

My journey through Two India's (July – August 2007)

Similar to John Edwards Two America's



Two weeks ago, I was in Bangalore, India attending the flag hoisting ceremony in a primary school. The name 'Bangalore' sends shock waves through US for all the jobs being lost due to outsourcing. Four days ago, I was in the outsourcing suburb of Chennai called 'Sholinganallur'. On both sides, high rise buildings belonging to InfoSys, Wipro, Tata Consultants, Cognizants line up. To bring their employees to work and return them home later, the streets were lined with AC Deluxe buses.

You can take both sides of the argument on outsourcing. For every employee going to work in these high rise buildings, at least 0.5 position is lost in the US. But on the other hand, this situation would not have happened if England and other colonial powers had not kept India suppressed as a colony.

Four years ago, the average hourly billing rate for work done in India was around \$ 20, compared to \$ 90 in the US. Now, the same billing rate in India has climbed to \$ 60. At this rate, Indian outsourcing companies have about 3 years left. Then most of the jobs will return to the US.

While a very small percent of jobs, less than 5% are claimed as high value jobs, the most typical job is in Accounts Payable and Invoice payment authorization for US companies.

Why do I write about outsourcing when I really wanted to write about my village project?

India is still a poor country

There is a current myth in the minds of US citizens that every Indian is a double major in Math and Science. That may be true in the case of 0.5 million people. Of the total number of India's 1.03 Billion population, about 1.2 million are employed in the IT field of any kind, including call centers.

The real India is basically an agrarian society and very poor. I was surprised to hear from BBC-TV in their special programs marking India's 60th birthday that 700 million people earn less than \$ 0.5 per day. This is quite different from the conservative position taken by the Government of India that only 240 million people are 'below the poverty' line.

I have lived in Minnesota for the last 35+ years, in a safe and secluded suburb. My daughter thinks that she is 'below the poverty' level, if the color of her purse, her nail polish and shoe do not match.

1 Billion people – extreme poverty – less than a dollar a day

Do you know that there are currently 6.2 Billion people in the world? The United Nations categorizes the first billion earning less than a Dollar a day as 'extreme poverty'. The Second and Third billion people are fantastically better off since they earn \$ 2 per day and are called simply as 'poverty'.



How do I convince my daughter as well as millions of US citizens that we have no clue what poverty is. To make matters worse, a good portion of the US population mixes their ignorance with arrogance, thereby choosing to remain indifferent and ignorant.

Picture on left: This woman makes about 1000 match boxes in a day, to earn less than \$ 1 a day.

Unless and until, we state that poverty breeds violence and hatred for the western nations and in some cases, breeds terrorists, no one wants to hear the truth.

The entire nation of Africa can 'stand on its own feet', if the \$ 4.3 billion annual subsidies given to 24,000 Texas farmers not to grow cotton are cancelled. We don't even process the cotton into textiles. This is done entirely in China. Do you know that it is better to be born as a European Cow getting a subsidy of 15,000 Euros per year not to produce milk than be born as a poor villager in India?

As I write this on August 28th, 2007, Channel 2 or PBS TV is running a special on the farmers who are committing suicide in Vidarbha region of the State of Maharashtra. This PBS special was produced by another Minnesotan, Fred De Sam Lazro. Hope my friends in the US will take a break from ball games and beer commercials and see what is happening in another part of the world.

I must admit that until 6 years ago, I could care less, who was classified as poor and why.

Luckily that changed when the State of Gujarat had a massive earthquake in Jan 2001. The Indian American community in Minnesota collected \$ 250,000 to help rebuild the village of 'Vijaypar', where 203 houses (really huts) out of 208 had collapsed. I welcomed the opportunity to visit this village a year later to see if the money was spent correctly. Until this visit to a village, I have never visited a village before.

All of us responded to the Tsunami waves that engulfed parts of India, Thailand and Indonesia. But do you know that there are 2 kinds of Tsunami – the fast one that occurred on Dec 26, 2005. Then there is the ‘slow Tsunami’ that silently rises every day in these villages and there is no one to report that.

Unless and until you take the time and effort to visit these villages and witness poverty first hand, poverty will remain a statistic. The reason why you and I are not poor, was simply a matter of luck.

We must help these people in need in two ways – charity as well as development. If someone has not eaten for 4 days and is hungry, that person needs food and not a lecture on democracy or the virtues of market based economies. That is charity. Development consists of a multi-sector incremental approach to rural development. The components of such a rural development program are – **water, food, health, education, livelihood, alternate energy and connectivity** – in THAT order. Please don’t construct a school if there are no students to attend due to lack of water and food in that village.

Go ahead and make your mistakes

Most of us spend our time reading about poverty in the world. Did you know that you can actually do something about it. It does not take a billion dollar World Bank program. In fact, I would like to challenge the World Bank to account for the Billions of dollars spent and nothing to show for it. Do you know that majority of the World Bank staff have never visited a village? They are too busy hopping across the world capitals. I would like to direct them to a village in the State of Maharashtra in India called ‘Hivre Bazar’ and meet a young village leader who has quietly reformed his village.



Hivre Bazar is located in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. Unlike the rest of the state, sugar cane and bananas are not grown here. Less water demanding crops such as millets and onion are grown here. Some of its residents who migrated to Mumbai in search of jobs, have returned.

Shri Popat Pawar (right) educated and working in the nearby larger city, returned to his native village 8 years ago. Starting with prohibition, water management and other development subjects, he has placed his entire village of 180 families ‘above poverty level’.

Another positive development – young and educated farmer

Farmers in India today are debating whether to continue farming or close down their farm and join their brothers who have migrated to nearby cities. As a farm labour, you earn about Rs 65 for a day's worth of work. If you migrate to a nearby town, you can earn about Rs 125, washing dishes in a restaurant or as a 'gopher' in a retail store.

In this background, an Engineer with Math and Science background has chosen to ignore the IT path to riches and returned to work in a farm. To my limited knowledge, he may be the first IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) graduate to work in a farm.



Madhavan (picture above) is achieving significant increase in output and hence lower unit price for his crops, by applying science to his farming



Madhavan rigged up a motorized cart to plant rice seedlings in multiple rows. This has cut his rice replanting time significantly

Is there a proven remedy?

After these 5+ years of traveling through the villages and participating in about a dozen projects, I believe that there is a proven remedy.

Poor countries like India (yes, India is a poor country) can get out of the poverty cycle.

There are 5 ingredients to this remedy.

1. NGO's with a passion and a proven field success
2. A corps of regional volunteers willing to learn and work.
3. Money from abroad to kick start these efforts but never fund any project 100%.
4. The local community or the village receiving the development MUST invest at least 30% of the project costs. This community share of the project costs will ensure their ownership and sustainability.
5. A few NRI's (term used by India to refer to its diasporas) to be catalysts and cheer-leaders.

The development mix is the same in every part of the world dominated by poverty.

How can you get started?

If you go to a bingo game, you cannot get excited just looking at others play. You must jump in, buy a few bingo cards and listen carefully to the numbers being drawn.

In the same way, you cannot just be on the sidelines, content being on-lookers. Decide an amount of money that you can spare and not get terribly concerned if you should lose it. Say this amount is in the range of \$ 50 to \$ 100. With the help of Google, find an NGO, in your part of India, working in your sector of Interest (water, food, health etc). Just mail that check for \$ 50. Don't waste your time looking for the tax deduction possibilities. This act of generosity will make a change in you. Now you will want to learn what happened to that money you sent. This will bring you closer to the project and the people it helps. You are no longer a by-stander. You are now a change agent. Follow your first step, with larger contributions and better understanding of the needs of the people that you have chosen to help.



Another Minnesotan, **Sen. Paul Wellstone** used to say – “We all do well, when we all do well”.

Picture on left: Our CARE team from Minnesota meeting with Sen. Amy Klobachar on June 14, 2007 in her Senate office and talk about world poverty.

Believe me; it does not take a lot of money. It just takes a lot of passion and commitment.

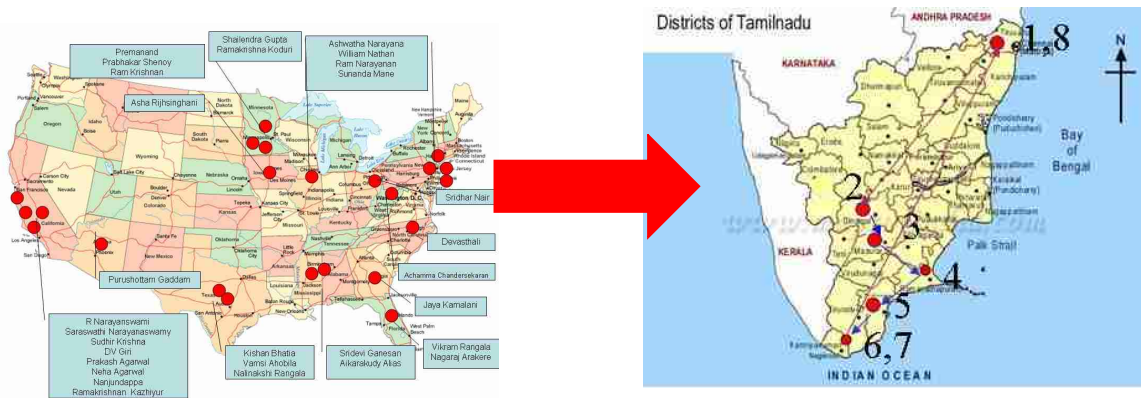
In our own project evolution, we are constructing a Community Center that will provide much needed services as well as field training in various livelihood projects..

IDCA – India Development Coalition of America

I will be remiss, if I did not admit to my own learning process that started with some annual meetings in Chicago under the banner of IDCA – India Development Coalition of America. I am a product of IDCA and I would not have understood the various elements of Rural Development. I am also a volunteer from Minnesota for the Poverty Reduction programs of CARE International.

Another initiative

A group of 30 Indian-Americans from all over the US have signed up to spend 7 days in India – actually to see the ‘other India’. A tour aptly named as ‘Learning Journey’ will take these people to visit the villages of India. They will visit villages where no development has taken place, some villages after the benefit of rural development, as well as some NGO’s working in this field. A similar journey that I undertook 4 years ago, made me accept the realities of India. We hope that many of these 30 participants will want to engage in similar development activities after they discover ‘the other India’.



The journey is mapped, the bus is stocked up and ready, waiting for YOU to board

Will you join us in this journey? I can promise you, I will guarantee you that once you smell success in this effort, you will regret not starting this journey earlier. Sure, there will be some problems initially in your journey. Come on, what are you waiting for. Are you waiting for your family to give the green signal? Are you waiting for your doctor to declare you with some horrible health condition? Take this journey as early as you can. **Note:** the above journey with 30 people takes place on Dec 15-22 starting in Chennai India and is fully booked.

“In poor people’s smile, I saw God” – this is a Tamil saying.

In Tamil it says – “Ezhaiyin chiripill, kadavulai kanden”.

Contact: If you are interested in finding more (or funding) about anything mentioned above, feel free to contact me at ram.krishnan@yahoo.com Note: There is a ‘period’ between the two parts of the name in the e-mail address. If you are interested in some field projects – both completed and underway, please look at www.ram-krishnan.com