



## LENDING AN EAR

VAANI, A NGO THAT FOCUSES ON ISSUES AROUND CHILDHOOD DEAFNESS, HAS SO FAR BENEFITTED 29,500 COMMUNITY MEMBERS INCLUDING 7,000 DEAF CHILDREN AND 2,000 PARENTS OF DEAF CHILDREN. **BY BINDU GOPAL RAO**

**IN NOVEMBER 2002** a feasibility study was carried out on issues surrounding childhood deafness in India. Based on the findings of the study, fact-finding visits and workshops, the vision which emerged was for family members to acquire some basic knowledge and understanding about deafness, and for teachers to have specialist knowledge and abilities that would enable young deaf children to achieve their full potential. What came through as a huge gap was the need for parent involvement in the lives of their deaf children, and a need for understanding childhood deafness, the need for early identification and education. This is how VAANI's strategy and focus area of work was born.

VAANI Deaf Children's Foundation was established in 2005 and is the first national NGO in India focusing on issues around childhood deafness, and provides holistic services that address the social, emotional, communication, language development and educational needs of deaf children. It encourages families to take an active part in supporting all the needs of their deaf children including advocating for their

rights from governments and service providers.

"Deaf children face a complete disconnect from the world around them. This results in isolation and feelings of desperation within the child. We stress that parents, teachers, community workers and the general community need to understand that deafness is a very complex disability and that being deaf results in the inability to develop speech, which means that the child does not have any means of learning or communicating via language. Establishing a mode of communication through any means, be this through speech or sign language, is necessary for the total development of a deaf child," opines Brinda Crishna, Chairperson – Board of Directors.

VAANI's vision is to eliminate the most fundamental and overlooked problem with childhood deafness - the inability of the child to communicate with his or her own parent. And its mission is to bring language into the lives of deaf children and their families, thus enabling them to have meaningful conversations between themselves and the world around them.

VAANI is a catalyst organization and works with grass root level NGOs to disseminate these services for deaf children by establishing a Sadhan Resource Centre (SRC) in their local communities and government and other professional groups to create awareness and build skills. VAANI works with deaf children and their families focusing on education in communication and language development.

"We build their skills to understand and use language meaningfully. We train families to connect and communicate with their deaf children and build emotional bonds with them. We work with teachers and other professionals to develop their skills on

## **CARING** IMPAIRMENT



how to best manage and teach deaf children and community workers on how to identify deaf children and direct them to the VAANI Sadhan Resource Centre (SRC),” says Crishna.

Between 2005 and 2017, VAANI has directly benefitted 29,500 community members which includes 7,000 deaf children, 12,000 parents of deaf children, 7,000 professionals and 3,500 general public. It has indirectly impacted around 1,00,000 community members that includes deaf children, their parents and the general public.

Take the case of 32-year-old Muslima Bibi from Sultanpura Village, North Parganas, West Bengal. Despite living in one of the remotest villages of West Bengal, Muslima Bibi has been progressive in transitioning the lives of her two sons who are deaf. Not only her children, but she has also managed to remarkably change the lives of other deaf children and their families in her village. At one point she had lost all hope and thought that her sons would never be able to lead a normal life like other children. “My sons have a future now, only because of VAANI’s efforts that gave my life a purpose and I wanted to share the experiences and learnings and

help other deaf children so that they can lead a normal life like any other child.”

Muslima proposed VAANI to start their resource centre in Malancha village so that the people in the village could get the right kind of services without having to travel a long distance. The Resource centre that started in a cow shed with just seven children in 2014 provides services to 24 deaf children and their families now.

If you want to help you can enroll into VAANI’s volunteer programmes like Teach for Deaf, a 54-hour course spread over nine months aimed at the corporate sector. The idea here is to create a movement of leaders that collectively help solve the problem of inequalities in access to communication and language for deaf children. You can also be part of various campaigns like Power of 10, a simple campaign to engage the general public. Each supporter will contribute Rs. 10 and share three key things about childhood deafness with another 10 people. The amount collected will be used to reach all villages of India and conduct more awareness on childhood deafness and bridge the gap of communication between a deaf child and the society. The main source of funds comes from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) conscious companies, corporate contributions, crowd funding and donations from individuals and foreigners.

VAANI Deaf Children’s Foundation aspires to emerge as an international resource organization to support, facilitate and demonstrate various innovative models through different stakeholders to address the issue of childhood deafness. “We hope to increase our reach to 20,000 deaf children by 2020. We operate in three states currently and by March 2018 we hope to expand to 11 states,” concludes Crishna. ■