

Caring Friends (India)

Located in India's bustling commercial capital, Mumbai, Caring Friends is a platform that connects a growing circle of individuals with carefully selected rural NGOs. Founded in 2002 by Ramesh Kacholia, Caring Friends remains an informal association rather than a registered organisation. Ramesh, now 75 years old, is a businessman who devoted his life to social causes after visiting the 'Anandwan' (literally Forest of Joy), a self-sustaining community for the sick in the very centre of India. Caring Friends hosted events where NGOs would talk about their work to an invited audience, including many from the commercial world. When Nimesh Sumati attended one such event in 2005, he was moved by the passion of the NGO speakers.

Nimesh had worked more than 30 years in the family stock brokerage and was now managing the family's own investments. 'Welfare and care for nature and the needy was rooted in our family's culture and Jainism practices,' Nimesh says, 'and when I heard the NGOs' presentation, I was struck by their compassionate work and the commitment of individuals.' Over the next three or four years, Nimesh regularly attended the meetings, taking his time to understand the social sector, and realised that only a fraction of India's thousands of NGOs had the desire and skill set to grow their impact to scale. Nimesh has now joined the founder, Ramesh Kacholia, with a small group of other committed members to develop the scope and impact of Caring Friends throughout India.

Growth of Caring Friends has been rapid since Nimesh joined. From a base of a dozen or so supporters in 2005, there are today more than 350 individuals who attend events or support NGOs who make presentations. Nearly 40 NGOs have engaged with Caring Friends during this period, with many of them profiled on the circle's website. Unlike other more formalised giving circles, Caring Friends does not accept and pool the donations of its members, a process that would require registration as a non-profit organisation. Instead, members make tax-deductible donations directly to the supported NGOs. 'We are a platform where pre-selected NGOs can meet with potential donors,' says Nimesh, 'but at these events there is never any pressure to give.' Caring Friends has no bank account, officers or any formal organisational structure. Most of Caring Friends' members are in Mumbai but there are donors in other cities as well as Non Resident Indians living abroad who regularly donate, including the U.S.-based Arpan Foundation — established to further the work of Caring Friends — which raises US\$500,000 annually. There is no fixed amount for donations by individuals, and giving covers a wide range, from a few hundred to several thousand dollars per month. A small group of members join Nimesh in volunteering their time to promote and organise Caring Friends events.

The group screens potential NGOs before inviting the organisations to events involving donors. 'We are keen to identify up-and-coming young NGOs that will find it difficult to raise money from traditional sources,' says Nimesh. Caring Friends is building a national presence, and already identifies potential NGOs in 11 states, including the poorest such as Bihar. The focus is very much on NGOs which are based in rural areas, which in India presents very great challenges for screening and due diligence — a three-hour meeting might require 24 hours of travel. Such constraints make it difficult for Caring Friends to volunteer their time to advise rural NGOs or mentor their staff, although 10 to 12 members are able to do this regularly. Nimesh is keen to utilise the skills he acquired from volunteering at Caring Friends' supported

NGOs to help other NGOs within the Caring Friends' 'family'. Vinayak Lohani is a social entrepreneur who pioneered an innovative education model for highly vulnerable children through the Parivaar School he founded in 2004. Vinayak uses the successes and lessons learned at Parivaar to mentor several of the NGOs associated with Caring Friends.

On its website, Caring Friends describes its engagement with NGOs as a four-stage process:

- 1. Proactive outreach.** Caring Friends evaluates proposals received from NGOs, but more often than not, it is proactive in contacting NGOs whose work deserves support and where they know funding is required.
- 2. Detailed preliminary study and visit.** After contacting the NGO, Caring Friends requests for its basic documents, and if the criteria are met, a visit to the NGO by an experienced Caring Friends member will be set up.
- 3. Initial grants during a probationary period.** Core members of the Caring Friends will first make substantial donations to the NGOs that they have decided to support. During a probationary period which lasts from a few months to a year or two, the core members assess and evaluate the performance of the NGO after which, if found satisfactory, will be recommended to the other circle donors. Caring Friends describes this initial support to be a fundamental principle, as it gives donors the confidence that an NGO has been tested and evaluated by the core members through their investment of money and time.
- 4. Changed role post 'NGO maturity'.** The beneficiary becomes benefactor NGOs that have been supported by Caring Friends for a while may become a useful resource to other NGOs — giving their peers guidance in strategy and management. They also may

introduce their own donors to Caring Friends in order to expand funding potential for other NGOs.

Nimesh believes that Caring Friends is an important innovation on the landscape of Indian philanthropy. The six or seven regular events and a three-day annual celebratory conference provide a unique platform for NGOs to interact informally with potential donors. It offers a learning experience for individuals who are exploring their own personal philanthropy and opportunities to fund NGOs that have been carefully screened and evaluated. For NGOs, the platform provides new funding avenues, donors who are prepared to offer business advice, and an opportunity to offer their peers support in turn.