

# How it all Began

by Ramesh Ramanathan, Co-founder of Janaagraha

Over the past few years, Swati and I have been asked one question more than any other, “*How did it all begin? Why did you’ll decide to come back?*”

Like most grandmothers’ tales, it is a long story. But let me attempt a short version.

I used to keep an infrequent diary; this is an extract from July 2, '97: Swati was visiting India with the children, I was alone in London.

*“Swati called me early, 7am. We talked, as we always do on Saturday mornings, of our life: where we are headed, what our priorities are, and in the talking, we make sense of this confusing, whirling rollercoaster of a world...”*

*Now I am alone, staring at these objects scattered around me: bed, dresser, lamp, photographs, the open doorway, the carpet, the wall hanging. And it makes no sense to me. WHAT AM I DOING HERE? A successful professional in utter despair. Everything is meaningless: getting up, brushing, eating breakfast, stepping out. Arbitrary choices... surprising we don't get carpal tunnel syndrome of the mind from all the endless garbage we stuff our lives with...*

*We have got to act for today, not for when we retire. Is it as simple a switch as this? What are we afraid of?”*

We had met our financial and professional goals: we were respected in our fields of work. I was on a fast-track career; the bank was grooming me – heading a \$100 million business spread across Europe, member of a team that was running a \$1 billion business at 33, liked by both political sections among my bosses. Swati was working with the largest architecture and design firm in the world. We had everything: money, weekend getaways to Paris or Milan, hot careers...

The truth is that all the trappings of successful professional lives are actually traps: the pay, the bonus, the perks, the lifestyle, the health insurance, the conferences around the world.

The question then is “*What next?*”

During all our years in the US, we had not thought at all about “giving back”. We had few friends in the NGO sector, and when we visited India, we would grumble like everybody else about the airports and the garbage and the traffic. Yes, we enjoyed the family company, and the smells of India, but there was a relief to get back to the calm and peace of our cocooned lives.

At the regular NRI gatherings, we would have the usual conversations about what ailed India. And all of us had all the answers. “The problem with India is...”, was how most sentences would begin. Magic wands being swished around, thousands of miles away, safe.

The more Swati and I thought about it, the more we realized that we were successful not just because of our own effort – yes, that is always necessary - but because there was an invisible “system” that enabled this search for excellence and accomplishment. It was the same system that ensured that the streets were clean and the garbage got picked up. After all, people are the same everywhere, white skin or brown or yellow: everybody would use opportunities for power and patronage. And as we looked at the differences through this filter, it started making more and more sense to us. We get frustrated at the bad roads in India, but what is the “system” that creates bad roads; we curse the garbage lying around, but what is the “system” that causes it not to get picked up; we have so many poor people in our country, with wonderful talents, but what is the “system” that prevents them from seeking their own destiny.

We knew that we didn’t know enough about all this. It is amazing how little most people know about politics and government and social structures. And yet have the arrogance – because of really trivial accomplishments in a career or a business – to hold forth with high-sounding opinions.

But we also knew that we were somehow part of a fortunate group: of people who had the good fortune to see another way in another part of the world. Imagination is what drives the world. It is hard to imagine how different things can be if all you know is the slum you were born into. And just being on the other side had opened up our minds. We could rationalize this by saying, “Yes, but we did this through our own effort, we took the trouble of studying well, writing GRE and GMAT, and taking the loan from Canara bank to go abroad.” To a certain extent, that is true, there is no substitute for individual endeavour. But then, having tasted all that the world had to offer, what do we do with our good fortune? Should we keep it to ourselves?

We began to believe that we had to return, that it was the obligation of our generation to build these systems back in India. We had our health, our secure finances, our relative youth. Most importantly, each other. Most people are caught in the everyday challenges of life: difficult marriages, a sick relative, money worries. Let’s face it, we are all dodging bullets every day.

And so, the rationale for returning was getting established over several months. The diary entry was an example of what we were thinking.

But like most things in life, there is always more than one reason for any action. And reason alone can only take you that far.

On our personal front, we had all four of our parents in Bangalore, all – touch wood – in good health. And getting along reasonably well with each other, imagine that!

For differing reasons, Swati and I were keen that our children got to know their grandparents. For her, because she never met either of her grandfathers, they died before she was born. For me, because my relationship with my mother's father was very special to me, until he passed away.

When we mention the family issue to most people, they nod and say knowingly, "Yes, in America, life is very selfish and money-minded" or, "Children need to have Indian values".

Neither of these statements is true for us. Our experiences in the US, both at university and work, broke many myths that we had held about that country before we got there. We have wonderful friendships with many Americans, who care about their families and friends as much if not more than most Indians we know. We saw civic conscience and hard work an almost universal aspect of American life. Of course there were exceptions, but that's always the case.

Neither of us is religious, so this question of Indian values is a tricky one. We loved life in the West, New York and London are even now our favourite cities in the world. However, we are clear that our identity is Indian, while our worldview is a more cosmopolitan mixture. We believe that our children also need a similar sense of identity, to be able to deal with the complexities of the world as they grow up. And here, they are fortunate in that they have the opportunity to build an inter-generational link with their grandparents.

This was the other dimension of returning to India. And at the time, it was not like I am writing it, in clear black-and-white terms; back then, it was more a confusing mix of feelings. The patterns only emerged as we looked back in time.

So, we had moved from the US to London, getting – as we said – "halfway home". We were not sure when we would pull the trigger, if at all. On one trip, in early 1998, Swati said, "*Let's check out the schools, just in case we choose to return in a year or two.*"

I guess that was fateful.

A few months later, one of our close friends who lived in Chicago was returning after a trip to Delhi, and stopped over in London. She had terrible news: both her parents had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and given barely a few months to live. She was devastated. And yet, she was constrained because her husband – also a friend, a classmate of mine – had just started an MBA, and she was supporting both of them with her job. The usual trappings: paycheck, insurance, bills. She left on Friday. Swati and I spent the weekend talking about their situation.

We told ourselves, "*What are we waiting for? There are never going to be any signposts saying 'Important moment coming up, turn left'. We just have to make the leap.*" All the traps, the benefits, the insurance, the business-class trips, the paid-for movers, all of it seemed irrelevant.

And so, on Monday morning, we quit. Just like that. That's what it came to, all the discussions and debates over the past several months.

My bank made me feel good, they refused to accept the resignation, flew in someone from New York to dissuade me. "*Whom are you joining, and how much are they paying you?*", he asked. It is a standard banking practice, jumping ship for fat bonuses. I laughed, "*No, I'm not leaving for another bank. I'm leaving for another life.*"

I finally left that Friday. I will never forget that evening, as I left our office at the Strand. I told myself, "This ID card won't work anymore, the doors won't click open when I swish this card." It was late, I left by the side entrance, a London cabbie pulled up and the leaves swirled in a quiet ballet.

"*Late day at work?*", he asked me as he pulled away.

"*Nope, I just quit*", I smiled at him in the rear view mirror, and watched his mouth drop.

I felt like a thousand balloons had been tied to me.

In the next issue, I will talk about our journey of discovering democracy, after we returned to India.