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SPIRIT OF INDIA—YOUTH SPECIAL

Their goal isn't the dollar dream, supersize cars or a house with a white picket fence. For these young people, it was just as easy to chuck their Ivy League MBAs and white-collar jobs with a corner office as it was to follow their heart and return home to tread the uncommon path. Whether it is the mechanical engineer from Detroit who returned to provide basic facilities to a little village in Tamil Nadu or the young agri-entrepreneur who always dreamed of going home with a foreign degree to transform agricultural methods in Kutch. Just like the young man who turned south Gujarat into the rose hub of the country. And the electrical engineering student from the University of Cincinnati who refused to be merely a spectator to the devastation brought by the tsunami. For them western education is not an end in itself, it's the means to achieve the bigger goals in life, to bring change, to explore new possibilities and positively impact most lives. Their vision is to empower their country and for them, the phrase 'making a difference' is not a mere cliché. This is the youth that breaks the norm, ignores convention and knows that there is more to life than the glorious American dream.



G. SENTHILKUMAR, SOCIAL WORKER, 34

"What we lack at all levels is clear leadership which makes sure that the benefits of democracy reach the common man."

The whole of Thennur, a small village near Trichy, calls him Enga Ooru Shivaji (Shivaji of the village), after the megahit superstar Rajinikanth starrer Shivaji-The Boss.

In the movie Rajinikanth plays a reformist who returns to India after earning a fortune in the US. Similarly, Senthilkumar, who worked as a software engineer in Detroit, US, at a salary of Rs 4 lakh per month till four years ago, came back to Tamil Nadu to do social service. Thanks to him, Thennur today has an eight-bed hospital, a school and a computer centre.

Senthilkumar has formed a trust called Payir (literally meaning crop), which seeks to remove communal differences between people. To achieve this, he believes, it is essential to equip villagers economically and fulfill their basic needs—healthcare, education, employment and bridging the IT divide. Now he aspires to kick-start such reforms at the national level. "I want to get involved in the development of village communities all over India, especially in the Northeast," he says. While he invested Rs 30 lakh himself, his friends have been contributing to Payir. Till now he has spent Rs 40 lakh and continues to mobilise funds for expansion of his activities.

Mantra for success: There are enough existing and workable ideas on development. What is needed now is action.

—Mahalingam Ponnusamy