

Invisible Culture That Can Shape a Nation

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Early this year, as part of Global Business program at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin, I had the privilege to take 24 MBA students to India. “India Shining” and non-stop focus on India’s growing knowledge sector and offshoring prowess made this trip special. It was an opportunity of a life-time to meet with some of the thought leaders like Mr. Nandan Nilekani, CEO of Infosys and Dr. Jadhav, Principal Economic Advisor, champion of kids from the slums, Mrs. Geetha Dharmarajan – founder of Katha, and the various executives of the companies that are icons of India’s shining moments such as Infosys, Wipro, Reliance, Biocon, Citi, Rediff, Dell, and RBI. In the words of most students, India trip was their most memorable and “life-changing” experience.

On the last day of our trip together in India, professorial instinct, I randomly picked a couple of students to express their thoughts and experiences. It was puzzling to most: wealth co-existed with abject poverty, majestic buildings juxtaposed with filth, extreme hospitality with intense harassment, mind boggling intellectual capital and enormous illiteracy, and successful women professionals with toiling women in pathetic conditions. One student, William Sprauer, a 15 year veteran with U.S. Navy, summarized: “I saw two Indias – one highly prosperous, passionate and optimistic, and the other large illiterate, desperate and pessimistic.” The contradictions are unbound, mystifying, and troubling. Can the Indian government fix the great inequities? Or, is it the responsibility of the larger society – including the Indian diaspora – to bring meaningful changes?

There are many things that the people of a nation can do to bring positive and lasting changes. Let me take one aspect – profound and sustainable – of nation building that America exemplifies. It is not the American government or its policies that make this nation great. It is the invisible culture that has shaped this nation – giving and volunteerism. These are deeply embedded in this nation’s psyche. Giving and volunteerism have a goal – the betterment of the society; they have much broader implications to a nation. They reduce the dependency on the government to make social changes that are best left to the local communities and neighborhoods.

To put things in perspective I gathered some hard numbers. According to Independent Sector (www.independentsector.org), 89% of households in the U.S contribute on an average \$1,620 each year for charity. Over 44% of the adults (about 83.9 million adults) are annual formal volunteers. These volunteers contributed 15.5 billion hours with an estimated value of \$239 billion. Individuals in the U.S. donated \$157 billion for various charities in the year 2000. Various corporations, private foundations, and bequests contributed another \$51 billion during 2000. Hewlett and Packard – co-founders of HP – family and foundations have given over \$800 million to Stanford University alone. Not to be left behind, Gordan Moore, co-founder of Intel, announced a startling \$600 million gift to California Institute of Technology in 2001. These gifts are an exception only from the point of dollar figures, but not in the spirit of giving by the hundreds of thousands of individuals and businesses. The impact of Andrew Carnegie on education and learning, and the recent efforts from Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for education are profound that last forever. College and Universities in the U.S. raised over \$24 billion for the academic fiscal year ending June 2001 from individuals, foundations, and corporations (Source: RAND Corporation). The dream of these

contributions is to make a better future for the next generation, promote excellence, leave a lasting legacy, and simply give back to the school/community that has given them so much.

Obviously, being 10,000 miles from India volunteering becomes a challenge; however given the power of the *almighty* dollar, our giving can make profound impact. One area that the India diaspora can make such an impact is in helping millions of Indian children get quality primary education; a much neglected area. From Noble Laureate Amartya Sen to common person on streets agree that the solution to move people out of poverty is access to quality education within socioeconomic dynamics of the society. In India, the inequities begin at this basic stage. Millions of kids, both in urban and rural areas, have little access to schools, books, and teachers. The constitutional guarantee for primary education to every child is simply a “feel good” print with no passion to implement. Still small children in rural areas walk several miles in bear feet to go to school!

Several individuals are making a profound impact on imparting basic education to slum dwellers. I had the privilege of meeting Mrs. Geetha Dharmarajan, founder of Katha (www.katha.org), who has dedicated her life to helping kids from Delhi slums. Currently 1200 children are being educated. In 2002, Katha received educational award from NASDAQ for creative teaching. Disheartening to note that no Indian company was actively associated with Katha; surprisingly the support came from Ford Foundation, Intel, and British Telecom. There are other organizations dedicated to changing kids’ life one by one – Pratham is one such organization (e.g., www.pratham.org).

Incidentally, when I visited Bangalore, my classmates from engineering days requested me to come see a school where they were building nine classrooms. This government primary school houses 600 children in 8 classrooms is in the heart of Peenya Industrial estate, just 100 yards from Tumkur road, opposite to Parle factory. This was a shocking and a moving experience.





Classrooms have no light or even electrical outlets! At 10:30am, 50-100 kids were packed under sweltering conditions in a tiny 140 – 180 sq. ft classroom covered by asbestos (yes, still exists!) sheets. The rooms were dirty and never been painted for decades. Teachers have an operating budget of Rs. 25 per month and cannot afford chalk or working paper. The only two classrooms that were somewhat decent have been taken over for storing food grains and cooking under the newly introduced mid-day meal scheme. While Katha supported by Intel can boast of 10-15 computers, this government school had no place to even keep a table fan, let alone a computer. If this is the state of affairs in the Silicon Valley of India what about rural areas? Even then the kids' enthusiasm to learn, and the excitement to see someone visit them was touching.

My classmates, Kedarnath Mudda and B. K. Krishnamurthy, saw the pathetic conditions and took the initiative to build 9 classrooms under Project Vidya through Rotary Bangalore South Parade. Aptec has agreed to donate several computers. The cost of this project is around Rs1.6 million. The work is going on with initial seed money from several like minded individuals, and borrowed money from the same people. They are still long way in collecting the required funds (If you are interested in helping please contact me at 257-8442 or by email at konanap@yahoo.com). The troubling part of my visit to this school is the complete apathy of companies – some target their products to the very same kids – around the school. So much for corporate social responsibility! May be, Jiffy Lubes commitment to local schools can be outsourced to these companies!

We need hundreds of thousands of individuals like Kedarnath and Krishnamurthy to make any difference. The masses need to join social reform movement – from creating basic primary education and cleanliness, and eliminating discrimination and exploitation. As a wealthy group of Indians in the U.S., we can join this movement in some ways – adopt a primary school of your choice to bring positive changes, join others who are active in making some impact in their own ways to primary education, or support financially some organized movements like Katha and Pratham to bring quality education to the underserved and downtrodden.

In this spirit, we can launch an initiative to collect various charitable activities, here in the U.S. or in India, and spread the good words that encourage everyone of us to do our bit for the betterment of our society – both where we grew up and where we currently live. Your input and help in launching such an initiative is very much appreciated. If India needs to shine forever, the diaspora needs to emulate the invisible culture of giving and volunteerism that has shaped this great Nation.