

Principles and a Principal : On the Hills with Dr.Sundar Gandikota

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It was a friendly hill. We were sitting on a comfortable spot, midway from the top of hill. It was Sundar's favourite spot. He could park his car without obstructing the road. One hardly saw a vehicle on that road. But occasionally a villager would be moving with his animals. A great Valley was in front of us and the Majestic hills across dominated the scene, leaving little room for obscure thoughts! The clouds were playing hide and seek with the hills. One of the hills is named after 'Vayuputra', Hanuman or Anjaneya. Even the village nearby is called Anjaneri. Gentle breeze was blowing and Sundar opened the snack box from his car and poured hot, home made South Indian filter coffee from the flask. The fragrance of coffee found its way to be noticed. Sipping the coffee we sat in Silence! Embraced by such benevolence of Nature, one wondered whether there is any need to talk at all! Time passed on. We were both watching the distant hills with no other concern. A grass hopper jumped out of the grass asking for attention.

A thought came! 'Principal of a School' is like a 'Captain of Ship'! He/she holds the authority as well as the responsibility over all the subjects in the Campus! Just a month before, I had met many principals/head masters of K V (Kendriya Vidyalaya) Schools. I was sharing my 'experiments with children' on how to make Math learning a fun and play. 'Bammetry', a workshop on learning symmetry with bamboo fascinated them. They were asking if I had written a book on my experiments! Even my web site(www.agrao.in) was not ready at that time! Writing a book is one thing, but sitting on a hill, sipping coffee with a principal of school is quite another experience! No wonder I have yet to write a book on the topic!

'Some more coffee', Sundar brought me into the presence! This was our second trip to the spot. In the earlier trip we had come with a person who was exploring the possibility of joining the school. He was over qualified for the job from normal standards. This is a great quality Sundar has. He would attract unusual, odd, very talented teachers to the school and groom them. They were not looking for just a job! They were looking for inner satisfaction!

This is where a *'Perceptive Principal'* counts ! In fact at OIS(Orchid International School) salaries were not as high as many private schools! Yet they joined OIS. The very place chosen for the dialogue with a new, unusual entrant made all the difference. With few searching questions he put, Sundar could assess the inner strengths and drawbacks of a person. *As I found out later by discussing with him, Sundar had a clear, tacit methodology in evaluating a potential teacher! This made him a highly talented Principal!*

'Sir (I wished he did not address me as 'sir', but his politeness and the age-difference between us, seemed to make it natural) this year we had a good intake ! This makes our chairman satisfied as we are gaining in the financial side!'

This is when I realized a 'pragmatic mind' is so necessary to make an ideal school viable! OIS had excellent facilities like a gym, yoga centre, play ground, open air theatre, student hostels, residential accommodation for teachers, an excellent guest house and a well- run Mess! All the students, teachers and guests took their 'meals' there! Things happened in time and healthy food was prepared with care and hygiene! Sundar, often, would eat there, suggesting new ideas and making sure food was tasty and of good quality! This canteen also became a meeting place during lunch. I was able to make friends with teachers and discuss with them many things informally to get a pulse of the place!

'Sundar, how did you go to Rishi Valley School(RVS)?'

He narrated in detail. Like many of us, he was drawn by J.Krishnamurti's talks. But he made a major decision in his life! Trained as an engineer he had a well-paid industrial job. He left that to join as a 'school teacher'.

'Did you ever regret leaving a well-paid job? I am sure it must have been a difficult decision.'

'Yes! It was a difficult choice to make! But I never regretted. I learnt a lot in Rishi Valley! I could understand the very structure of school organisation! In fact my doctoral thesis was 'A study of the management style and growth of students at Rishi Valley School'.

I was attracted by the topic as 'Krishnamurti on Education' was my favourite book. I still remember, how a design educator from Brazil Dr. Luiz Gomes, who visited IDC, IIT Bombay, in 1989, was amazed at the content when I presented him a copy of that book! Browsing through 'Sundar's thesis I learnt many new things!

A quote from JK (taken from Sundar's thesis):

The Headless School: "The center cannot be made up of the headmaster alone... If the headmaster is dominating, then the spirit of freedom and co-operation obviously cannot exist. A strong character may build a first-rate school, but fear and subservience creep in, and then it generally happens that the rest of the staff is composed of nonentities. Such a group is not conducive to individual freedom and understanding. The staff should not be under the domination of the headmaster, and the headmaster should not assume all responsibility; on the contrary, each teacher should feel responsible for the whole. If there are only a few who are interested, then the indifference or opposition of the rest will impede or stultify the general effort. One may doubt that a school can be run without a central authority; but one really does not know, because "it has never been tried".

KRISHNAMURTI J. (1992). REP 1992. Education and The Significance of Life. Chapter 5-The School. Page 90

This dictum is a great challenge to any Head Master or Principal of a School!

But one could see how Sundar was implementing it in spirit at OIS.

Sundar's doctoral thesis validated very unique managerial practices at RVS like

- Informality with tacit discipline
- Innovation in Education within the boundaries of peer acceptance
- Absence of explicit, formal rules to be followed rigidly.
- Involving many in 'decision making' without extending to unconnected areas which could become a hindrance for a speedy decision making.

through statistical data and analysis! *His thesis also brought out that tacit unobtrusive management style did result in the personality development as well as professional development of Teachers and students!*

As I saw, Sundar brought into practice *'the spirit of RVS and the articulated findings in his thesis'* at OIS, in spite of missing *'philosophical foundations of RVS'*. He even took the challenge of moulding the top management which was so necessary. It also brought conflicts in 'school operations', once in a while! Sundar took every opportunity to expose the chairman of the school to a larger domain of 'Education'. He arranged an informal meeting of Mr.Sapkal with me. I had a nice interaction and invited him to visit the unique Bambu Studio at IDC,IIT Bombay. Coming with a graphic art back ground, Mr.Sapkal had a creative eye in choosing the place for OIS as well as building harmonious relationships with the villages around. We did have discussions on great role OIS could play in that region.

Operating with constraints in a private school dependent on its own financial resources is a challenge! Adopting creative structures to groom teachers and children, exposing them to eminent persons and places of academic excellence like IITs needs a 'Vision and capability' which Sundar had. Prof.Lance Rake who came to Bambu studio as a Fulbright scholar and Dr. Iko, a graphic designer from Israel visited OIS on Sundar's invitation.They met Mr.Sapkal and gave talks to students and teachers.

I was trying to recall how I met Sundar to start with. It was through another passionate teacher with an excellent record as an educator, prof. Anant Mahajan. He brought Sundar to Bambu studio, one fine morning and introduced him to me. Sundar soon invited me to OIS at Nasik. He had a knack of picking up Opportunities. Later when I said that I am going to conduct a week long workshop to primary school teachers for a NGO, Sundar immediately came with a suggestion that he will sponsor three teachers from his school to attend the workshop. The workshop was initiated by another passionate promoter of 'Art' in schools, Ritu Khoda, founder of a wonderful organization called 'Art1st'. The workshop turned out to be unique with

Mrs Ritu Khoda herself attending. Another significant person was Sarada(Mrs. Sundar Gandikota) who also taught in OIS.

Sundar also sent a team of children along with 3 teachers to Shenoy Innovation Studio at IDC. Prof.B. K.Chakravarty got so impressed with the searching questions of students and teachers that he engaged them for an hour explaining, how design innovation takes place with examples like Petrol Pump and Jaipur foot.

Often less talked about, persons like Dr.Sundar Gandikota, who had an international exposure to J K School at California (USA), in addition to getting groomed at RVS, are great assets to the Country. Such people adhere to 'principles' and 'Values' which can bring hardships to them and their families when difficult 'decisions of principle' are taken. This is where 'inner strength' is required. Sundar left OIS once, due to such a conflict of principle with Management! But within a year and half the school management came to him with a request to join back! In his absence several dedicated teachers had left the school. Student- intake had come down, putting financial strain on the school! Sundar in no time brought back the School on to an even keel!

'Sir, shall we go back?' the question brought me back to the hills! Each trip I made to OIS, Sundar made sure that I got something new. On this occasion it was also precious! In the evening he took me to meet Swami Sreekantananda, a monk with a social mission who was groomed at Ramakrishna Mission. He was staying in a simple abode near a temple along with his younger colleague! We sat in an open hall. I felt at home with the faint smell of cow dung bringing memories of my childhood. I had grown up in a house with mud floor washed by cow dung every day! The place was quiet but for the occasional sounds made by the bells tied to the cow nearby. We sat in silence for a while before we got into conversation. Swamiji was simple and unassuming. His ability to laugh at ourselves brought us close in no time! Soon I discovered that he had a thorough exposure to Indian Scriptures. Swamiji would quote an opt sloka in Sanskrit on any topic which came up, to our delight! Young he was, his depth of knowledge was amazing. We had wide spread discussions starting from J Krishnamurti to Design, IITs and

Indian traditions! He prodded me to write more on my concept of 'arupa' in the context of Design!

Swamiji also told me how helpful Sundar was in starting his work at village-schools. Sundar took children of OIS, who come from well to do families, to mix with children in the village-school. The friendships across the children led to some OIS students celebrating their birth days in the village school and sharing the 'sweets and cakes' with their friends there! In a subtle way Sundar was bridging the gaps in economic inequalities to develop the social dimension of OIS students.

I somehow get drawn to persons like Sundar and Swamiji. May be a common chord in the inner layers vibrates with same frequency!
