

The humane thinker

DR DEB PRASANNA Choudhury's goal in life is to help the less fortunate. He also finds the time to accumulate degrees, hold a full-time job in Adnoc and give guest lectures at universities and global conferences. By Shiva Kumar Thekkepat

"I believe I am unique," he says. You could easily be led to assume that Dr Deb Prasanna Choudhury is being uncharacteristically boastful. I use the term 'uncharacteristically' because there is nothing about his demeanour to suggest that he even possesses a smidgeon of arrogance.

On the contrary, he is soft-spoken, unassuming and an entirely easy person to converse with.

Given this it makes perfect sense that his stand on a person's uniqueness is not confined to himself alone. In fact he believes that all human beings are unique. A scholar with five masters degrees and two doctorates to his credit, he is also a management professional in the oil industry, a part-time professor and director of a charity in India.

But all these achievements surprisingly have led him to come to some rather unusual conclusions about self-development. For example, he does believe in heroes, but "as soon as you put a hero on a pedestal you start following that person. That becomes the benchmark". He does not wish to have a benchmark and this is exactly what he tells

his students. "You don't have a benchmark," he says, "you don't have to follow a hero or even be a hero. Just be true to yourself."

Educated at the Ramakrishna Mission in West Bengal, India, he imbibed the principles of the guru Ramakrishna Paramhansa who inspired the establishment of the institution. The key motivators in Dr Choudhury's life have been the search for knowledge and compassion for the underprivileged.

opportunities to enhance one's life and be engaged in diverse activities. Being geographically close to India, it helps him fulfil his mission to serve people in his native country (he is the founder-president and director of a charitable organisation, Deb Kalika Choudhury Charity and Development Centre, founded in 2000).

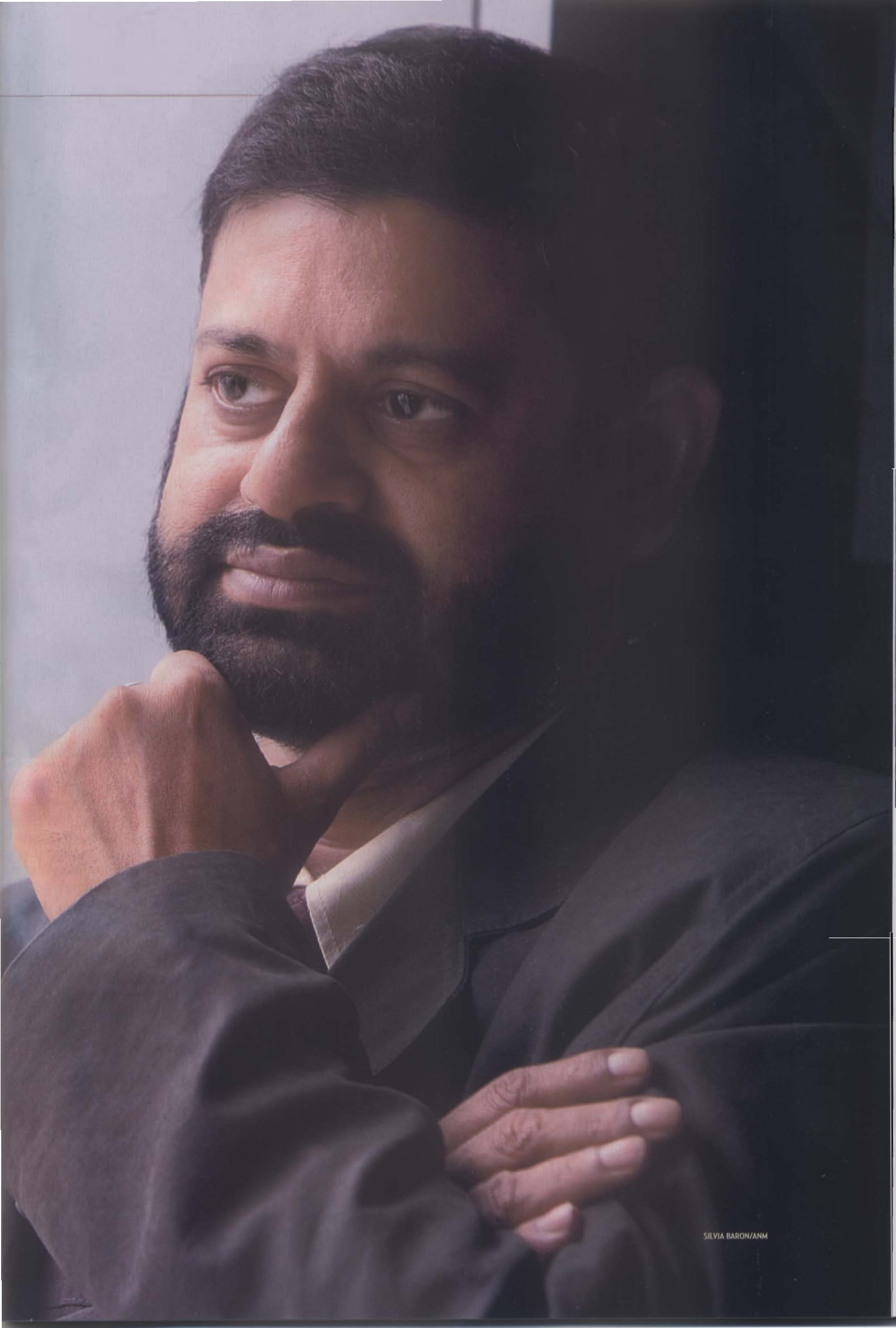
The centre focuses on charitable activities in the areas of health, education and creating self-employment opportunities for the

I admire the virtues of resilience, forgiveness and kindness in human beings the most. All the others pale in significance.

As the head of contracts, Abu Dhabi Oil Refining Co (Adnoc Group of Companies), Dr Choudhury has lived in various parts of the world, including the US, UK, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. But he feels living in the UAE for the past 13 years has enriched his life even more. The UAE, he believes, provides ample

underprivileged and destitute. It includes a hospital, a school, and various project activities.

Despite having a formidable list of achievements, his third doctorate in education makes him confess that for him life has only just started and he is eagerly waiting to realise a new set of dreams! Whatever may be his



I, ME, MYSELF

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achievements in the future too, the one piece of paper he carries with him at all times is a handwritten receipt from Mother Teresa for a donation he made to her charity Missionaries of Charity many years ago. The receipt goes with him everywhere – perhaps as a reminder that no task in life is too small and no matter too great to accomplish it.

I, ME, MYSELF

I consider myself merely as an agent of change. I believe all human beings are unique. Of course each one is moulded by the lives or actions of others who influence them. But even that influence takes on a unique path with their personal interpretation.

I admire the virtues of resilience, forgiveness and kindness. All other virtues pale in significance to these. I also believe we can see a lot of things with our hearts, which are otherwise invisible to the eye.

I would describe myself basically as a student of the Ramakrishna Mission school where I studied as a child. Even after I went to the US for a degree in engineering, and later an MBA, motivation in life still came from the lessons I learnt at the Mission. It was there that I learnt to treat people as equals. When I went back to India after my American experience, my motivation to serve others became stronger.

I feel that to do service, it is not enough to have compassion alone. You also need humility. Humility strengthens compassion and gives you a sense of duty. In India, when I go to my hometown Bolpur, where my charity is based, I sometimes go and clean the public drains as a part of the service our organisation does. Sometimes we clean bathrooms too, and people are surprised. But I have found that it's no use telling people to do something for their own good. It is only when I do it to set an example, that people follow it. This lesson I learnt by reading the writings of



SILVIA BARON/ANM

Mahatma Gandhi.

I find it most inspiring to learn new things. For instance, the recent discovery in neuroscience, that our thoughts can change the structure and function of our brain, even in old age, struck me as fascinating. In fact, thinking, learning and acting on it can turn our genes on and off, thus shaping our brain's anatomy and our behaviour. Therefore, anyone can be a high achiever at any age with the right pattern of thinking and behaviour.

I believe you can only become a winner if you are willing to walk the edge. The best decisions I have ever made in my life are often those that went against everybody's advice.

I, ME, MYSELF

Me and my strengths

I am a person with varied interests and I think that fits well with my academic and professional background. I play the violin with

the same intensity that I teach my students. My varied interests are my biggest strength because I want to learn and grow all the time. My insatiable hunger for knowledge is my driving force.

As for my weaknesses, I have been told that I need to slow down. Sometimes I get a little too involved in getting things done.

Me and my inspiration

My parents were my primary inspiration. My father was a chartered accountant, and financial adviser to the Emir of Kuwait. My father came from a very poor family and was a self-made man. He worked very hard and always advised me to aim high and make a difference with my life.

From my mother I learnt the most important tenet of life: the need to give. My parents' teachings complemented each other. My father passed away, but my mother is still very active and looks after our charitable foundation. Reading



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Clockwise, from left: Caring touch... Dr Deb Choudhury's charitable centre in Bolpur, eastern India, creates self-employment opportunities for the underprivileged; treats poor patients and conducts classes for the children from the economically challenged section of society

is when you like doing something, you make time for it. If you like spending time with your family, you will make time for them.

I believe time management is an extremely important skill in leading a fulfilling life...

Me and my philosophy

My philosophy of life has evolved with age. As a young person it was all about having a professional ambition. But as I travelled and faced different situations and conditions, it helped to sharpen my focus. At the age of 17 my ambition was to study more and create a mechanism to help people. I am happy I have been able to achieve that at 54. By the time I am 70 I would like to open a cancer hospital. And at the end of it all, I hope to evolve into a more spiritual person.

I, ME, MYSELF

When you visit your school in India, what lessons do you impart to children during your classes?

Sometimes when I go to the classroom I see that the children do not possess the required skills to tackle their academic workload as they come from unprivileged backgrounds. So I introduce a subject that will help them see things in a different way. I use cognitive therapy

which I have learnt a lot about to boost their confidence. Cognitive therapy, which is about changing thought patterns, works very well when you are depressed and can change the way you think. Naturally when they start changing the way they think, they feel more positive.

The reason I do this is because my interactions with them have made me realise that when it comes to the choice of profession, most children say they will follow their parents because they don't have the confidence to think differently. One of my organisation's goals is to train them to think for themselves.

What is your new book about?

It is about strategic planning and performance management in non-profit organisations (NGOs). I've dealt with the theory, practice, research and cases involved with running an NGO. You will not see many books (about NGOs) in which all these subjects are tackled together.

What are your plans?

To do all the things I want, I need to be in India full-time. Apart from setting up a cancer hospital, I also plan to open an old age home for those who have no place to go.

Right now my academic pursuits are focused on how I can help the children at my school in India. I am doing my third doctorate in education primarily for their sake. My research focuses on techniques that can be used to help them learn faster. Eventually, I would like to see them integrate with the mainstream. After all, they are my children too.

- Shiva Kumar Thekkepat is
Feature Writer, Friday

biographies of famous people inspires me. My favourite book is *Geetanjali* by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

I believe that it is not just the financially underprivileged who need help, but also the emotionally deprived. You can be a rich man and have nobody to care for you. I go to the rehabilitation centre at the Zayed Military Hospital in Abu Dhabi regularly to meet the patients. I spend time with them and when they laugh or smile with you it moves you.

Me and my family

My wife, Dr Priya Choudhury, is a gynaecologist. I have a seven-year-old daughter, Diya. As a family we travel a lot to India, not only to look into our charitable work, but to also enable my daughter to imbibe the values my wife and I believe in.

Me and time management

I am often asked how I manage to make time for everything. My answer