

## Venkat Krishnan: The Joy of Giving by Awakin Talks Editors

As a child, Venkat grew up in a middle class family in Bombay and got an opportunity to study in an ordinary school. Seeing some of his childhood friends like Manohar and Harry drop-out due to the vicious cycle of poverty, Venkat realized “just where you are born makes all the difference in your life”. His whole life ever since has been a sincere, untiring attempt to be an instrument for a more equal world.

Studying at IIM Ahmedabad, India’s best business school, at a young age of 21 when his friends dreamt of a fancy career, Venkat was busy writing in his college assignment “I see myself as an instrument or tool that is available to society. And my choices should be guided by maximizing the returns that I will give to the society. So I will not do something just because I like it, but because that is the best use of my time for the society’s benefit. I will do whatever it takes.” He asks himself and now other young bright minds, “For anyone with a good education, the needs of physiology, safety and esteem are non-issues, then why not focus on self-actualization?” Rashmi Bansal, author of the bestseller “Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish” featuring stories of 25 MBAs from IIM Ahmedabad who left lucrative jobs to take the road less travelled remarks “Venkat’s nickname on campus was ‘Fraud’ which is ironic because both in the honesty with which he speaks to me, and the actual work he does, Venkat is one of the most genuine people I have ever met.”

3 years of working in a corporate job at “The Times of India” was enough to pay back his student loan and some debts on his family. An opportunity emerged and he then found himself setting up Eklavya School in Ahmedabad in 1996 along with 2 college friends. A typical school would hardly excite Venkat and they did something quite remarkable by bringing together some of the richest children of Ahmedabad and some of the poorest under the same roof, with the same opportunities. Within a year, it was the “coolest school of Ahmedabad” but soon after Venkat decided to step-out. What emerged next in 2000 was GiveIndia - an online platform to enable ordinary citizens to be agents of change by donating to trustworthy NGOs. GiveIndia was perhaps the first crowdfunding platform in the world- exclusively for social welfare, but Venkat draws his inspiration from Vinoba and credits Bhoodan movement as the best crowdfunding campaign; and says “empathy and relating to people” is the most effective resource for social movements. Much to everyone’s surprise, GiveIndia’s first annual report read “Dear Stakeholders, We are delighted to inform you that GiveIndia has closed down”..expressing their wish that the society becomes more inclusive and caring that organizations like GiveIndia are no longer needed. While that hasn’t yet come true, Venkat’s life has been a continued expression of being-the-change and trying harder like Boxer at the Animal Farm and like Gandhi- who is his biggest inspiration along with Buddha. “I cry every time when I think of 15th August when everyone was celebrating freedom and he was in the middle of a village near Calcutta saying- now is not the time to celebrate freedom -my next milestone is freedom from intolerance - that is what we need!”

Next in 2009, he and a bunch of volunteers, started Joy of Giving Week (now Daan Utsav) - a completely decentralized movement, a 'festival' celebrated every year from Oct 2- 8. It is estimated that 50 Lakhs- 1 crore Indians engage in giving in that 1 week. Venkat says working in DaanUtsav has been personally transformational for him - he earlier thought that India needs to be taught about giving but now he regards maids and autorickshaw drivers and poorest of poor as his teachers in giving.

Venkat is also the Principal Trustee of India Welfare Trust which aims to promote philanthropy and volunteerism in India. Venkat is also a signatory to #LivingMyPromise, an initiative where middle class Indians promise to donate 50+% of their wealth to causes of their choice. He has recently been involved in an initiative called #EveryIndianVolunteering that aspires to engage every Indian in volunteering for social causes.

While Venkat's story is of creating many organizations for social good, it is an equally powerful story of letting go. GiveIndia over its course has surprised the development sector by building highly valuable and impactful initiatives like fundraising through marathons, High-Networth-Individuals (HNI) Giving and then simply transferring those projects to other organizations without any expectations. In 2008, Venkat also personally stepped out of GiveIndia because he felt the organization could grow better under a professional management. Most recently when an education social enterprise Educational Initiatives which he co-founded was sold, for a guy whose entire belongings can fit into 2 suitcases he finds himself owning much more wealth that he would ever need. He has pledged to give away more than 90% of this wealth (and time) and while doing so, keeps questioning himself if he is able to give with detachment.

His story is also one of simplicity - you can often see him sporting the same grey t-shirt since last 15 years, and using the same laptop bag and the rumors are that he doesn't lock his small house at night. "When you simplify, you start getting a lot of freedom to do what you really want to do" says Venkat. Venkat's story is of mass-scale tangible impact, yet it's also an equally powerful invisible story of ripple effect of being-the-change - his life has deeply inspired many to adopt a life of greater generosity. Venkat deeply cares about social impact and at the same time, he sees giving as its own reward and has actually turned down many prestigious awards and is not driven by milestones, but deeply enjoys the journey each day, each moment. He says "Give till it Hurts" and he has, but yet in his last 25 years of service he has never regretted one single act of giving. His life is a beautiful and inspiring example of "joy of giving".

Five Questions for Venkat

What Makes You Come Alive?

Seeing people give selflessly and enjoy themselves, getting lost in service.

Pivotal turning point in your life?

I think there are more than 50-100 moments in life where a different decision could have taken my life into a very different path, but if I had to pick, I'd say 2 moments have changed the course of my life significantly. 1. Joining Airport High School in class 5- moving from a "fully middle class" school to one which had people from mixed

socio-economic backgrounds. 2. Quitting the corporate sector to join Eklavya in Ahmedabad in 1996.

An Act of Kindness You'll Never Forget?

30 auto drivers in Chennai deciding to donate Rs1,000 each to feed people on the streets as part of #DaanUtsav when we launched it in 2009

One Thing On Your Bucket List?

I don't have a bucket list. If possible, I'd love to find a way to erase my existence from all memory, so that the memories are not "wasted" but can be used for others who would like to be remembered.

One-line Message for the World?

Give of yourself to the fullest extent you can, till it hurts and till you get immense joy out of the hurt caused by the giving.

\*\*\*

For more inspiration tune into an Awakin Talks interview with Venkat this weekend, more details and RSVP info [here](#).