



Dr Armida Fernandez addresses her flock

Loving and giving

SNEHA, AN NGO BASED IN MUMBAI'S DHARAVI SLUMS, IS SUPPORTING
THE LIVES OF THOUSANDS THROUGH AN OUTPOURING OF LOVING SERVICE

by **Monica Fernandes**

"It's not how much we give but how much love we put into giving."

Mother Teresa

The individual is a unit in society which is the aggregate of many units, each with a different task to perform. We could compare society to a human body. If a person's shoulder throbs, the pain reverberates through the whole body. When a section of society is convulsing in agony, all of society feels the tremors. It is this sympathetic and empathetic resonance with another's pain that prompted the emergence of SNEHA, an

NGO that supports the empowerment of the individual through a holistic approach to address social inequalities and issues.

Dharavi has the dubious distinction of being Asia's largest slum. Within its narrow fetid lanes, hundreds and thousands of lives struggle for survival, for the bare necessities of food, clothing and health. The merciless laws of the jungle prevail and the weak and helpless are often pressed to the ground. Here is where SNEHA steps in, led by the indefatigable Dr Armida Fernandez.

During her tenure with Sion Hospital, where she rose to become the Dean, Dr Fernandez came across many underprivileged mothers from the slums of Dharavi. While interacting with these women, Armida realised that they were too preoccupied with the issues of food, housing, domestic violence and social acceptance, to attend to their health issues, which often affected their well-being and that of their newborn babes. The compassionate doctor decided to step in and help out.

SNEHA means 'Love' in

Sanskrit. SNEHA (Society for Nutrition, Education, and Health Care) is a non-profit NGO formed in 1999 in Dharavi, Mumbai, by Armida and Patricia Soans with a generous financial contribution from Patricia and her late husband, Neville Soans.

The co-founders were assisted by many large-hearted individuals who, like them, wanted to make a difference. A prominent philanthropic builder conducted the building repairs free of charge. The furniture, sewing machines, and computers were donated.

SNEHA had a solitary social worker, Naina, in 1999. It has since grown by leaps and bounds. Today, it has a staff of over 50 dedicated professionals who are doing excellent work among the underprivileged. They have a psychiatrist and a legal advisor on their rolls, amongst others. That's not all. SNEHA is assisted by a veritable army of volunteers from Mumbai and different parts of the world such as the USA, South Africa and Canada who help with yoga, singing classes for the young and teaching.

SNEHA has a multi-pronged approach to the upliftment of the poorer sections of society. Some of its activities include:

- Medical treatment of the poor.
- Neonatal care. 30 per cent of neonatal deaths occurring worldwide occur in India. SNEHA's City Initiative for Neonatal Health aims to pre-

vent neonatal deaths by working through existing health services and through community participation. Above all, it educates urban underprivileged mothers on the importance of hygiene in taking care of their children.

- A trauma centre for battered women. One such woman was Nasreen who was tortured by her in-laws while her husband was away from Mumbai on work. They broke her arm one day and were about to burn her to death when she recovered consciousness. Nasreen's two young children and a compassionate taxi driver brought her to SNEHA. Nasreen and her family received counselling, guidance and legal intervention. Today she, her husband and her kids know what happiness means.
 - Teaching skills such as tailoring to battered women so that they could earn their own living.
- SNEHA's website states:

"You should see what a brave fight babies in neonatal intensive care units put up. Yet, so many of them die. To lose a newborn life like this is heartbreaking. Especially when we know that such tragedies can be prevented. We strongly believe that if a mother's health is attended to, if she receives basic nutrition, health care, and education in her formative years as well as during pregnancy, then newborn babies would not have to die."

Dr Fernandez says that she is

constantly amazed and touched by the generosity and support of individuals and companies towards this worthy cause. This was evident during the deluge in Mumbai in July 2005. The low lying areas of Dharavi were submerged in water. SNEHA suspended its daily activities for two months in order to reach out to those in the vicinity who lost their homes and their belongings. Donations poured in from people from all walks of life in the form of monetary assistance and kind (food, clothing, utensils and medicines). Many volunteers assisted SNEHA in their laudable work. Working along with the government, SNEHA ensured that 35,000 families, who did not have ration cards, were able to avail of government rations from the ration shops. Twelve medical camps provided medical assistance. Each camp addressed the medical needs of 2,500 people.

SNEHA partners with the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, ICICI Social Initiative, UNICEF and several other associations. It is headed by a dedicated team of prominent doctors and citizens who are interested in the upliftment of the downtrodden. SNEHA would like to extend its reach to cover slums in other major cities of India as well, provided they get the necessary support. ☺

Those who wish to know more about SNEHA and experience for themselves the joy of giving may contact them at SNEHA, Urban Health Centre, 4th floor, 60 Feet Road, Dharavi, Mumbai 400 017; Phone no. 22-240442627, E-mail: snehamumbai@snehamumbai.org, www: snehamumbai.org.

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this article. Mail us at editor@lifepositive.net