

## SAFA INDIA: SOCIO ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Just a furlong away from the posh residential buildings ,glass and chrome show rooms and swanky corporate offices of Road no 12 Banjara Hills in Hyderabad , are the lanes and by lanes occupied by the slums (Bastis ) of the lower dregs of the social strata. Many kacha houses have sprouted amidst pucca buildings and spill over ancient boulders that dot the landscape .There are five such Bastis :Khawja nagar , Ahmednagar ,Bholanagar ,Syednagar I and Syednagar (2)which have mushroomed in the past twenty to twenty five years .They were probably temporary settlements of the labor which built the posh buildings and later remained back to help maintain it and also supply cheap domestic labor .Most of the population in these areas is either poor or on subsistence level ,working on daily wages or by operating small kirana shops, quite a few which cater to the Basti wallah .

Bholanagar is located in a lane next to Vijaya Bank where it dips sharply downwards fringed by myriad houses of different shapes and sizes. Located in one of the by lanes is the office of SAFA quite a well known landmark in the area The head office of SAFA is on the second floor where I met the Founder President and CEO of the organization Rubina NafeesFatima. Rubina's name is synonymous with SAFA and when one goes to Google Search; her name simultaneously appears with the organization. Though SAFA has a dedicated team she is its guiding spirit.

**A picture of Team Safa with Rubina in the centre**



Rubina  
a  
pleasant  
faced ,  
well  
groomed  
and self  
assured  
lady of

52 years, is a graduate of Osmania University and has worked for seven years in the business of training and placements in Travel and Tourism Industry. . Before setting up the Foundation in 2006 with the objective of empowering underprivileged women socio-economically through education and income generation while respecting their socio cultural environment, she did considerable groundwork and underwent relevant training programs in entrepreneurial skills , business planning and livelihood initiatives from various institutions such as Center For Social Initiative and Management Hyderabad ,Social Impact US A and Akshara

I am impressed by her single minded pursuit for the welfare of the marginalized sections of the community but also intrigued :I have come across few women specially from the Muslim Community who dedicate their time and energy to such causes .Why had she taken up this mission ?What was the defining moment that led her to make this decision ?Rubina ,it seems became aware of the appalling ignorance and poverty of women in the vulnerable sections of society when her father who was in the Defense services came to settle in Hyderabad .Up till then she had been cocooned in the secluded and posh army environment . But it was a rather disturbing incident in the family when her sister got divorced which turned this sympathy to empathy : if an educated and accomplished woman found it so difficult to move on in life what must be the fate of the women who were abandoned and had no education or means of livelihood ? Her concern for such women found its expression in SAFA which is an acronym consisting of the first two letters of her grandfather name Suleiman Ali and her father Aftab Ali. Both the gentlemen had inspired her: her father for economic independence in women and grandfather for social good in all our actions.

Setting up the Foundation was only the first step towards her objective: creating Community based programs and finding sustainable livelihood was quite an onerous task .It was a learning process, to know the requirements and cultural ethos of her target group and then to provide appropriate means of livelihood. She had to network with various agencies, raise funds and market the products .The strenuous efforts of the SAFA Team are now visible. The SAFA Head office which I visited also houses the production unit for stitching of bags ,(a branded item of the NGO and noted for its durability ) foldable prayer mats , cushion covers etc which are prepared on a mass scale for corporate and bulk

purchases .The proceeds from these sales provide sustainable livelihoods to many poor and illiterate women . These women are given wages at government rates on per piece basis unlike the women in slum areas of the old city which function more like sweat shops where many wholesale traders pay just Rs 18 for 12 petticoats or Rs 20 for 100 Rakhis!

Besides creating livelihood SAFA also imparts education and life skills to girls and women from under privileged backgrounds under the aegis of the National Council For Promotion of Urdu , where they are provided coaching for obtaining a Diploma in Urdu . The classes are also utilized for providing information on hygiene and nutrition. Coaching classes are also held for students to prepare them for the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> standard examinations as many of the students who are first time learners and subjected to indifferent teaching in government schools are not able to cope with studies and drop out in the eighth and ninth standard .

The problem and reason for the high dropout computer training programs became apparent only after a survey of some of the household in the area .They realized that they were unable to get candidates for the post 10<sup>th</sup> standard computer training courses as many of the students were unable to make it to the 10<sup>th</sup> exam .Hence they now have two computer centers : one for pre-metric and the other for post metric students .Both are doing well as they also provide placements for the successful students in retail outlets and as data entry operators on a salary ranging from Rs 6 to 10 thousand .

All the above initiatives have become popular and they have a long list of waitlisted candidates not only from slums around Banjara Hills but from the whole city. But their efforts are severely constrained due to paucity of funds and availability of accommodation .Perhaps in future, in addition to the growing reputation of their work, the certificate acquired recently for tax exemption under section 80(G) of the Income Tax Act 1961 may attract some more donations .The organization is now gearing up for a social audit to assess their social impact.

But accommodation still remains an issue though there is so much spare capacity with the mosques which is underutilized .In England , the mosque also functioned as a Islamic Culture Center and provided various other facilities .In Mumbai the Shia mosques generally have a floor reserved for various activities

such as Qirat,(Quran recital) classes , Ishtema(religious gatherings) literacy classes, sewing and stitching classes for girls as well as for workshops and lecture programs on Health ,Nutrition and Hygiene . Rubina is hopeful that proper liaison with the concerned authorities and with initiation of confidence building measures they will be able to take the stake holders on board and benefit the underprivileged sections of the community .

But despite the good credentials of the organization I was disappointed to learn that they had not been able to get the benefit of the schemes operated under the Department of Minority Affairs! They had applied twice for the New Roshni scheme for building grassroots level leadership in the minority community which had been recommended by the state Minority's Commission but was not approved by the Central Government .However they continue to assist and facilitate students applying for pre and post matriculate scholarships and are satisfied with the response .They also act as facilitator for the state schemes of the Telangana Government such as pension for handicapped and widows as well as the new and popular Shadi Mubarak scheme .

Watching the dedication and enthusiasm of the SAFA team, I really hope that they would be able to bring about a seminal change in the attitude of the community for the betterment of their lesser privileged brethren specially women.

For more information on SAFA please do visit their web site: [www.safaindia.org](http://www.safaindia.org). You can help by buying SAFA's unique handmade eco friendly products.