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A Conversation with Piyush Tewari of SaveLIFE Foundation

Ambika Samarthya-Howard
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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you please introduce yourself and your organization? How would you describe the organization and the work that you do?

Piyush Tewari: My name is Piyush Tewari. I'm the founder and CEO of the SaveLIFE Foundation. We are a specialist nonprofit organization based out of India, and we are committed to saving lives on roads across India and the developing world.

There are traditionally two ways of approaching system change. One approach is that you take on the government, which means that you sit on the absolute opposite side and use litigation or protests to get things going. The other way of operating is to not be exactly on the same side but not also be on the absolute opposite side of governance, and engage with them using data evidence, [strategize] in terms of what is aligned with the government's agenda, and try to get your work aligned with what they see as important, then achieve system change and breakthroughs through that.

We were founded in 2008. On 28th of February this year, we will have completed 17 years in existence. In our 17-year history, we have tried both. We have been folks who litigate and who protest. Then we've also been people who have reformed our strategy to be more engaging with the government, to find more alignment and commonality with their agenda, and to use more strategic communications. We have seen that both have relevance, depending upon the situation.

At this point in time, we see more breakthroughs coming through with better use of data, better use of political strategy in terms of finding more alignment with governance objectives and with their agendas, and finding a space for the issue within that. We

have seen a lot more policy breakthroughs coming through, a lot more openness in the government to engage, because we're not pushing them into a corner or embarrassing them. I think that tack seems to be a lot more productive and better for the mission that we have seen.

That's really what we do. We engage very closely with the government, use evidence, find alignment with their priorities, and are then able to communicate that effectively so they understand what we are asking for.

Each year globally, 1.2 million people are killed in road crashes, every single year. Five to 10 million are either seriously injured or permanently disabled because of this issue. Most unfortunately, 93% of these fatalities and injuries are suffered by low- and middle-income countries. Within that, India has the highest absolute number of deaths, about 180,000 fatalities each year.

There are various reasons behind such a high number of fatalities. We have road design and infrastructure issues. We have police enforcement issues. We have vehicular safety issues. We have, of course, driver behavior-related issues. We have delayed trauma care that converts potential injury into a fatality. There are a number of reasons that all come together to cause such a high number of deaths each year.

When it comes to SaveLIFE, we attack the issue from two directions. One is top-down and the other is bottom-up. In top-down, we work in framework change. We are trying to embed better systems and policies. We are trying to push for reforms. We are trying to bring in new policies where we see gaps and they're missing. The idea behind this entire effort is that you need to have a broad framework under which road safety can survive long-term. It should never be individual-driven, whether that individual is a minister or a government official or an NGO. It should be something that's systemic, that's part of the systems where it survives longer term.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: In 2003, I was on a Fulbright in India, and I was hit by a SUV while I was in a rickshaw, and I fractured my arm. One of the laws in India is that if you are in an accident in a public place, anybody who approaches you is either liable or part of the accident report. I wasn't able to get a lot of people to help me, even though I was in a very crowded area in Bandra.

Piyush Tewari: The first thing that we did when we started SaveLIFE was to look at the issue of bystander care, the exact issue that you spoke about. I started the organization in 2008 after a young family member was killed in a road crash in 2007. In his case, he lay on the road bleeding, asking for help for a very long time. A lot of people stopped to see what was going on. Many people offered him water, many people threw water at him, but nobody did anything that could save his life.

One of the reasons that I eventually discovered, after I set up the organization, was that there was hesitation in the public because of these issues that you articulated with regard to police procedures and legal hassles. The very first thing we did was to start advocating for a Good Samaritan law for India. As part of that, we did multiple things. We moved the Supreme Court of India. We started some parliamentary action where we got a lot of questions and educated a lot of parliamentarians around the issue. We worked with the media in spreading more awareness around the issue.

Eventually, after about four or five years, the Supreme Court of India passed a judgment in our case instituting a nationwide Good Samaritan law on 30th of March, 2016, which was India's first-ever Good Samaritan law. As of 30th of March, 2016, if you are a bystander who decides to help an injured person on the road, you will not be subjected to any legal or procedural hassles that have traditionally been a part of assisting somebody who's injured or has suffered some trauma. That was our first success.

Building on that success, we started doing a lot more on-ground work. In this journey of five years of getting the country's Good Samaritan law, we ended up interacting with a lot of experts, families, lawyers, police officers to understand what was going on as far as this issue is concerned. We discovered that it wasn't all driver-behavior related. It had a lot to do with road infrastructure design. It was a lot to do with vehicular safety standards. Of course it had to do with behavior to some extent, but that was not the end-all.

At that point of time, we said, now that we understand what's going on, why don't we adopt the deadliest road in the country, and transform that road into a low-fatality road, if not a zero-fatality road? We adopted the Mumbai-Pune Expressway as the first highway where we would intervene and understand what's going on and try to reduce deaths on that road. In the year 2016, it had 151 fatalities, which was the highest in the country from a per-kilometer fatality basis.

We started that work, instituted a system of forensically investigating road crashes for the very first time in India, started unraveling crashes, started understanding what was causing the crash and what was causing the injury in the crash, and started giving recommendations to fix the issues of infrastructure and enforcement and trauma-care response that were coming out. Over a period of four years, we were able to reduce deaths on the Mumbai-Pune Expressway by over 50%.

Mumbai-Pune Expressway is an access-controlled highway—doesn't have villagers, doesn't have pedestrians. We then said, why don't we pick a more complicated road and see what we can do there? We picked up the old Mumbai-Pune Highway, which is National Highway 48. It runs parallel to the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, much more complex, and in 2018 had 298 fatalities in a 110-kilometer segment. There, over a

three-year period, we were able to reduce deaths by over 60% by getting infrastructure improvements, improving trauma care, activating electronic enforcement, and so on and so forth.

There was a model emerging where if you identify, adopt, and treat the deadliest roads in the country in a systematic, scientific manner, you can dramatically reduce deaths on those roads. In 2021, we partnered with the Government of India to adopt 100 highways across the country that were the deadliest roads in the country, and work to reduce fatalities on those roads. Of those 100 highways, we are currently present on 22 highways, and there's been an average of 31% drop in fatalities on those roads in the last three years of our work on those highways.

In 2019, we also assisted the Government of India to upgrade and amend the road-safety laws overall in the country. A lot of the knowledge around that came from the efforts on the Mumbai-Pune Expressway and on the old Mumbai-Pune Highway and understanding what was going on. For the first time in the country's history, the 2019 legislation talked about child safety in a legislative manner. India never had any rules for keeping children safe during commutes. We finally introduced child helmets. For the first time in 2019, child seats became part of the law, child restraint systems, and adult accountability.

We were able to hold road contractors and engineers accountable for shoddy construction. We instituted a mechanism for institutionalizing crash investigation as a practice through the law. A lot of good things came through. Of course, the law is only as good as implemented, and implementation is exceptionally poor, like most laws in the country. At least from a framework perspective, we were able to address a lot of the issues that were earlier missing.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are you from an engineering background or government background? How do you have both the skill set to do this work and the government relationships to make it happen?

Piyush Tewari: SaveLIFE is now about 65 people strong. We have forensic investigation scientists. We have PhDs. We have transportation-safety engineers. We have urban designers. We have trauma specialists. We have enforcement specialists, project managers, communication specialists. I myself obviously didn't have all of these skills, but we were able to build an organization that has these multilateral skills that we are able to apply to this issue and resolve it in a systematic manner. My role has largely been entrepreneurial in the sense of building out this organization and the team, and giving it flexibility and the ability to research and innovate.

My brief to the team is do whatever it takes to save lives. Even if we have to, for example, deploy a drone in the sky to preemptively identify parked vehicles on highways so we can prevent rear-end collisions, we'll do it. The idea is that it's a multidisciplinary team that looks at the issue. Everybody talks to each other to understand what could be the solution. Civil engineering may not be the solution to all the infrastructure issues. Sometimes it's just pure architecture design that might help. Within trauma care, our trauma specialists may not have all the answers. Sometimes, our MPHs [masters of public health] have the answers in terms of systems.

We've built an organization to serve the issue and have found experts and passionate professionals who work on this issue day-in and day-out with us. We are scaling up now. We are going to be over a 100 full-time staff in the next few months and present in about 16 states in the country. From this year onwards [we are] looking at contributing to our neighboring countries, like Bangladesh, that have a very similar burden of this issue.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you create those government relationships, and how would somebody get them if they didn't have them?

Piyush Tewari: We had to learn how to establish relationships with the government and how to work, and that took many years. The fundamental learning is that every government officer and every political leader has a very clear set of responsibilities and a very clear set of priorities. Unless you are able to show that what you're doing is either aligned with those priorities or could be a new priority based on demand from the public, it is unlikely that you will get attention on an instant basis.

You need to have an advisory board. You need to engage with experts. You have to have ex-government officials who work with you. Our board itself is composed of some of the most eminent government leaders from India. We were able to find people who were very passionate about the issue. They didn't become instant board members. We engaged with them for a few years, and then eventually they ended up joining our board and extending support in different ways. Even today, my board members visit a company [or join] some complex meetings that I might have with the government. They extend a lot of support, and we are able to work with them on this. That's one way of doing it.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You make it sound easy. Tell me a little bit about the challenges.

Piyush Tewari: Sometimes the nature of success is that you remember the outcome but not the journey behind it. It has of course not been easy in any way. You need political championship to be able to overcome bureaucratic barriers. You need to have

someone who will say, OK, I'm willing to hear that my bureaucrats and my engineers screwed up and that they have not done the work that they were supposed to do. That political championship comes through the process that I told you earlier, which is to find out how this issue may be relevant to the political champion that you're trying to build. We face constant opposition.

It's not something that is easy in any way. Even with this meeting that I was telling you about today, there was a lot of opposition, and sometimes there is just patronizing. You are an NGO. How do you know more than us? We are the government, and so we have access to IITs and all the others, so who are you? You're dealing with subservience, you're dealing with patronizing behavior, you're dealing with rejection constantly. It's a very frustrating line of work.

It's not easy to get some of the stakeholders to admit to the fact that there are problems. There is a natural opposition that comes through in many of these cases. You have to be constantly bracing to deal with opposition. We face that opposition constantly, even from officials who we meet regularly, who we often end up assisting in some investigations or in some research. When it comes down to getting them to fix their mess, we get a lot of opposition.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you see funding as a catalyst for sustainability? How do you know if funding is effective?

Piyush Tewari: In terms of SaveLIFE's funding model, one of the things that we have always been very particular about is to never accept any funding from the government. There are many reasons behind it, but the core reason is that we want to be independent of government in every way. We want an arm's length from any transaction with the government, and we want to sit on the table as equals and not as a vendor or a service provider, which in an Indian context is considered to be subservient. That equation is very important for us. We never accept any funding from the government, and therefore non-governmental funding becomes very crucial for us.

Within non-governmental funding there are two models. One is restricted funding, and the other is unrestricted funding. Restricted funding is largely CSR [corporate social responsibility], institutional, where the donor will tell you how they want the money spent, and there you can only spend X amount of money in building your organization capacity. You have to spend Y amount of money in direct implementation on the ground, and there's rarely any money for research and innovation. We have a set of funders who are project funders where we adopt a particular road and they will help us undertake some early interventions that would then become triggers for government to invest and scale those interventions. It's a good thing, but doesn't support us to do more cutting-edge work.

Then there is a very small core of funders that provide unrestricted funding. These are funders who undertake an intense due diligence on you, determine that you are credible, that you know how to manage money, that your mission alignment and your systems will ensure that the money is well spent. Then they let you spend the money the way you wish to spend it in attaining the objective of the organization.

Rippleworks is an amazing example of that funder that tells you, hey, we trust you. Here's our funding, and you can spend it for whatever you like. You can spend it to build your capacity. You can [use it to] fund technology. You can [use it to] fund innovation that may or may not work. You can do research that otherwise CSR will not fund, because that's restricted by law.

I think that core of funders is really what advances an organization like ours that is so reliant on constant innovation, on finding the best talent, on ensuring that we are at the cutting edge of engineering, enforcement systems, trauma care—really that whole multidisciplinary team that I was talking about earlier, that restricted funders typically don't end up funding all of. They become a very crucial source of funding.

Rippleworks is a very special funder. Rippleworks is special not just because of the quantum of money that they give you or the fact that they don't have any restrictions on you. Rippleworks fundamentally wants you to succeed. They go beyond just giving you the money. What they tell you is, give us your pain points in running the organization. Is it HR? Is it leadership? Is it management? Is it technology? We will find the best brains from around the world to help you overcome those challenges.

Today, talent and HR management is a way bigger challenge than finding money. What Rippleworks has been able to do is to give us an additional grant to manage our HR issues. They have aligned experts with us that helped us build our employee value proposition, fix our recruitment practices. They have helped us scope out talent. Doug Galen, the CEO, has been personally mentoring me in dealing with complex leadership challenges. That is unprecedented. That level of interest and involvement is very, very rare for a donor to have.

What Rippleworks is trying to do is make this support institutional. It's not just for a SaveLIFE Foundation or another organization. They're trying to make it accessible across their portfolio, which is something that I appreciate a lot. If I had to talk about my favorites, they're right up there in terms of the people we engage with, and in terms of how they treat us and how they see us impacting the world

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you are getting an unrestricted fund from someone, in order for you to feel comfortable telling them about your problems,

you have to have a very high level of trust in them. What would you advise to a funder who's trying to nurture that trust?

Piyush Tewari: I think Rippleworks was very intentional about it. I think that intentionality comes across in every interaction you have with them, every conversation you have with them. They really want to help. Actually, they really want to add value, not just help. Every team member from Rippleworks who we have interacted with has approached us with a real intention to listen, and after listening, figuring out where exactly they can support. They have championed us with other donors, which is something that is very rare for donors to do. They do that regularly for their portfolio organizations.

These actions build a tremendous amount of trust, because you see intentionality coming through, you see a genuine interest in supporting, you see action that's then translating that intention to reality. All of that comes together as a very potent effort to propel an organization forward. That's something that we see consistently coming through Rippleworks.

We have received a talent grant that we used to build our leadership team, institute an HRMS [human resource management system] in the organization, and engage consultants to establish some systems that were earlier missing. It's an ongoing partnership where they are consistently creating avenues for us to engage. I can't be involved in everything because of my own responsibilities and agenda, but many of our team members have benefited from these opportunities that Rippleworks has provided.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you have any feedback about anything that they should change to make it more useful?

Piyush Tewari: I'm trying to think hard if there's anything. The reason is not because they're a funder we love but that they're very thoughtful about how they design their work. It's done in partnership with the audience. I have spent time with their team structuring their support service to CEOs, to give specific feedback on what issues might work, how to structure mentorship sessions, and so on and so forth. They're very thoughtful about how they design this. They don't assume that they know everything, that they have all the answers. What they're very good at is intentional listening. That is a tremendous quality as a donor, to be able to intentionally listen and then design something that might work for the audience that they're looking to impact.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Let's talk a little bit about the impact of the Rippleworks talent grant. How did it help you to retain and find staff?

Piyush Tewari: I'll give you three examples. First one is that when we signed the MOU with the government of India in 2021 to scale the model to 100 highways, we were dealing with an animal we had never dealt with. Government doesn't wait for you to scale. Government is like, okay, you've signed the MOU, tell us what you're going to do next.

We need to very rapidly scale up the team. We need to inject new systems, new people. We had to bring in more leadership into the system. Our CSR grants were unable to cover that piece. We needed donors to come in and say, hey, we see this as a great opportunity to save lives. Here is an unrestricted grant from our side for you to scale up your team.

How that grant really helped us was that we were able to hire a core of leaders in the organization, mostly middle management, that was earlier almost entirely missing or very limited, to start managing some of these new highways we were looking at. That was very timely and transformational in helping us very quickly scale up and find the right people. We were able to engage consulting firms to do that.

In parallel, they aligned an HR expert who helped us build our first ever employee value proposition. That was the first time we were able to create a set of messages that would attract people to apply to SaveLIFE. That was a very, very valuable exercise for us to attract the right talent. Through that grant we were able to hire a consultant to structure the organization properly, set quotas in place, set levels in place, designations. What would a 50% organization look like? What would 100% organization look like? What were our challenges in technical expertise versus management depth? How do you structure a subject matter expert organization around scale? That was the second thing that was very helpful.

The third thing we used the talent grant for was that as we were growing, we needed to put a lot of systems in place. We needed to have integration of our teams in different parts of the country. We were able to invest in a fairly expensive but very, very useful HR management system that has now integrated all of our teams across the country. We run our performance management systems through that. We run a lot of communication through that. We of course run all of our HR management systems through that. We now run recruitment and expenses through that.

There is not a single restricted donor who will allow you to spend money on something like that. This was transformational. We were not only able to bring in new people, we were able to hire experts, and we were able to bring in technology to brace for a larger growth, but also smoother systems with that growth.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: In the larger funding landscape, what do you think are some of the shifts that need to happen to center the voices of those closest to the problems?

Piyush Tewari: The evolution that I'm seeing in the funding landscape globally, in the non-India scenario, is that a lot more philanthropists and foundations are now interested in unrestricted support. It still hasn't reached a level of maturity where it's sizable, but I do feel that there's a lot more appreciation for respecting the autonomy of nonprofits and relying on them as experts and trusting them to spend the money in what would advance their organization and their mission. I would like that to scale so that it becomes a bit more pervasive and more of a culture and practice in family philanthropy as well as corporate philanthropy and institutional philanthropy, like what Rippleworks and Skoll run. That's something that I would like to see a lot more of.

Harder diligence will help such organizations reach a more trusting mind space, and if that's really what they intend to do, then I would support harder diligence [followed by] unrestricted support rather than telling organizations how they should operate or what they should spend on and what they should not spend on. You can specify no-go areas, but the more restrictions you have, the more you scuttle innovation, the more you scuttle sustainability of organizations and leave them constantly relying on donors and converting everything into a project, and sometimes departing from the mission because of sustenance issues. That does more harm than good.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are some funding models that you've encountered that actually hinder progress?

Piyush Tewari: CSR is one, especially Indian CSR. There are a tremendous amount of restrictions. Not just in terms of how you spend the money, but also where you operate. Many companies in India that give you money want you to operate near their physical locations, near their plants, factories, offices, or their target states.

As it happens, if you draw a line right down the map of India, you'll see that the eastern part of India has a massive burden of road crash fatalities but is not as industrialized as the western part. What ends up happening because of CSR is that that portion of the country does not receive as much money or initiative as would happen in the West. That is injustice.

We end up using a fair amount of unrestricted philanthropy dollars not just in building capacity but in actually doing execution work in these otherwise ignored areas that are not funded through CSR, or have limited CSR available because of the lack of big industrialization. That's the other challenge with CSR-related investments.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What other unrestricted funders do you have outside of Skoll and Rippleworks?

Piyush Tewari: We currently have Mulago. We have Jasmine Social Investments. We have Cartier Philanthropy. We've had Draper Richards Kaplan. We've had Echoing Green that supported us.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Which of those currently supports you? Who are your current funders outside of Skoll and Rippleworks?

Piyush Tewari: Except for DRKF, which was three years, and Echoing Green, which was two years, we have support from all of the others that I just mentioned. Skoll, Rippleworks, Mulago, Cartier Philanthropy, Jasmine Social Investments are all unrestricted and all current funders. Even within India, we now have Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies that now supports us in an unrestricted manner. We've also had the Amita and Ajay Chauhan family, the Parle [Products] family in India, that's now giving us an unrestricted family grant to do our work. We've had some luck there.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's a long, impressive list.

Piyush Tewari: Yes, we've been lucky. A lot of them came right after Skoll. Many of them are more recent in nature. We've had Mulago for many years. We've had Rippleworks for many years. I guess we've been both lucky and perhaps noticed because of our impact, which has helped.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I don't think it's luck at all. I think it's an incredible amount of intention and hard work. Why do you think your organization received the Skoll Award when it did, 16 years in?

Piyush Tewari: There are a few reasons, I would say. One is that I feel it happened at the right time, even though it took whatever amount of time it took. The timing was absolutely right because of a few reasons. One is that it took us a bit of time to go from R&D to scaling, and the innovation became very clear only 2022 onwards. It became very apparent that this was the solution to a public health issue, not just in India but potentially across the world, wherever this is prevalent.

The second thing is that road crashes are not typically recognized as an issue by the Western world because it is not a public health issue there. In America, for example, they use the term car crashes. Whereas in India, the majority of people dying in road crashes are pedestrians, cyclists, and two-wheeler riders. Cars are not really involved in many of those incidents, or are only involved as offenders. You have a situation where there was a big lack of education around the issue, despite it being the eighth leading

cause of death and the only cause in the top 10 that's linked to severe injury or traumatic injury. Despite that, it has never been treated as a significant issue.

What we were also able to do in these many years was to elevate the discourse around this issue, find funders like Rippleworks and Mulago who could talk about us in funding circles and help educate other donors about how significant this issue is and that there is a solution to resolving it. A lot of things came together to create this timeline. I feel that Skoll happened at the right time because we are at the right stage to now take this to the next level, both within India and globally.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are the top three things you need to unlock your ability to scale?

Piyush Tewari: Number one I would say is talent. That's a constant struggle for us.

Second thing is that the money is trickling in, but it's still a trickle, which means that we still have to constantly keep raising year-on-year, and there is a challenge in stability as a result. A lot of the Skoll awardees have just had their USAID grants withdrawn, which is impacting them significantly in some of their most important projects. This level of uncertainty is problematic. From our perspective, it becomes an even bigger problem because we have alignment of government will with a solution that works. If you can't fund it, such alignment may not exist later. It becomes a lot more urgent for us to intervene and use the timing to our benefit by raising money at the right time.

The third is that it's a priority for us to keep maintaining our government relationships, dealing with the challenges that come every day with that, staying on course, and ensuring that we are on top of any potential challenges that might come up.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is there anything I didn't ask that you wish I had asked?

Piyush Tewari: I just wanted to inform you of one more thing that we've started doing over the last three or four years, and that is that we now look at trauma care as a separate pillar of our work. The reason we do that is because we've realized that while road crashes kill about 180,000 people each year, traumatic injury overall kills about half a million people each year in India. When you fix trauma-care issues, even if you're doing it for road crash victims, not only are you impacting the issue of road safety, you're also enabling better outcomes for injury across India. That's something that has become crucial for us to look into.

We are looking for a right-to-trauma-care legislation that would institute a very clear chain of survival. When I say chain of survival, it includes what number to call for help,

who arrives and with what capability, which hospital are people taken to and what are the capabilities there, what are the systems that connect to in-hospital care, what happens inside the hospital in terms of care protocols. All of that needs to get institutionalized and brought within a legal framework as a right. That is something that we have begun to look at quite seriously as an issue and something that we are quite keen to work on as a focus area.

I started this conversation talking about forensic crash investigation. We have done a large number of these investigations, and while the Indian police might collect anywhere from 50 to 100 data points from each crash, we collect about 600. Over the years, this data is now giving us insights that may allow us to start predicting crashes if certain conditions are met. That could be transformative in looking at how you place police, how you place ambulances, how you look at infrastructure changes overall, how you start finding trends and repetitive issues. That's the other area that we're looking to invest in over the next three years.

The third thing is that, as part of our agenda, we are looking to scale this work to five other countries over the next three years: Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Kenya. All are countries that have very similar issues to India, and all where we feel the zero fatality corridor approach can help dramatically reduce road crash fatalities.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's amazing. Thank you.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*