

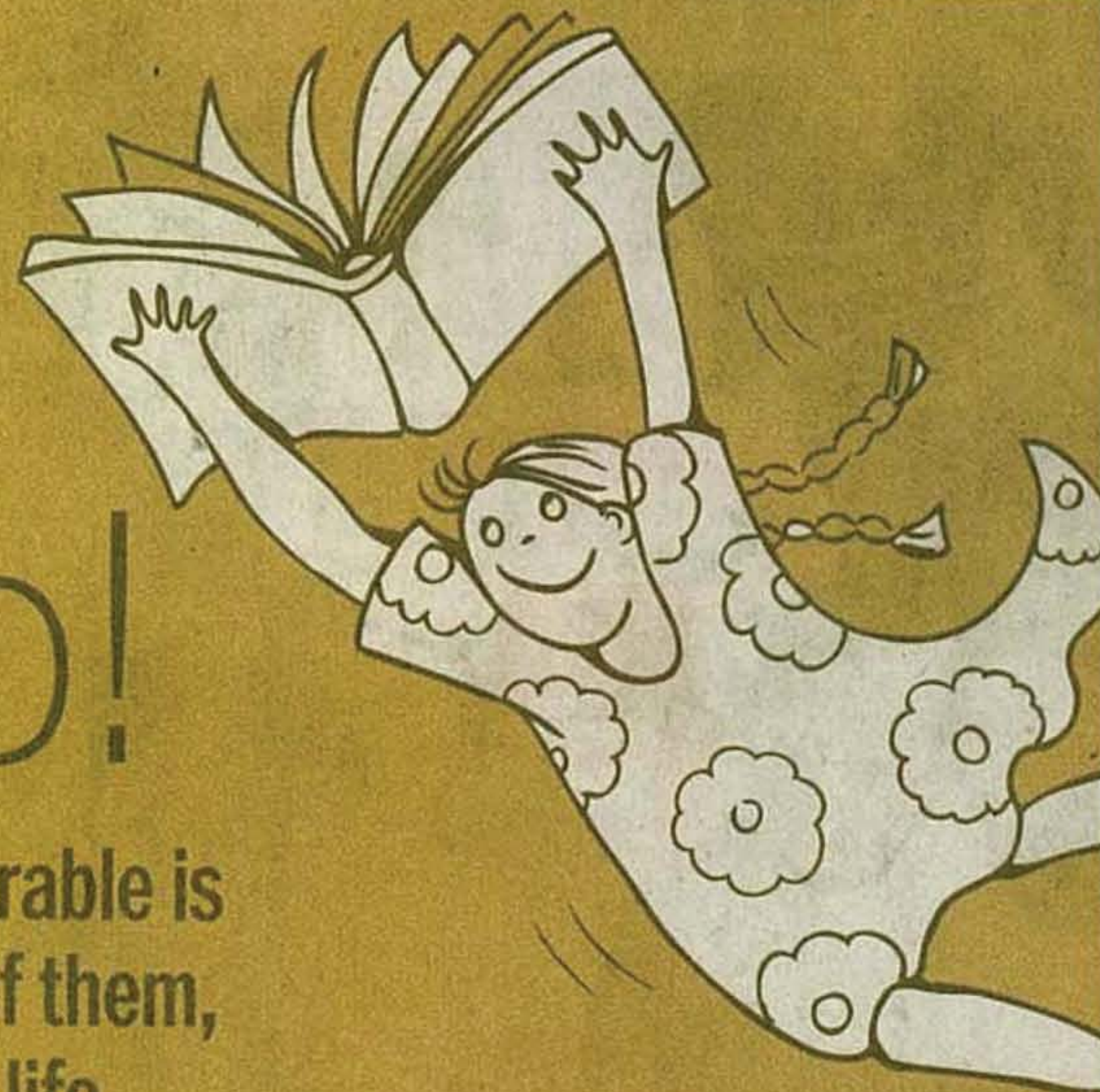
She has starred in several South Indian films and played supporting actress in many more. But Abhinaya MG is no ordinary actress – she is hearing and speech impaired. An interview with this remarkable lady



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WAKE UP, it's time to help!



For some people, finding the time to serve the needy and miserable is about the most fulfilling human experience. If you aren't one of them, read on and find out how helping others can change YOUR life

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COVER STORY

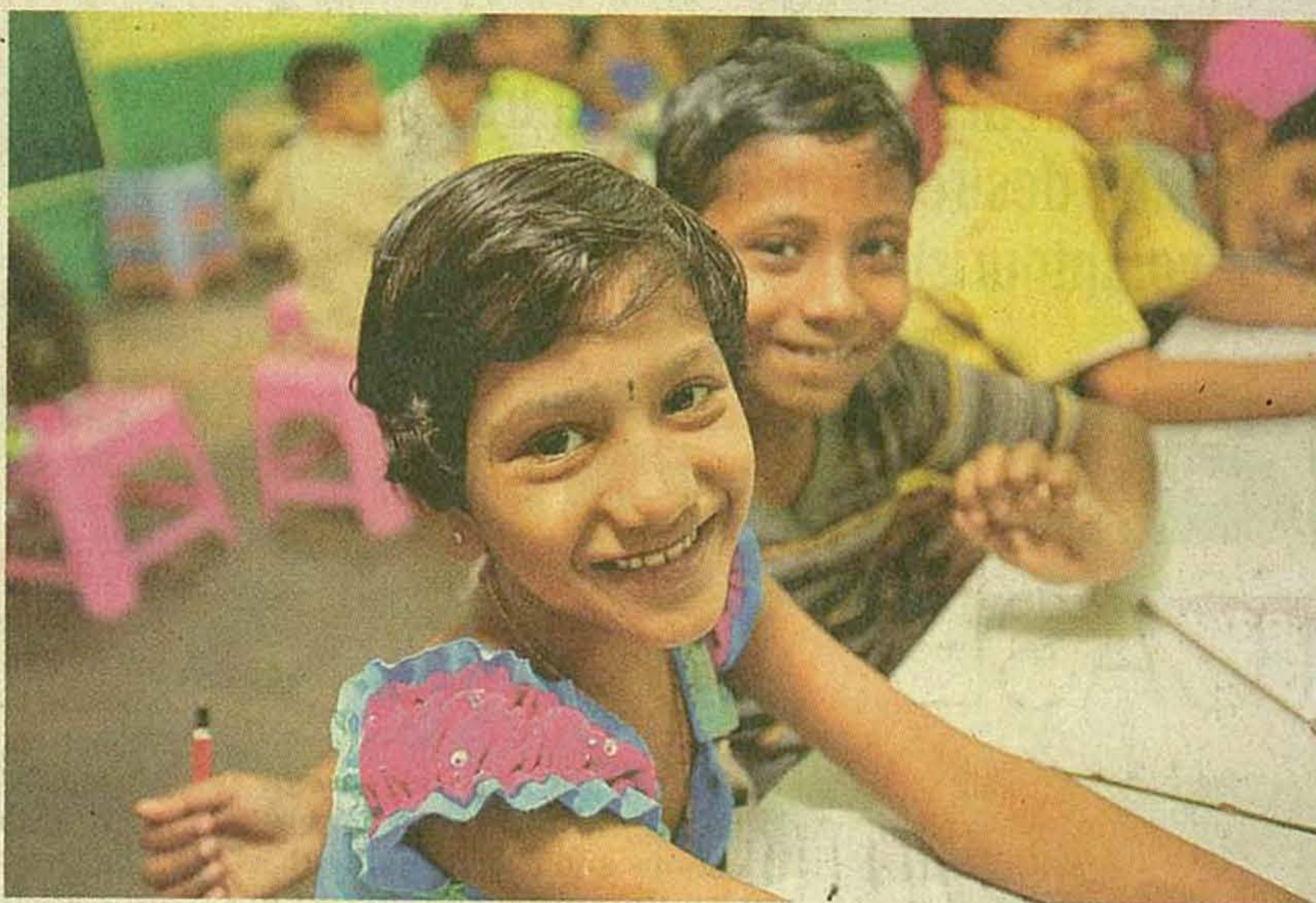
or software guru Sreenivasa Jaganmohan Murthy*, 32, life is a daily struggle—not for the normal stuff like money, love or a career, but for time. To earn his seven-figure salary and a sumptuous life that comes with it, Murthy works, on an average, 12 hours every day developing high-end ERP solutions for leading banks and financial institutions with a hand-picked team of application developers, programmers and business analysts at an IT service bellwether in Bangalore. He loves what he does, is one of the very best in the business and despite his crazy schedules that leave him with little time for his family, he is hugely adored by his 27-year-old wife Geeta and primary school going son, Rohan.

Still, Murthy struggles to squeeze out the one hour that he must devote every day to his extended family of poor children whom he supports through NGOs like SOS Village, many of them in abject habitats flung around the Silicon City. "I cannot spend time with each one of these kids but what's there to stop me from driving down to the ones I can?" he asks, feelingly. "What these children need as much as money is love, a feeling of belongingness that simply cannot come from the mechanical exercise of transferring cash every month."

Adds his wife Geeta, a cardiologist: "These children are part of our family and finding time for them is priority. Seeing a smile on their faces is a beautiful, life-changing experience."

Makeadiff.org (MAD) is a website that lists dozens of people across the country like Murthy who help abjectly poor and needy children, in their own many myriad ways simply because it is beautiful to be able to change lives – to spread warmth among the homeless on freezing winter nights, to be the ears, eyes and limbs of the differently abled, to give strength to the infirm and to help them lead a decent life. Makeadiff.org mobilizes support essentially for children and is among the most dynamic of online platforms for people who despite

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Pic courtesy, MAD

packed work schedules lend a helping hand to the neediest for one solitary reason: Love. It was, for example, impossible to get Murthy to participate in this story, until he was promised anonymity: "No, I would never speak to the media about my work—this is my private mission, my little space with faith. I love these children far too much," he said unbendingly.

Says Jithin Krishnan who quit a promising career in journalism at *The Hindu* to join up with MAD: "I was 23 when I moved, simply because it seemed (comparatively) the more immediate way to serve the needy and if possible inspire a social change, which was primarily the reason why I opted for journalism in the first place." However, Jithin's work with under privileged children pre-dates his 18-month stint at the newspaper: "I started out by teaching a bunch of poor kids in Cochin when I was in college but over time realized that to make a difference I had to do more. That led me to journalism and later to MAD, which is just the perfect platform for anyone who cares for children living in or-

ages, street shelters and poor homes." MAD in a way was an answer to a question that Jithin asked himself one day: "If you don't do this, who will?" Last year 16000 people – college students, working professionals and house-wives—apparently asked themselves the same question and joined MAD. "Every day we get 400 visitors and about four sign up," showing that we do not live in as self-obsessed a world as most of us imagine.

Although the word 'star' is out of whack with the de-glammed world of community service, it is difficult to describe Mumbai-based Pooja Taparia, who has fought selflessly against child sex abuse for more than six years, any other way. Pooja's involvement with social service began in the late 90s when she was a collegiate, many years before she set up Arpan in 2003.

"I was a hyper-active student," she says, referring to her mercurial engagement with a range of extra-

curricular activities. However, 'nothing, she insists filled her with as much satisfaction or joy as the time she spent with the inmates of the SPJ Sadhna School, which worked with the mentally challenged and was located within her Sophia College campus in Mumbai. "Training these people in office and vocational skills and thereby empowering them was a moving and profoundly uplifting experience," she says.

Even later, after college, despite the pressures of her family business and the pulls of her freelance practice as a graphic designer, Pooja never failed to find time for her work with SPJ. "In 2003 I heard my guruji, Bhaishri Rameshbhai Oza whom I had known since 1992 and who runs a beautiful ashram in Porbandar, say: "If you are tired of social service, leave. But always remember that helping others is in fact an act of self-emancipation—it's not a favour." That was the turning point in Pooja's life: "This was exactly the way I felt too," she says. "The sense of fulfillment and bliss I derived from social service was immeasurable—it was liberating, ennobling and finally humbling." After this, Pooja plunged herself into a diverse range of community activity that eventually led to the birth of Arpan, which she says, is "not an organization but an ideal."

Clearly then, be it Murthy, Geeta, Jithin, Puja or hundreds of other change leaders like them who work passionately around the country, many of them alongside full time careers, community service is not work or even duty. It's an act of mercy, a labour of love, an expression of care that metaphysically brings man and god together on a self-liberating plane. It is a force that changes lives – of others and yours.

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