

“I always wanted to physically be in the social space”

– Lijo Chacko

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Lijo Chacko has been the head of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) at Synergy Marine Group since October 2015. He is in charge of planning and executing the

developmental work of the entire group, spread around various parts of the world. The projects include integrated development of a panchayat (which consists of various villages), and support for an orphanage, among others.

In his very first interview feature in a maritime publication, Chacko recently spoke with **Nishit Doshi** and

Nandita Mahajan of Maritime Matrix Today, among other things, about Synergy’s CSR activities and the options shipping companies have when it comes to CSR.

Could you tell us the focus areas of CSR at Synergy? What are the various activities?

We are sector agnostic and since we are in the early stages of our journey in the CSR space, we are looking at various kinds of work that could bring about a meaningful impact. We are trying to move based on the fact that most of our unfortunate brethren are in the poverty trap through no fault of their own. The poverty trap is a negative spiral and those caught up in it require a helping hand to extricate themselves. We are privileged enough to be able to lend that assisting hand.

In addition to the integrated development of the

Adigathur panchayat (In the Indian state of Tamil Nadu) — wherein we selected five village fellows to identify issues and implement solutions, with members of our own staff acting as a bridge between the villagers and Synergy— we have been often working with very dedicated developmental activists on various aspects of national initiatives like implementation of NREGA (where they are guaranteed 100 days of work by the government), the efficacy of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) as part of the right to food campaign (RTF), etc. These engagements give us a larger perspective of what is happening in India and ensure laying of a sound

foundation to the social activities of our Group.

We are also partners with CII’s India@75 initiative and recently we have been invited to the core committee focused in making this a national movement.

We are working on various initiatives as a group. In Pune, we are working with two NGOs —Awakening Jagriti and Rainbow Homes.

In Kochi, we are working closely with the Cochin Cancer Society. The CCS is also guided by our CEO as he is a Trustee on their

Lijo Chacko board too. At Kochi, we also conduct direct initiatives like blood donation and medical

camp, and collect food for distribution to various organizations. The IT development group in Kochi works pro bono for creating online collaterals or back-end support systems for other social organizations even though they have no formal relation with Synergy.



In Manila, we recently did a good round of exposure visits to local NGOs and interacted with Ashoka Innovators for the Public and Ashoka Fellow to decide what work to focus on going forward.

In Delhi we have chosen a government school to provide nutritional supplements to the students. We are currently awaiting approval from the government to start our proposed intervention.

In Singapore, a lead person from that office is driving our activities with the Kerala Government where we are trying to work on: low cost housing solutions (starting with the tribal belt in Wayanad), improving the general environment in government LP and UP schools, skill development to increase employment opportunities for the youth, implementation of Nourishing Schools Foundation programme in the schools of the state and transforming government run Brennen College, Thalassery into a centre of excellence. We are in discussions with LKY/NUS to help us with Brennen College.

What are the different options shipping companies have when it comes to CSR activities? How can seafarers and others in the industry participate in these activities?

When it comes to the S of CSR we could safely remove the baggage of the C. The R doesn't necessarily come because of the C. Like Jean Dreze said, we contribute to society because we know that, "It is the responsibility which comes with privilege." So shipping companies also need not be limited by the fact that they are in the shipping business. We could pick up any kind of social problem and work to solve it.

Seafarers, for starters, could volunteer their time to work with NGOs, individuals or movements when they are on their break. They could also involve their spouses wherein the spouses could continue to give support even when the seafarers have again signed up to go on board.

They could take a go at such activities on their own too: they could pick up any issue in their neighbourhood and work to solve it or bring people to help solve it. If the seafarers are unable to provide their personal time, they could even contribute in kind or provide funds for developmental activities.

What do you like the most about working with the Synergy Group? How is Synergy's CSR different from others in the industry?

The group is very open and receptive when it comes to new ideas, which is what I like the most. Synergy is also ready to sail into uncharted waters and I get full support from everyone. We have families of Synergians volunteering to work on our initiatives and even ex-Synergians wanting to continue to work on social projects that they were a part of earlier.

We haven't compared ourselves with others in any industry as such because we wanted to start on developmental issues with the guidance of those who have been there for decades — like Jean Dreze, Vijay Mahajan (of Basix), Shankar Singh (of MKSS), etc. So we decided that it is the actual work on ground which we should choose from to shape our CSR activities.

We are working in both direct and indirect ways to help alleviate poverty and we take advice from the likes of whom I have mentioned earlier. We also seek guidance as well as try to collaborate with various initiatives of corporates like Tata and Bosch who have been doing stellar work in the social space for a long time.

What motivated you to make the shift from the navy to CSR?

I had always wanted to physically be in the social space, so the transition was surely going to happen and at the first available opportunity, it did.

Last year we let twelve lakh children die when, as a nation, we could easily have prevented it. We let thousands die of hunger when we are actually a food surplus nation. There are mothers who pick grain from cow-dung, wash it, cook and feed it to the children and there are mothers who boil stones in a vessel to make their children think that it is food which is being cooked but enact the drama till the children fall asleep. How hard would it be for a mother to do that? Can we even imagine it? There has been no dearth of motivation for me to be in the place where I am.

You have climbed Mount Everest. Could you share your experiences regarding this? Also, how did you prepare for the climb?

I qualified the mountaineering course from HMI, Darjeeling with the requisite grade just a month prior to the Indian Navy announcing that an Everest expedition was planned and that the selection process would be underway soon. I fit the bill. Then I started the strenuous training-cum-stringent-selection process, which was spread out from November 2003 to February 2004, all

in the winter months. We were trained and assessed at the Siachen Battle School (SBS) where we practised with the Indian Army at the glacier. Thereafter, we were taken to Eastern Ladakh, where temperatures in the early morning would be -35 degrees Celsius. On return to Delhi, the team was more or less finalized to comprise of 13 members of which 6 were to be the climbers. We chose the North Face (Tibet/China) side to climb because no other Indian defence force had done it before as that is the more treacherous of the two sides of Everest.

More than the cold, it is the altitude that wears you down. As the body tries to make up for the lack of oxygen at higher altitudes by generating more RBCs, our BP also rises, leaving us with constant headaches

and feelings of nausea which, in turn, quite often prevents us from being able to eat and sleep properly.

Base camp to the top, and back to base camp, took us two months. And we were a fortunate team; we came back safely with no casualties whatsoever. Our closest companions, a South Korean team of seven members, lost three in the expedition. Such ventures where we battle the elements shows us not only the incredible beauty of nature but also its power, and everyone comes back humbled by its sheer strength. But such adventures are also the story of the indomitable will of mankind.

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Total waste management system developed



Wärtsilä has developed a complete offering for handling dry waste in cruise ships, providing a total waste management offering.

The new total offering has been ordered for one new vessel to be built by the Meyer Werft shipyard for British cruise operator Saga Cruises.

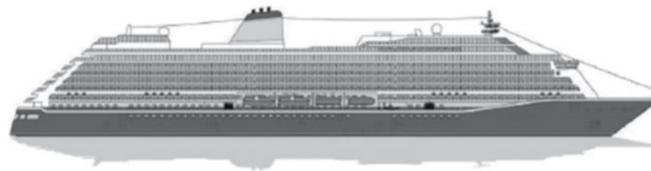
Kevin Robertson, general manager of water systems at Wärtsilä Marine Solutions, said: "Wärtsilä offers a complete range of environmental solutions that meet both current and anticipated maritime regulations."

"Our waste treatment systems are state-of-the-art in terms of both technology and energy efficiency.

Saga Cruises and Meyer Werft are both important customers, and we have tailored the solution for these ships to meet their specific needs and requests."

The overall 'full treatment' solution will provide the vessels with an environmentally clean, safe, and energy efficient means of handling their effluent and garbage.

Wärtsilä equipment utilises new membrane technology that is particularly energy efficient, with energy savings of up to



50% over conventional membrane systems.

Bernd Wiltfang of Meyer Werft, added: "We have a good relationship with Wärtsilä and are very familiar with the high quality of their solutions and the excellent level of support we can expect from them."

"Having a single supplier for the complete handling of all waste, both wet and dry, means fewer interface challenges which adds value to the project."

Each vessel will be fitted with Wärtsilä's Advanced Wastewater Treatment system, including grease traps, buffer tanks, and membrane bioreactors.

A Wärtsilä Dry Waste Disposal system, including densifiers, glass crushers, bale compactors and storage as well as a Wärtsilä's Food Waste

Vacuum system, Bio-Sludge Treatment system and Dry Garbage system.

When completed, the 236m-long vessels will offer capacity of 999 passengers and will sail in some of the most environmentally protected sea areas.

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