



# GEMS OF PUREST RAY SERENE

*Glimpse into lives and work of  
India's outstanding Social workers*

Edited by

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Foreword by

**Ratan N. Tata**



## Foreword

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The Tata Trusts have been working with numerous social workers who engaged in contributing to making a difference to the communities with whom they worked. Such social workers have indeed made major contributions to the mainstream of public development programs and shaped the narrative in a number of social development fields, transforming traditional ideas of philanthropy to drive sustainable development in the lives of the communities served. These individuals have also often made huge personal sacrifices to wipe the tears of the poor, to enlarge their food basket, to heal the sick and to rid the society of ills.

Executives of the Trusts have prepared profiles on the life and work of 22 select individuals. This book of profiles of social workers succinctly narrates both the work done by these individuals and the struggles they went through while making their contributions. Each profile narrates in fair detail the complexity of the social development work undertaken by the concerned person. The Editors have dedicated the book to the memory of Late Mr. Madhukar Dhas. He was a social worker who came from a humble beginning but through his concern for the society and his dedicated hard work was able to make a difference to thousands of people living in the very conditions from which he came. His contribution to the cause of water conservation and harvesting in the drought-hit Marathwada continues to inspire many other

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workers. The Trusts were associated with many achievements of Dilasa, the organization which he established and managed till his death in December 2016.

Individuals who selflessly work for the society not only benefit those for whom they work but they also set an example for others to emulate. They become polestars showing directions to the young men and women contemplating their careers. Working hard to create and run commercial enterprises helps bring in prosperity for individuals and the society. Working hard to alleviate the sufferings of less fortunate people helps create a caring society. Progress on both these fronts creates a balance in the society.

I commend this book to all the young persons who are exploring their calling. They stand to gain by learning the wonderful impact they can bring about in the society should they choose to follow the path of these 22 persons.

— **Ratan N. Tata**  
Chairman, Tata Trusts

Mumbai  
December 2017



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Tata Trusts is amongst India's oldest, non-sectarian philanthropic organisations that work in several areas of community development. Since its inception, Tata Trusts has played a pioneering role in transforming traditional ideas of philanthropy to make impactful sustainable change in the lives of the communities served. Through direct implementation, co-partnership strategies and grant making, the Trusts support and drive innovation in the areas of education; healthcare and nutrition; rural livelihoods; natural resources management; enhancing civil society and governance and media, arts, crafts and culture. Tata Trusts continue to be guided by the principles of its Founder, Jamsetji Tata and through his vision of proactive philanthropy, the Trusts catalyse societal development while ensuring that initiatives and interventions have a contemporary relevance to the nation.

The shared vision outlines broad guidelines for the Trusts' engagements over the next 10 years in a five point check-list of facets that the Trusts would endeavour to incorporate in all future engagements supported by them. The guidelines such as (a) Scale; (b) Measurable Impact; (c) Finite Exit Route; (d) Sustainability; and (e) Adoption and contextual application of global best practices, are now used to evaluate every intervention that the Trusts wish to engage in. ■

## Gems of Purest Ray Serene

### The idea of this research

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This book profiles twenty two persons who have dedicated their lives to work for the society on issues which they felt very important. In our judgment they selflessly work for the society often giving up comfortable lives and forgoing incomes which they themselves are capable of earning. Three motivations have led us to initiate the research work that leads to the present book. The first is our own sense of dismay and appreciation of the life and work of the people represented by the twenty two persons profiled here. The second is a rueful realisation that the number of people who appear to take to social work of the nature undertaken by these individuals is perhaps not keeping pace with either the need for that or with the number of youth having the benefit of education in the country. We elaborate on these two motives.

Working with the Tata Trusts for a decade since 2007 gave us a huge opportunity to interact with a large cross section of development professionals in the civil society in India. The work allowed us time and encouraged us to visit the sites at which the work of these professionals and their organisations was being carried out. In a large number of cases we have felt overwhelmed both by the sheer pathos of the people for whom the work is being done and the selfless and dedicated work which the organisations and their pioneers worked. In a dominant majority of the cases, these pioneers or leaders came from a socio-economic background not too dissimilar from our own. They perhaps faced the same sort of challenges and pressures of society and family as we did in our lives. And yet here they were, working for an income smaller



and recognising the situation of dwindling flow of high quality human resource in the world of civil society for constructive work. We are glad to say that most of our colleagues who thought about the idea found our idea good. We hoped that by creating such profiles and making them known to people, particularly to youth, we would contribute to creation of role models of people with whom the youth could relate. The point is this: all the great persons about whom students and youth learn in their school or college days are of a generation gone long time ago. While we all respect say Bal Gangadhar Tilak or Raja Ram Mohan Roy, we find it difficult to relate to them. Their world was very different. The social and family demands made on them, the milieu they lived in, the economic conditions they faced etc. are of a totally different genera than what our youth today face. That is why they cannot relate to them. But here were people whom they could go meet if they so choose, who lived in this world of blue jeans and smart phones, of internet and fast bikes, of Facebook and Twitter and yet in that world they did things that were remarkable for their worth in terms of benefitting the society around them. Surely, the youth would feel that they could touch and feel these people. And this ability to personally relate to them would carry much greater conviction and hence among them a possible desire to learn more, go and see and perhaps emulate some of them.

The process of selecting the persons chosen for profile deserves a word. Right at the start let us make it clear that we may have committed acts of omission. What we did is the following. Since the Trusts were connected with over 500 different social service organisations during the course of our work at the Trusts, our colleagues in the Trusts could come up with possible names of persons to be profiled. Our insistence was that to the extent possible they should be people who started their work much after



work of these individuals at a greater depth. These will be made available by way of a downloadable, web based publication. While this shorter version will hopefully make for easy reading, the longer version will provide more granular information which may encourage people to visit them to see, and may perhaps be useful for research purpose. That version will do much greater justice to these lives which are being very well spent. We found these individuals very inspiring and we hope to help many more people to be inspired. Naturally, we will be most happy to facilitate interaction with the persons profiled should anyone so desires.

This entire work done in connection with the preparation of the profiles as well as in respect of editing, publication etc. of these profiles was generously supported by Tata Trusts. All the contributors to this book were employed by the Trusts during the period they did this work. We remain indebted to the Trusts for this

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— *Editors*



## Integrating faith and development



Akeina Gonmei

Rongmei Baptist Association

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“In the first two years, we realised that streams were far and the girls and women had to walk long distances to fetch drinking water. It was quite hazardous. In one such incident, a girl was swept away in a flash flood. This episode touched my heart. We needed to do something urgently. So we began fencing wells in our backyards with concrete cement

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## AKEINA GONMEI

- The first woman from the community with formal training in social work
- Persuading the church to initiate community development
- First to introduce Self Help Group activities in Nagaland and later providing support as a resource organisation for other NGOs and government programmes
- Responsive to community needs and re-orienting programmatic interventions accordingly
- Livelihood, health, water-sanitation are the other development intervention areas
- Inclusive approach in work

### Schooling and professional career

Born to Late Alotdi Kamei and Late Ajin Kamei on July 18, 1968, Akeina grew up in Dimapur in a typical middle class family of two brothers and two sisters. Her father was an officer in the public works department of the Government of Nagaland and had a reputation of being an upright official. Her mother, though not formally schooled, was an excellent housewife. The conduct of her parents influenced Akeina profoundly and this positive impact continues to remain her single most important source of inspiration till date.

Akeina completed her schooling from Dimapur and Bengaluru and graduated with a Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) degree in Home Science from Handique College in Guwahati. It was her brother who drew her attention to the Master of Social Work (MSW) course in Mumbai in which she enrolled. In 1993, she was probably the first woman from the Rongmei Naga tribe to have completed



and around villages, they observed that people were uneducated; their livelihoods threatened because *jhum* (slash and burn on the hill slopes) cultivation was no longer sustainable. To have sufficient food to eat all round the year was a big challenge for many families. RBA had to do something more than just preaching. Rev. Gonmei said, “When I shared this situation and my intention of beginning some development work, some of my own people in the Church commented that I was becoming a ‘worldly man’, getting diverted into worldly things away from my religious and spiritual duties, to which I told them that we had to ‘live’! For that our people needed food on their plates. It would not happen magically.” Subsequently on a friend’s advice, RBA was formally registered in 1994.

### **Early years in RBA**

RBA is a church based organisation and is the apex administrative body for the Rongmei churches in Nagaland. In 1992, with the first development programme the broad objective of RBA was to empower the rural people and reduce the rate of poverty in the region. After Akeina joined RBA in 2000 as Youth Secretary and Development Coordinator, the activities began expanding in multiple directions. Akeina moved to Jalukie, a small town in Peren district fifty kms outside Dimapur. She was single at that time. For Akeina, it was a big change. The town had awful road connectivity. Electricity supply was erratic. There was only one bus owned by a private transporter which plied daily between Dimapur and Jalukie.

Akeina narrated her first few years of work in the RBA, “When I joined RBA, we had no building; two small rooms were used for an office, which meant a handful of staff, a manual typewriter, an old cyclostyling machine and a scooter. The wooden benches in the office would be shifted at night to make room to sleep. In 2001,



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— **Ratan N. Tata** | CHAIRMAN, TATA TRUSTS



**Gems of Purest Ray Serene** is a book about the life stories of twenty-two outstanding Indian social workers. Foregoing lucrative careers, each of them has taken a less travelled path, making a positive impact in the lives of hitherto forgotten and invisible people. The stories narrate their aspirations, struggles, determination and perseverance in overcoming challenges while working towards their goal.



**SAMAKALEEN PRAKASHAN**

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