Focus India Forum

Ramya Nageswaran is a typical 'international Indian' — born in India, she is a professional who has lived much of her life outside her home country, including the last 14 years in Singapore. Ramya, like many other South Asians in Singapore, regularly give to charitable causes back home. After being approached many times by Indian charities, Ramya felt it would be more effective to collaborate with others in the diaspora Indian community. She says, 'I could not do justice to all these projects by myself, so I thought why not form a group of people interested in NGOs back in India that would be a pooling mechanism so that we could support more than one cause.' Focus India Forum (FIF) started modestly in 2002 when Ramya and 16 friends decided to each donate S$20 (US$16) each month. The amount was deliberately kept small so that individuals would continue to donate to those charities in India they had long supported, but the new, pooled fund would encourage people to step out and investigate unfamiliar NGOs or locations. Ten years later, FIF had grown to more than 250 members, with 180 giving regularly. While the fee remains S$20, many give lump sum donations, for special occasions or when receiving a salary bonus. In 2013, total funds collected rose to S$40,507 (US$32,000).

Over its first ten years FIF has distributed the equivalent of 1 crore Indian rupees (US$161,000), and much more indirectly and in kind. In 2012, FIF donated US$11,000 to nine Indian non-profits in four states, the largest gift being US$2,900. From time to time the circle donates to South Asian causes within Singapore, particularly those that help to abate hardship amongst migrant workers. Members also regularly collect clothing, toys and books, which are shipped to India to charities supported by the giving circle. The circle is run entirely on volunteer labour, and with nothing spent on administration, it is understood that all funds donated by members are dispersed to the end charities. In Singapore there are no tax deductibility incentives for donations to overseas charities, so FIF has never sought to institutionalise with charitable status or partners with a community foundation. Communication among the members is done through e-mail, a newsletter and a Yahoo Group. Two members operate a joint bank account on behalf of the circle. To ensure transparency, a list of donations and payments to charities are posted on the Yahoo Group, which is accessed by all members.

Ramya firmly believes that FIF is not just about collecting donations and funding non-profits. Educating the Indian diaspora about the non-profit sector back home and the impact of non-profits are important objectives of the group. Ramya also describes FIF as a 'bridge between donors and NGOs'. There is no pressure to make a donation through FIF, even though members are encouraged to connect with and fund non-profits introduced to them through FIF. When non-profit leaders from India pass through Singapore, Ramya will convene a social event for members to learn more about the work of their organisations. FIF is careful to select non-profits that can demonstrate they are coordinating their activities with the government to help ensure sustainability, and take a pragmatic approach that 'looks for sensible interventions where there is a quantifiable or tangible impact for the money we give,' says Ramya.

It is not surprising that the Indian diaspora community is well networked socially and professionally in the small city-state of Singapore. Philanthropic circles also overlap. FIF has joined two of Dasra's Singapore Giving Circles (see DASRA profile), taking one of the six or seven syndicated places on each. Each 'circle within a circle' makes an annual commitment of US$2,500 to the Dasra project. Participating in a Dasra giving circle gives FIF members an introduction to the venture philanthropy model, as practiced by Dasra in helping scale up the 'best in class' non-profits.