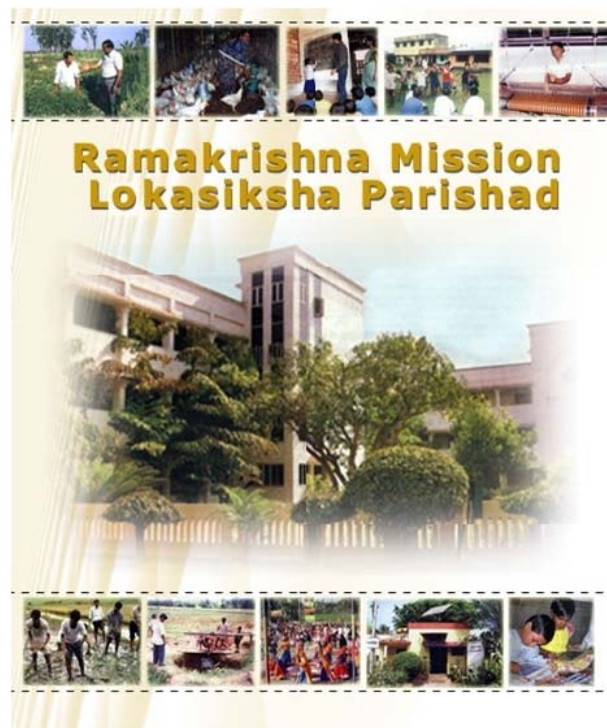


Getting involved in Managing a NGO in Kolkata, India

How all this happened

What does "managing a NGO" mean? First, let me explain a bit about the context that brought me involved into this great experience. I got the chance to go abroad to the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta (IIMC) as an exchange student. Among all the courses that I had the opportunity to attend I picked up a course called "Entrepreneurship in NGOs". Throughout the term several NGOs' managers came to present their activities and some specific projects on which they were working on at the time. They wanted us, IIMC students, to get involved anyhow in these projects, either to conduct them from A to Z or to improve them. We had many presentations which gave us an overview of quite a lot of projects ruled by NGOs in Kolkata and around. From empowering the women to improve rural area or ecological awareness, NGOs covered pretty much all the topics that one could think of. I had to pick up one of the projects... but which one? Out of all the presentations, one of them had a strong impact on me. As I heard Dr. Shakti Halder explaining: "we have a strong and worldwide organization but you know Management better than us and we need your help; we want a win-win exchange with you", I knew I wanted to understand better this worldwide organization.

A worldwide NGO: Ramakrishna Mission



Dr. Shakti Haldar represented Ramakrishna Mission (RKM), at least, its Kolkata-based campus in Narendrapur. This organization spread all over India also has some campuses and influence in other countries around the world. It follows Swami Vivekananda's thoughts, focusing mainly on education but also active in many other areas. Obviously I was not able to manage not even able to pretend helping the head-management of such a huge organization in only a short period of time. Discovering one of the campuses of the huge organization, I discovered a lot of different programs and I happened to know about one of these programs specifically focused on rural children education, through sponsorship: "Save a Child". The managers faced challenges and I could be helpful there. So we decided that I would get involved into this project.

A European student involved into an Indian project

The first challenge, as far as I was concerned, was to understand what exactly the "Save a Child" Program was. Indian people speaking English have an accent, and it takes a bit of time for a French student to understand anyone perfectly here. The second challenge was to get the responsible of the program speaking about it. Here I mean that some of them were very excited to welcome a European Student, a French student even, and wanted to get a chance to know more about France and Paris and I was glad to speak about my country but also... to learn more about India! Besides, as an IIMC student I was already considered as a wonder. I need to explain here that IIM Calcutta is one of the leading Indian Institute of Management. I was rather impressed by the way people perceived me there.

Now, let us get to the core of the topic: what is it like to work within an Indian NGO? Let me first describe my job there. I was supposed to understand the "Save a Child" program and to find ways to improve it and, finally, to give some solutions concerning fundraising issues. This was quite challenging, for the "Save a Child" program did not exist by itself only but was a part of the huge and complex organization that has been described above. It depended on RKM for some funds; all the means collected through sponsorship were completely dedicated to the children in needs. People working on the program were paid on RKM own funds.



To understand the program I spent several hours with the management team of the project. Here I need to thank Indrani Sen who spent a lot of her time explaining me every aspect of the project. She was really kind to me, answering several times the same question and making sure that I was comfortable and could understand things perfectly. At first, I was supposed to give some tips about general management because all the organization had a daily rut they wanted to improve; and they had some natural expectations from a partnership with a student specialized in management. But then, it appears that their main issue was about fundraising and about donors, mostly the long-term donation. Once I understood what was the program about, I discussed with Indrani about possible solutions and I formalized them.

While on campus, I was sitting at one desk with one or two managers of the program - Indrani being one of them- in the middle of a big room with many people sitting in front of many desks, busy with reports and files. We drank a lot of *chai*¹, ate some biscuits and drank some more *chai*, discussing about "Save a Child". On one day, while we were talking two ladies came in. They were two teachers in one of the rural area covered by the project and they had some problems to face. Indrani and her team were here to help them with all kind of problems from pedagogical ones to more personal.

After several meeting and even more liters of *Chai*, I wrote a report, giving all advice I could think of to improve the program trying to comply with RKM sensibility and philosophy. But more than a simple report, Indrani was grateful for having a chance to exchange points of view with a European student and I was pleased to get a chance to work for a huge NGO spread all over India.

Until today it is still challenging to me to explain everything about Ramakrishna Mission. I got a chance to speak with Prananda, the Head monk of Narendrapur Community and he helped me a lot to understand the thoughts, which were behind the whole organization. Dr. Shakti Halder had also been really kind to me, explaining me the different activities and helping me to make a choice. Working with each of the persons I met in the campus was great. In India they know how to welcome people, they love to welcome foreigners and, as a white person and a French people even, I was more than welcome.

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Marie-Sophie Charvin
– February 2009 –



¹ *Chai* is the Indian name for tea and it is also a specific kind of tea, with milk, sugar and species. *Chai* is a basic and daily Indian drink.