

DR. BALU

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AND THE SRI VIVEKANANDA YOUTH MOVEMENT: SERVICE LEADERSHIP AMIDST RAPID CHANGE.

Bangalore, India, which used to be a sleepy little town where Indian Army officers settled after retirement till as late as the 1970's is now a bustling traffic-clogged metropolis of over 10 million. Home to many of the world's leading software companies, Bangalore has become the leading edge of India's technology development efforts. This city of discos, malls, flashy hotels, and sprawling mansions is the capital of the state of Karnataka in south India. Like all cities in the developing world, Bangalore has its slums, and masses of people who barely get by. When one leaves Bangalore and travels into the countryside, the conditions under which people live often lacking access to the bare necessities of life, could make urban poverty seem relatively benign.

We set off by train for (Mysore) to have a conversation with an individual who, we had been told had dedicated his life to helping the dispossessed, the depressed, the poorest of the poor. My companion was Fr. Lazar Savari, a Jesuit priest based in Loyola College, Chennai. Fr. Lazar, a sociologist who has worked with and studied the plight of people living at the margins, was intrigued by what he had heard of Dr. Balasubramanian, ("Balu"), a physician by training who, soon after obtaining his medical degree, plunged into a career, indeed a life, dedicated to bettering the lives of those who have been marginalized in the headlong drive to build a modern, industrial society.

When Balu graduated from medical school in 1987 he decided that, rather than pursue a lucrative career in the practice of medicine, he would work to help the tribes in the rural part of the state who had been forced off of their

land and whose livelihood was increasingly under threat because they could not grow the tubers and other crops which had traditionally comprised a big part of their diet. Balu was, and is, an admirer and disciple of Swami Vivekananda, an early 20th century Hindu philosopher who advocated action as the key to spirituality, and called for more practice than prayer. Vivekananda's philosophy of action may be distilled into two main values: Seva and Tyaaga, which may be loosely translated as Service and Faith. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, Balu has added Satya and Ahimsa (Truth and Non-violence) to the cardinal values of the organization he founded. Making these core values the foundation for all his actions and those of the organizations established by Balu and his colleagues, has been central to remaining mission-focused. The battle between materialism particularly in the context of a consumerist society, and a value-based approach to serving the most needy and oppressed in society continues, but the growing appeal of SVYM demonstrates that ideas and ideals still hold a strong appeal for the youth of today.

Not only was Balu imbued with a burning desire to improve the lot of the disadvantaged and dispossessed, he also realized that in order for his actions to have a lasting impact, he needed human and material resources and an organization to breathe life into his mission. The Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM) which he established over thirty years ago, has given life and meaning to the ideal of service to the needy while creating a cadre of workers, each of whom is equipped to lead in the various endeavors on which the SVYM has

embarked.

It so happened that, on the day Fr. Lazar and I met with Balu, the SVYM was celebrating the 31st anniversary of its founding. Hundreds of individuals leading efforts in fields as varied as health care, education, socio-economic empowerment, training, etc. had gathered at the SVYM's premises in Mysore to share experiences and ideas, learning from one another while meeting with old friends or creating new relationships.

The forest-dwelling tribes who were the group that Balu initially wanted to serve had many pressing needs, foremost among which were abysmal health care, poor or no educational facilities, loss of their traditional habitat and means of livelihood, and exploitation by the wealthy and the powerful in a society focused increasingly on maximizing economic growth, and their own personal wealth. India, which had gained independence from the British in 1947 under the moral leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, had, under its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, embarked on the path to "democratic socialism." The country's economic policy was one of industrialization with the government and public sector undertakings (PSUs) firmly in charge of providing the necessary products, making prodigious investments, and creating the required skills for the functioning of a modern economy. A series of five-year plans was unveiled with the Central Government in charge of deciding what goods and services would be produced, quantities authorized, location, and so on. PSUs received massive doses of investment from the state, and many essential services such as electricity, rail and air transportation, and tele-

communications were operated by the government itself. Private firms were allowed to function but only within the license – permit – quota regimen imposed by the state. Foreign investment was negligible and the country became autarkic-effectively sealed off economically from the outside world. Government projects and PSUs were generally mammoth in scale and scope, and though governments typically engaged in poverty amelioration measures, they often remained slogans coined to win elections. Of the funds targeted to helping the needy, typically only a fraction reach the prospective beneficiaries, much of the money being siphoned off by intermediaries. The plight of tribals was even worse than that of the poor in cities and villages. Adhering to their age old traditions and customs, tribes who eked out a livelihood outside the pale of economic development, were often considered impediments to industrial growth. Deprived of their land and food sources (roots and tubers, honey, animals), their numbers rapidly dwindled as India pursued economic advancement. As the country's government-centered economy hit the skids in the early 1990s (part of the reason being the drying up of remittances from the Middle East with the onset of the first Iraq war), free market reforms were introduced in the early 1990's. The license-permit-quota "raj" (rule) was loosened, entry of foreign firms was facilitated, and a slow program of privatization was rolled out. The plight of those who were not direct participants in an economic process which focused on GDP growth and wealth creation became even more abysmal, with the welfare of tribes and forest dwellers being almost forgotten.

It was in this context that Balu decided to commit his efforts and, indeed, his life to improving the lot of the marginal inhabitants of the land. The predominant importance assigned to economic growth meant that efforts to preserve the rights of tribals ran afoul of the powers-that-be. Balu aroused such animosity that he was thrown in jail in 1996. Rather than break his spirit, it only strengthened his resolve. Recognizing that without adequate health care, any effort to help the poor would go to waste, Balu and a few medical personnel who joined him in this endeavor went around administering whatever advice

and medication they could, given the limited means at their disposal. However, this "knee-jerk response" (as he termed it) was akin to extinguishing a fire here and a fire there, while the conflagration around them continued unabated. The need to organize to provide care on an ongoing basis was apparent and urgent. The founding doctors (all graduates of Mysore Medical College) started by supplying physicians' samples, holding weekly clinics, and organizing blood donation camps. The Vivekananda Memorial Hospital was established at Kenchanahalli in 1994, and at Saragur in 1998. They provide a range of ob/gyn, orthopedic, pediatric and other services. It works in collaboration with other health care and insurance programs run by the state and Central governments, co-operatives, and NGOs. Nearly 25% of patients were provided cashless services based on transfer of funding provided by government and other funding sources. A total of 45,000 patients received treatment in 2013-14, of whom over 10% were in-patients and about 15% were tribals. While the initial mission was to serve tribals, it has now expanded to include all who live at the margins of society. One of the central operating principles of the hospital is that the quality of care must never be compromised no matter what the socio-economic status of the patient might be. The blood storage center at the hospital, one of the first such banks in a rural area in India exemplifies this belief, providing blood on an as-needed basis regardless of ability to pay. Some innovative practices include the tuberculosis (TB) control program in which a provider in the community dispenses medicines to patients who are also given dietary supplements without having to visit the hospital, training for local groups in paramedical care, thus imparting skills while serving health care needs, and a committee to provide financial, technical, and emotional support to patients, funded by various individuals, endowments, and private firms (Bosch contributed nearly 80% of the funding).

SVYM's hospitals struck out in new directions. Staff visited tribal colonies, partnering with local public health centers to increase awareness of the health care support available and to facilitate self-help groups. Mobile Health Units fan out to bring their services to a wider section of the com-

munity. The outreach services also focused on reproductive and children's health. Treating persons with disabilities, working toward water quality improvement, educating people on better sanitation, addressing the growing problem of HIV in the area, providing palliative care, conducting yoga, and so on, have become regular features of the program. The hospital also features a combination of allopathic) and ayurvedic systems of medicine and counts on the participation and support of a range of partners. Counted among the latter are the central and state governments, students from local and foreign universities (including Cornell, Iowa), forest departments, police, nearby hospitals and the Infosys Employee Association. The SVYM hospital at Kenchanahalli incorporates both the stationary model (where patients travel to it) as well as the dynamic, preventative approach of taking care out to the served population and educating them on health-related and quality-of-life issues.

A second major thrust of the SVYM is in education. The VivekaTribal Center for Learning (VTCL), Viveka School of Excellence, the Viveka Teacher Training and Research Center (VTTRC), the Scholar Program, and the Mobile Science Lab exemplify the strategic efforts in education. The VTCL serves over 400 tribal children. Its purpose is to instill values such as diligence, self-reliance and caring for others, in addition to energizing them with the skills needed to make it in the India of today. Technical skills are taught and students learn teamwork in camps and in group activities such as rafting and camping. An indicator of the program's effectiveness is that all the students (most of whom were from poor, mainly illiterate backgrounds) appearing for the state level 10th grade exam passed. Not every activity was classroom or institution based. Sports were given due importance and the primary school students won the state title. The VTTRC's goal is to develop teachers sensitive to the needs and capabilities of their students, especially if the latter have not been exposed to the practices and values of a society very different from theirs. The Scholars Program seeks to enable deserving and competent students to take on more advanced studies. The degrees obtained by students in the Program include pharmacology, agriculture, engineering, and medicine.

Even being admitted to the Program is clearly a creditable achievement for students who would otherwise probably not have progressed beyond primary school, while graduating from it would count as stellar outcome for the student's family and community.

A third pillar of SVYM's work is based on going beyond capability creation (health care and education) to capabilities-in-action. With a view to enabling the needy and dispossessed (particularly women) to take charge of their lives, the SVYM has initiated and supported self-help groups (SHGs). There are over 100 SHG exclusively for tribal groups, and around 600 other rural, youth, farmer, and street-vendor groups. The focus is education, social awareness, and instilling leadership skills. By providing start-up capital to a few groups, seed capital to others, establishing units to produce cereals and breads, providing training in skilled work (e.g. carpentry) and in entrepreneurship, the SVYM has set in motion a variety of interlinked programs to offer a choice of livelihoods to tribal peoples and residents in impoverished rural areas. A radio station reaching over 100,000 listeners helps spread the word about the diverse development activities attracting more participants and supporters. Serving as a lodestar to this facet of the SVYM is a quotation from Vivekananda himself, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved." It may be noted here that nearly seventy years after independence, the status of women in India remains far from satisfactory. While women have risen to positions of political and economic power, and numerous women in urban India are in the workforce, by and large, India remains a patriarchal society, particularly in its villages. There have been a few high-profile cases of sexual assault in India which have garnered a lot of international attention. While these prominent instances have justifiably generated great outrage inside and outside the country, the fact is that much needs to be done to address the treatment of, and status of, women in their everyday lives quite apart from the issue of physical and mental harassment. The preference for male

children, for instance, persists to this day. In certain states there are fewer than 900 women for every 1,000 men. This has caused social problems due to a shortage of women of marriageable age. Speaking of marriage, a predominant share of marriages is arranged, with brides often becoming appendages to their husbands and/or in-laws. While female literacy has risen over the past 10 years, the rates still trail significantly behind those of men in a significant portion of the country.

The SVYM's Socio-Economic Empowerment Program (SEEP) is an attempt to give women skills, greater confidence, and a new vision for their role in society. Training and Research is a division of SVYM whose mission is to bring together the knowledge, often tacit, gained in its various health-care, educational, empowerment, capability creation, and other activities, with a view to sharing and leveraging the learning generated within the organization and with like-minded institutions across the country. The Vivekananda Institute for Leadership Development (V-LEAD) offers a two-year Master's degree in Development Management in collaboration with the University of Mysore. The focus is on experiential learning, combining academic knowledge, interaction with fieldworkers, experiencing leadership in on-going projects, benchmarking similar developmental works carried out elsewhere, and so on. The program aims to enhance capabilities of those engaged in developmental work in government, NGOs, and corporations. A particular focus of the V-LEAD program is to create a cadre of leaders among young people. It is worth noting that the leadership process and capabilities are relevant in SVYM's projects to business firms as well. The areas of immediate relevance include corporate social responsibility (CSR), communication skills, workplace behaviors, and customer relationship management. (Ever since the government of India mandated that all publicly owned firms must devote 2% of their annual projects to CSR, corporations have sought expert advice on where and how to make their CSR investments. The experience of SVYM in areas of particular interest to firms

makes the public-private partnership all the more appropriate.)

As we continued speaking with Balu late into the night, we could see that he burned with an undiminished zeal for the work he had undertaken some thirty years ago. His piercing brown eyes kept lighting up with joy and pride as he recounted instances of success- graduates of the SVYM program becoming forest-officers, the improvements in the health and income-earning abilities of the thousands helped by the Movement he started and shepherded, the leaders trained and becoming influential agents of change themselves. But, as Balu continued to lay out the rising arc of the SVYM's achievements, we could sense that, having established, and given momentum to, an organization on a massive scale, Balu was ready to move on. Not that he was losing interest in the growing social enterprise. Far from it. His thoughts have now turned to institutionalizing, evaluating, and scaling up. About 5 years ago, with the SVYM functioning to his satisfaction, Balu felt that he needed to do more, but had little idea what direction to take. He decided to go to Sabarmati Ashram (where Mahatma Gandhi had once lived) in hopes of deriving some inspiration from the spirit of a great change-maker. Balu happened to see a mural of the famous Dandi March in the course of which Gandhi walked all the way from Sabarmati to the sea, gathering thousands of people along the way, in order to make salt (to protest the salt tax imposed by the British). The entire freedom movement in India, in a way, appeared to crystallize around and gain momentum from, Gandhi's long walk and symbolic gesture. Seeking inspiration for his own Movement, Balu embarked on a long walk ("Jagruti Yatra" or Awareness March) of his own, covering 400, passing through around 120 villages, interacting with an estimated 200,000 people. The purpose of this long walk was to alert people to the endemic corruption in the country, and to build grassroots support for concerted action to address the issue. Balu was a leading figure in the snowballing activism that was taking the country by storm at that time,

and was, in fact, among its leading lights on the national stage. Balu arrived in Bangalore on Gandhi's birthday to a hero's welcome with leading luminaries, among them the former Chief Justice of India's Supreme Court, on hand to commemorate the occasion. Later, given the opportunity to run for election supported by a new party devoted to fighting corruption (which would almost certainly have resulted in his becoming a Member of Parliament), Balu reluctantly declined in order to return, with renewed idealism and excitement, to his real calling – service, and the nurturing of leaders with the same vision.

In 2012, Balu did what most founders of successful organizations have great difficulty doing: he stepped down, and handed over leadership to a couple of colleagues, Dr. M.R. Seetharaman and Dr. M.A. Balasubramanya. Balu admits that it was a wrenching experience to avoid involvement in the everyday activities, or intervene in the decision-making process, at SVYM. Rather than distancing himself from the social enterprise he created and led, Balu is now trying to build further on the edifice, so to speak, of the SVYM. His new venture is known as the "Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement" (GRAAM, which, in a few Indian languages translates to "village.") GRAAM's mission is undertaking research to evaluate the results of social actions and policies. Some of the categories of social policy assessed are outcomes in human development, research in school education and nutrition, inclusive social development and justice, and in public health. GRAAM has been designated as the lead agency charged with reporting on the efficacy of policies, advising other social enterprises (including government agencies), and sharing of best practices.

To call Balu a Social Entrepreneur would be an accurate statement, but also a gross understatement. What has transpired in the years since the Jagriti Yatra (the Awareness March) has been in two senses, a sort of meta-social-entrepreneurship. For one, the establishment of GRAAM provides an approach to tracking the performance of the SVYM's multi-dimensional Social Entrepreneurship, while sharing best practices and scaling up. A second aspect of going beyond traditional social entrepreneurship is the

attempt to replicate not just the model of service activities undertaken, but the very leadership characteristics and style that could mirror and amplify the scale and scope of service leadership inculcated at SVYM. The metaphor of "Network" leadership (that is, multiple leaders who encapsulate the entire range of capabilities demonstrated by other organizational leaders), appears apropos here. Network leadership makes it possible to scale up by the movement of interchangeable personnel. (The "lattice" organization adopted by W-L-Gore is analogous in the limited sense that it attempts to create leaders who assume different roles depending on the need of the moment – product development, retailing, technology development, etc.). Of course, the SVYM does not attempt to create cookie-cutter leaders. Personal differences would make that impossible. However, creating a culture of service, of restlessly seeking out new opportunities to benefit those whom society ignores, seeking out like-minded benefactors, and so on, are integral and invaluable to the network leadership model. The culture-leader connection is one of mutual influence. As conditions change, leaders need to adjust, which could result in modifications being made to the beliefs and values guiding decisions. For instance, in the 1980's, economic conditions in India were such that funding or providing social and economic support for tribals were limited, and available mainly from a few sources, mainly governmental. Now, with the expansion in the number of NGOs, state and central government-agencies, and the increased involvement of the private sector through CSR programs, the leaders' visions, strategies and interactions with stakeholders has changed, resulting in a very different organizational culture. As Balu puts it, leaders have to learn to separate their role from their self. That is, their inner core, their passion for truth, justice, and service, and their unshakeable will are what sustain successful leaders. However, the roles they play may vary as times change and as they deal with varied and changing stakeholders. The mark of a true leader lies in how successfully he/she plays multiple, changing roles while remaining true to his/her inner core.

"Seeing God in all human beings, as I do," Balu stated with utter conviction,

"inspires a passion in me which, I hope, is seen and felt by everyone whose lives we touch". He added, "Servant-based leadership is, of course, embodied in the leader who gives himself/herself entirely to serving others. In fact, service to others is what gives meaning and renewed passion both to the lives of those who serve as well as to those being served. The leader plants the seed for new leaders to be born and to flourish from a variety of sources, but particularly from the ranks of those previously-marginalized by society."

When Fr. Lazar enquired how Balu, given his remarkable accomplishments on behalf of the powerless kept a level head and resisted the intrusion of his ego into the running of the organization, his response was illuminating. "Ego," to quote Balu, "is a powerful worm." By that he meant that when leaders of organizations experience continued success, they are often infused with an increasing sense of their own competence and invulnerability, which can "worm" its way into their very being. Starting as self-confidence, this belief in one's own indispensability to the organization can border on hubris. Effective leaders, in Balu's opinion have to guard against the ego's insidious influence. The key to being able to do this harks back to keeping one's role and the self distinct. Fidelity to one's core beliefs while adapting one's role to the needs of stakeholders keeps a leader, in a manner of speaking, on the straight and narrow.

When asked how he managed to recruit young men and women to work for a social enterprise which paid a fraction of what they might earn in a corporation, Balu replied that, for a few different reasons, the SVYM was not short of applicants. Some were inspired by the mission and were self-starters, who took the initiative in becoming integral to the organization's activities. Others, who were looking to "pad resumes," stayed for 6 months to a year working effectively at SVYM and typically becoming socially-conscious even after they had left. A third category of hires may be "escapists", seeking a refuge in a highly competitive, demanding world. While these individuals needed advice and re-orientation, they often stayed on as they had found their true calling. A fourth group of new hires comprised

graduates who were confused and looking for direction and meaning. And exposure to the compassionate, humanitarian work of the SVYM draws a fair proportion of this group to stay on a full-time basis.

Generally, the recruitment process is facilitated through employee referrals and an initial screening for intent and focus on service. A desire to serve, the humility to work in teams, and a willingness to subordinate one's ego to the needs of the organization and its stakeholders, are some of the qualities sought in a new employee. Mentoring is part of the orientation process while sharing of experiences

which further cements the core values, and helps the members internalize them. The question of spirituality came up, and Balu was careful to point out that though the SVYM and Leadership Formation Program were rooted in the precepts and actions advocated by Swami Vivekananda, the underlying philosophy was not specific to any one religion. In fact, the SVYM incorporates and builds on tenets and ideas common to most major religions. For instance, a sense of compassion for the poor can be found in most religions, with some, say Christianity, emphasizing actions over words. The latter principle is embodied in much of Vive-

kananda's teachings which called for greater self-reliance, and the importance of being a servant to all.

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dhism extols the virtues of doing good to others, of achieving one's goals through altruism, and of mindfulness. In an era when consumerism and the pursuit of material ends seem irresistible, the spirituality common to the great religions might appear to be losing ground, even becoming irrelevant. Rather than exhort youth to become more spiritual, the strategy of SVYM is to engender spirituality through action. In other words, the SVYM's belief is that pragmatism in the form of service, changes individuals, thereby transforming society.

As we chatted with Balu, it became apparent that SVYM had traveled a

great deal of ground since its inception and was now training leaders capable of striking out on their own to do the same or similar work in Karnataka and elsewhere. In addition, the organization had become a benchmark for achieving social change in the state, in India, and even beyond. Some of the challenges occupying the organization and its founder now are:

Finding and grooming the next generation of leaders who are both committed and competent

Operating in a rapidly changing eco-system, wherein governments are becoming nervous of the activities of NGOs. Changing regulatory laws and challenge of a market driven economy make finding the right person now becoming a challenge

Though CSR offers new opportunities, the mushrooming number of NGOs makes fund raising highly competitive.

Finding the right balance between social interventions, campaigns, development projects and charitable initiatives is a challenge

Ensuring financial stability to a organization that is now into its 4th decade of existence with more than 700 full time employees is a real challenge.

Clearly, the inspiration, passion and a self-renewing leadership model have had an enormous impact on the lives of many thousands of people who would otherwise have not stood a chance in a highly competitive and materialistic environment. But, what concerned most Balu in December 2014 was how he was going to magnify the impact of the SVYM without compromising any of its core values, without sacrificing spirituality on the altar of expediency.

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reinforces the values of SVYM at the weekly meetings Saturdays. Emphasis is placed on articulating how the week's developments help further the pursuit of Truth, Justice, Non-Violence (Peace), and Compassion. Another occasion for sharing experiences is during Alumni Week, which serves both to give the associates, particularly recent additions, a sense for what they themselves might achieve, as well as (a) keep former associates/graduates connected with their alma mater, and (b) help in discovering new directions which the Movement and Leadership Program might take. An organization-wide Retreat is held every six months,