

Interview with Pushpa Aman Singh, Chief Executive, GuideStar India

13th July 2009

KT: Pushpa first of all thank you very much for sharing with us your valuable time. My first question is: How is the concept of civil society understood in India?

PAS: The term civil society is not a very commonly used one in India. We refer to the sector in India largely as the voluntary sector. It is the larger organisations and foundations who understand the term civil society or CSOs. But by and large people refer to the sector as NGO sector or nongovernmental organisations. We at GuideStar India have tried to look at what should be the definition of a CSO or an NGO for the purposes of GuideStar India. That's because in India you have different forms of entities that are broadly known as the CSOs or NGOs. So we looked at some of the studies in the past particularly the one done by PRIA who partnered with JHU to do the first formal study of the sector. We also interacted with Dr. S Srivastava who is the advisor for GuideStar India and was formerly the Director General of the Central Statistical Organisation in India. GuideStar India refers to NGOs or CSOs, as those who are societies, trusts or entities that are registered under Section 25 of the Indian Companies Act.

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KT: How do you think current government legislation impacts on the development of Indian civil society organisations or NGOs as you put it?

PAS: It is pretty simple actually in India to set up an NGO. It generally takes you about 4 to 6 months to get a legally registered organisation up and running. What is a little more difficult is access to foreign funds or foreign contributions because our Ministry of Home Affairs regulates NGOs under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act which is commonly referred to as the FCRA and it takes an NGO 3 years of existence and compliance with the due diligence process of the Ministry of Home Affairs to get permission to access foreign contribution. However, it's also possible to get what is called a prior permission or permission to receive foreign contributions from specific entities for amounts within a certain limit if you make an application, but which can also take anywhere about 6 months to a year. So it is a little difficult or tedious to access foreign contributions be it in kind or in monetary terms. I think there are about 35,000 Indian organisations who file annual returns with the Ministry of Home Affairs. So

not many organisations in India I would say are still tapping foreign contributions. It's believed that India has about 3.3 million NGOs as per some of the recent estimates. However, the published figure is 1.2 million... this is the JHU-PRIA study. So you could imagine that such a small number actually taps foreign contributions. On the other hand, the fact that we have so many NGOs, whether it's 1.2 M or 3.3M only goes to show that it is really a vibrant sector that India has. As far as tax benefits are concerned, tax benefits that donors get on making contributions to NGOs, it is not as attractive as in the UK and the US. So in a sense if the government were to be more liberal in the tax breaks to donors of NGOs, I think that philanthropy will get a real boost.

KT: Does the Indian legal and regulatory framework support the implementation of a GuideStar system?

PAS: I think it is a No and a Yes. It doesn't really support it in the sense... I am a bit envious of the position in the UK and the US or for that matter Canada as far as GuideStars are concerned because you pretty much start with the form 990s or the returns the charities file. You get them in bulk from the government and that's like a great way to start because you have the basic tax filing, the government filings on the GuideStar platform. And then there is a pressure on organisations to provide their contextual information so that it is much more meaningful for the users. This is something that does not exist in India. In the sense even government, that is if you take the income tax department, which is the equivalent of the IRS in the case of the US... even the income tax department does not have the annual filings in one place. I am told it is spread over a little over 100 locations across India. And if you take for that matter the information on registration of nonprofits, I believe in the UK it is there in the Charity Commission's office. You would get all the nonprofit information in one place. Whereas in India, you have entities registered either as societies or trusts or as section 25 companies. The registrars are located all over the country. There are at least 5 or 6 laws under which the NGOs get registered, and most of these administrators are not very well equipped in terms of IT, to be able to monitor the papers or the annual filings. So in that sense I would say it is not really a

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support for us to get started with. Another key difference is the income tax return or the annual tax return of non profits is not a public document in India. In the sense that NGOs are not required mandatorily to report or to state their filings in the public domain. So to that extent I would say that we are not in a very beneficial environment. At the same time I would say that because of the absence of any one comprehensive source, the need for GuideStar is most acutely felt in India. So whether you go to the tax authorities or the planning commission, or the central statistical organisation or a charity's commissioner's office at any state, everyone is delighted to know that somebody is trying to put together a comprehensive online database that can be frequently updated. So in a sense it creates an opportunity, and as we begin speaking about a uniform classification of NGOs, a unique identifier, as we bring to the fore for the problem of data being scattered all over the country we begin to hear even government being more vocal about its desire to streamline identification, registration and information about NGOs. Having up to-date information will help in making sure that the administration of nonprofits is more enabling rather than controlling and regulatory in nature.

KT: So where will the primary information for GuideStar India come from?

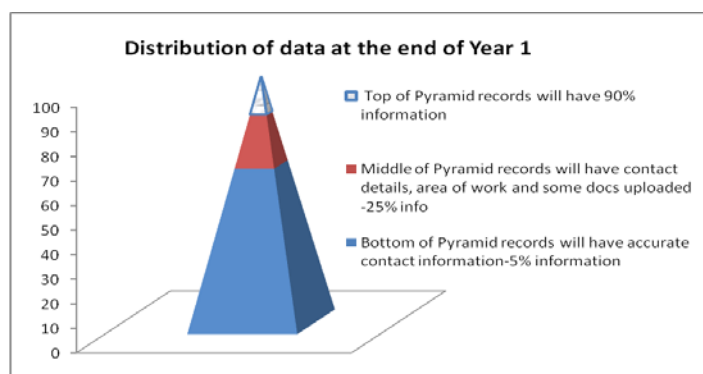
PAS: You are in the country with a billion people with documents about NGOs scattered across the different parts of India. For a moment I would say just picture our team trying to go all over the country picking up bits of paper and digitising that. The primary source will be NGOs themselves. It is going to be more like a bottom up or a ground up approach. So are we planning to go to 3.3 million NGOs and especially when we don't know where they are located? No, we are going to be a little bit smarter about this. We will first try and reach our various networks and intermediaries. People who have groups of NGOs, they could be members of network bodies, they could be partner NGOs they could be grantees of foundations. So we will first go to the networks and tap into whatever form of information they have. It could vary from just visiting cards and business cards, to some contact lists or it could be profiles of members, it can be annual reports and some of the intermediaries, like Give India and Credibility Alliance, provide richer information them. We are partnering with all these organisations to get our database together. We are actually taking

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whatever people have. I remember Buzz having said at the Assembly that GuideStar is like a big vessel. We are starting off with an empty vessel and are going around telling people: please pour your little glass of information or your bucket of information or your bottle of information and we are going to distil it, clean it up, filter it, give you back definitely your glass or bucket that you poured in and as the vessel starts filling, you are going to get access to more than you poured into this vessel. That is pretty much our approach.

KT: India has a large geographic landscape and the second largest population in the world. In addition Internet connectivity and access is not readily available for many of the estimated 3 million CSOs that exist in the country.

PAS: From the 3 million, like I said earlier, there could be at least 35,000 to 50,000 filing different returns and I believe that there are at least 100,000 that file their annual income tax returns. As we are looking at a ground up approach we are not targeting a very large number to begin with. I must also tell you that any database that would



have a couple of thousand records is going to be pretty exciting and interesting to users to begin with. So at this moment our aspirational target is about closing the first year with around 7500 records of NGOs. We are looking at it as a pyramid. A large number of the records, literally about 6 ½ to 7 thousand of them will be at the bottom of the pyramid. We have these large numbers but with very little information, it may not go beyond their basic contact information, but given the current state of affairs in the country it would be very useful. When I meet with most potential users or current users, they say if you could give me the name of the organisation, a telephone number, and an email id that works, if the number of mails I send wouldn't bounce as many as they do today or if place a phone call, and I am able to get through, I would be happy enough. So literally we are going to start off right at the bottom trying to get 6 ½ – 7 thousand NGOs with just this contact information. Then we are looking at another slice, the middle of the pyramid with about 500 to 1000 records, which kind of has a neat profile of the organisation, what they are doing, their budget size, their staff strength the type of activities they are into, and for this we have 2 or 3 interesting sources. Some of the

networks I mentioned to you, most of the profiles that they will be giving us would neatly fill up this portion of our pyramid.

Also the Joy of Giving Week an event about which I keep writing about on our blog, their official registrations are done by GuideStar India. We kind of piggy ride on their workshops, we get time to present the concept of GuideStar India and we get first hand submissions from organisations they reach out to. The good thing is that this event is from 27th September to the 3rd of October. So because we have an event there's a time bound registration programme. We are looking at that as an interesting channel for receiving NGO registrations, which goes into the middle of our pyramid... and for the very top of our pyramid where we look at very detailed profiles; the Credibility Alliance has very kindly agreed to give the profiles of their accredited organisations. We are looking at all of these strategic win-win partnerships where the partners are able to offer something extra to their members by way of having them profiled on GuideStar India and we get NGO information from organisations that work closely with them.

How is this data going to come and my bigger worry is how is it going to remain updated. For the first collection, I mentioned some of the methods that we are going to adopt to get the basic information. For regular updates, we are going to depend heavily on volunteers, students, people who go and visit NGOS. We will say this is a little add on to your volunteering assignment, would you just go and profile this organisation, and train them to operate their internet account and go and update their records. We have 2 firm associations in place. We tied up with iVolunteer which is an organisation that has nearly 2000 volunteers every year that go to different NGOs. I am just coming from a meeting today with the S P Jain Institute of Management and Research. They have their MBA students who spend their summers with NGOs doing a 6 week project and their Chairperson, Centre for Development of Corporate Citizenship, indicated that the students will profile the organisations they intern with.

There is one other idea I want to talk to you about Keisha: This actually came about at the suggestion of a user. We were at this workshop in Bangalore and the session was in progress and there was very little time to collect profiles or ask people register. So I actually went around carrying a drop box pretty much like a donation drop box. We had a gentleman remark: hey, you are not asking for cash but you are asking for cards! I have latched on to that... and we are going to experiment by moving around in different conferences and seminars where NGOs. Literally after talking to the organisers we are either putting up our visiting card drop boxes or moving around with it as if one is moving with a donation drop box... I believe some of these

ideas should work and help us get 7 ½ thousand NGO records in a country of about 1 – 3 million nonprofits, doesn't seem too hard to me.

KT: What has been the general response of the Indian NGO sector to the development of GuideStar India?

PAS: I would say overwhelmingly it has been very positive, except for 1 to 2 organisations who I would say are a bit sceptical. Perhaps they would like to see action on the ground. I am pretty confident of even getting some of the sceptical observers to come around, because we are actually trying to do something that will enable the voluntary sector. My team members aren't too happy when I give compare us with janitors. We are people who are collecting a lot of information to clean it up and put it up there. I see ourselves actually doing something that not very many people like to do. That is going around collecting data from so many different sources, validating it, cleaning it up and putting it up. From the 8 odd years I have spent in the voluntary sector, I think GuideStar's concept is so interesting and so useful. It's like the vanilla layer at the bottom of which a whole lot of other players in the voluntary sector are going to build their activities. And since we already have a fairly vibrant sector in India it is like the parent or the bottom layer coming around after the top layers are already there. So it's going to take a little bit of adjustment for all of us to make, but since we all are working with the common purpose of the betterment of the voluntary sector, it is achievable.

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I have not mentioned our mission to you. Our mission is to revolutionise philanthropy in India. Our end purpose is not creating a database of information but to actually make sure that it leads to greater giving, more charitable giving, more philanthropy in the economy, better decisionmaking with respect to nonprofits, bringing about greater transparency in the sector. And I see most players in the sector have similar objectives and mission, so I think we are going to be able to build some elegant partnerships.

If you have some time I would actually like to narrate a little story here. We were in Bangalore at a workshop for the Joy of Giving Week. We were at Dell Computers who supported GivelIndia's workshop by giving them space and there were about seven of us from different

organisations standing shoulder to shoulder trying to register NGOs and facilitate their participation in the Joy of Giving Week. We were helping Give India to get more NGOs to take advantage of the Joy of Giving Week. We were providing the volunteers from iVolunteer with a volunteering experience. We had Praveen from Credibility Alliance volunteering for us and he was happy to use the opportunity to network with other NGOs, so in a sense we were all sort of standing there trying to help each other accomplish the task of the moment including managing every glitch that came up, while we were meeting our respective objectives. Despite our different academic backgrounds and the varied organisational hats we wore, we worked seamlessly, and to me that was the high point of that Saturday, 27th June. I realised that here is a platform where everyone can equally connect and work towards a common cause.

KT: Good story, so I know you mentioned Give-India and you mentioned Credibility Alliance are there any other major partners in the initiative?

PAS: Oh yes I would like to talk about ProPoor.org. My friend Yoo-mi has been very helpful even before the thought of GuideStar India ever occurred to me. I heard about GuideStar when I met Buzz in October 2004. Yoo-mi is from Charity Focus, they are the people that run www.ProPoor.org, and they have 22,000 plus members in South Asia. When GuideStar India was in the project phase, they actually passed on their database to GuideStar and now it's a little over 2 years since then and they have promised to support yet again. In fact they broadcast an announcement for the Joy of Giving Week to their members. We have a lot of their members writing to us at our blog. They are a great supporter. MCC - Murray Culshaw Consulting incubated the project and helped in defining the technical requirements. Murray and his team continue to support GuideStar India. While I may not take the names of all supporters, here are a few. The British Asian Trust has been really wonderful. Abha was one the first persons who has agreed to pay us to profile their grantees in India and this has kind of given us the confidence that there would be revenue streams from day one. Elizabeth Kurian of Sightsavers International in India has been very supportive. Within an hour into our meeting, she assured us of their help in many ways. She introduced GuideStar India to their partners, many of who have evinced keen interest. She would like to get Sightsavers International profiled and its partners profiled. From every meeting that we come away, people are either emailing databases by the time we get into office or are connecting us with people they know! So I would say we are going to have a long list of partners very soon.

KT: What is the current status of the GuideStar India project?

PAS: This is my favourite question, because I have been itching or rather waiting for us to go from a storyboard state, or from an exciting idea to a reality you can click to have www.guidestarindia.org up with a live search. We have a static page at the moment. We were so impatient that we came up with the idea of having a blog with dynamic content and some interaction with NGOs. We have made a detailed inventory of various sources that we are going to approach. In a sense I am actually jumping steps as I speak with you. We have our business plan in place, our data acquisition strategy has been documented and, I don't want it to sound like a big document running into a few pages, but more importantly we have an excel sheet with various sources, the number of estimated records and how we are going to get in touch with them and by when.

We hope to have the site go live in 2 months from now. Kerr and Stephen and other people at GuideStar International are actually helping that happen. The technical specification for the site is done, we are yet to ink it, but all the iterations are nearly through. We know what is going into the database immediately and what kind of fields you will see a few months from now when we get our wish list up there. There is some amount of testing that is currently underway by the developers. In short, the current status is: very much under development. As regards data acquisition, to be precise, we have some 732 organisations on our excel sheet that we are building in the office. We've clearly identified where the first 1500 are going to be from. By mid August, that is about one month from now, we'll have first-hand verified 1500 NGO records. Hopefully we should be going live with that and like I said there's the plan to have about 7500 NGOs at the close of year one.

KT: Thanks so much for speaking to me today Pushpa and good luck with everything, Good luck with GuideStar India

PAS: It's been a pleasure speaking with you and I would be more than happy to take questions from your readers and your visitors. It's always a pleasure to speak about what we are trying to do although we would like our results to speak for themselves. I hope a few months down the line you would have a very concrete update in your newsletter saying what GuideStar India has been doing for its users and for NGOs in India.

KT: We'll make sure everyone keeps up with you via your [blog](#) and [Twitter](#).