

## A Family Link to the Past is a Bridge to the Future

Written by Grant Schreiber, Real Leaders

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Pandia Rajan knows about child labor – he experienced it firsthand growing up in a village near the town of Tamil Nadu, famous for producing firecrackers. He lost his father at a young age and his community raised him, helping him to complete his education. "I certainly feel the need to give back to society, because of what I experienced growing up," he says.

Rajan also found the perfect business partner in his quest to give back – his wife Hemalatha – and together they spend much of their time studying different models and methods on how to create a sustainable philanthropic organization.

"This analysis gave us a framework over which we started to draw a human dimension," explains Rajan, a member of [Young Presidents' Organization](#) since 2003 in India. "It also made us realize the importance of examining policy at a grassroots level and how political parties can also assist."

The couple has never believed in checkbook philanthropy and wanted to build proper relationships with communities, much like a family would. They established the [Ma Foi Foundation](#) in 1992 to promote community service and registered the Sornammal Educational Trust in 1996 to help eradicate child labor in the firecracker industry. In the beginning, the trust adopted one child every month, with Rajan and his wife personally selecting and mentoring them.

"Our philosophy has always been to improve human development in the areas in which we operate," says Rajan.

This has resulted in the permanent change for the better for thousands of people, mostly children, youth and women. Three different organizations fall under the Ma Foi umbrellas, each with a unique focus: Disha nurtures disadvantaged children to finish school and become employable, Ekam provides holistic healthcare for children between birth and 17 years old, and Sornam provides micro loans to women.

The numbers illustrate the effectiveness of what they have done to date. The Disha scholarship has given educational opportunities to 4,000 children from 120 schools across the state of Tamil Nadu. More than 700 of them are now in college with 280 having moved on into

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formal employment. The Disha Sports Academy has maintained the participants as state champions in boxing and district champions in football.

Ekam has created a network of more than 172 doctors and 51 hospitals across five districts, saving a staggering 7,000 infants from death. Another 6,000 children have received their first pair of reading glasses and 3,000 nurses have been recruited to staff local government hospitals.

Sornam has created 4,315 self-help groups for 60,900 women that facilitate lines of credit to help support women in starting their own businesses.

"It gives us immense satisfaction to personally see the growth of people we work with," says Rajan. "The time we spend with staff and beneficiaries of each project are critical to the success of these ventures, and for us too. We understand that ideas do not just appear at the top of the management chain. In many instances, it's the people we work with, or our beneficiaries, that give us ideas."

To ensure sustainability and long-term vision, the couple believes in giving freedom to participants who design projects in which they believe. They recruit people who have a vision of their own and Rajan and his wife are always at hand to incubate these ideas and support them. Ekam came to life in a similar fashion. It began as the idea of a doctor, the couple supported it, and today it is one of the largest NGO's in the region.

"Focusing on impact, rather than project-mode, is another reason we are able to innovate constantly," says Rajan. "We discuss relevance and impact with beneficiaries constantly. This approach keeps the benefits optimized and also helps us formulate new projects and initiatives."

YPO (Young Presidents' Organization) is a not-for-profit, global network of young chief executives connected through the shared mission of becoming Better Leaders Through Education and Idea Exchange™. For more information, visit [www.ypo.org](http://www.ypo.org).