's how all of this started. I never went to ask for a project, but many agencies continued reaching me through word-of-mouth.

What are some of the factors that you look for in an NGO?

Firstly, I never work with an NGO that does not take government funding because the donor never wants to be a singleton! Schemes with NGO - government partnership and funded by external sources have so far worked out well for us because there is a systematic level of supervision coupled with a layer of trust and accountability.

Secondly, the NGO should be able to provide the reporting required for the donors to continue working with confidence. Typically, my observation is that urban based NGOs are good at reporting and so are more successful at securing good donors. But the rural ones struggle and that's where I like to pitch in and help.

Tell us about how you engage with the NGOs.

Although I am a consultant for the funding agencies, I work hand-in-hand with the NGOs and my objective is to aid their cause. I ask the right questions and help them conceive and implement a project but I am also strict with them. For example, I would ask for the last quarter details but they would give me two years old data and I would have to then chase to get the accurate information that I require.

In one case, the government had given the self-help groups 3000 cows as an aid, but it was never recorded anywhere. They think it's not important data but it is, for the agency that funds to know what kind of assistance the organization is getting from other sources and how it impacts the project at large. If I don't visit the place and talk to them, there is no way of finding out these things.

Since I am working in this space for a long time, I know all the government schemes and encourage and guide them about how they can leverage these. I also get a comparative view of different NGOs and can carry forward one experience to another.

Can you talk about some of your favourite projects?

In *Kulithalai*, near Trichy, we did a watershed management project and it gave me immense satisfaction. We focused on water conservation and making more wells and the end result was that I saw the whole place coming alive after a drought. Social life prospered. Children went to school. It was a heartening sight.

Sometimes, projects emerge in an unplanned fashion. In one case, the government gave cows, which were yielding less milk. Three French girls who volunteered with me asked relevant questions about milk production and a cow farm project emerged out of this. It increased the net milk output by ~40%. We ended up having so much fun with this one!

We are also into projects that provide education and support disabled children. We have come up with two English medium schools for 1500 children. There is also a lot of work happening for HIV children. A project could come from any direction but the key is that it is rural segment oriented and that it provides some level of self-sustenance to the people. Then, there are self-help group based projects that have been running successfully; it's totally changed the lives of women.

What has been the motivation for you to keep going in such a tough space?

Well, I meet nice people! *(smiles)* I can see the way a place transforms due to our projects and I know that some of these agencies would not fund if I am not in the picture. I realize the difference I bring and that's a big driver for me. It rests heavy on my shoulders sometimes but I see people from all walks of life going beyond to reach out. For example, in one school, the teachers were giving extra coaching to the students in the evenings at no cost. Sometimes, villagers share the efforts by giving vegetables and milk to the students. There are plenty of such small stories that make a difference.

Looks like you are working in multiple projects. How do you manage all this?

I visit the projects once in a month. I also have a small volunteer team from OFI (Objective Francais) to support me; there are also young students from business schools in France who do their internship with me. They learn a lot through this exercise and get trained in different aspects – how to assess the situation in a rural area, how to prepare a project, how to understand the financials, what is the rationale for a project, etc. However, I wish there would be more people to act as liaisons with local corporates.

How does the monetary side work for you?

I don't get paid for any of this work. Some agencies offer a 3% commission that is mostly consumed in sending out newsletters and updates. I bear travel costs to the villages myself. I guess that's why most people hesitate to volunteer in this space.

What are some of the challenges you face?

I find training the right set of people a huge challenge, whether it's in the space of education, disability or medicine. Often, qualified people do not want to travel to these remote areas at scorching heat and we are forced to train local people. For example, I have observed polio children sitting on floors and I tell them that this can lead to breathing problems down the years. I need someone on the ground, who would pay attention to these minute things.

Surprisingly, I have never faced language barriers as there is always someone to help me connect to people. The real barrier is getting them to follow a process and track data.

How does your hospitality business blend with the rest of your work?

The hotel business is my bread and butter (*laughs*). I am happy to have preserved a little bit of old Bangalore here and like my social work, I am an intermediary here, too, between my international customers and the local culture. Running this place gives me an insight into administrations costs like staff and real estate.

How does your family react to your work?

They are happy and have their own way of helping me with it. Some of the young volunteers who work with me are friends of my children; sometimes they help by raising money from their universities. My husband is not directly involved, but completely supportive of my endeavors.

How do you hope to carry this forward in the future?

There is always scope for more funding and volunteering. Sometimes we need expertise. There was an instance when a Swiss agency required for a business plan to be submitted for a housing project. The template was so complicated that I eventually gave up on it. Then, one gentleman, who had come to stay in our hotel and was a financial director in a corporate, offered help. In just two weekends, the plan was ready and it helped fund 3 crores. Such a huge impact can be created if one offers time.

I do not expect them to be as involved as I am. Even if a Montessori teacher can visit schools three days for a couple of times in a year, it is a huge help. I also hope to tap funding from private institutions in India in a big way in the future.