

Ep 10 - What Shapes Us - In Talks with Makarand Sahasrabuddhe

Recorded On 12th May 2026

[Vidya Mahambare] (0:15 - 1:38)

Welcome to What Shapes Us, a podcast by Great Lakes Ministry of Management. I am your host Vidya Mahambare. In this series, we try to explore how the complexities of life unfold.

We use a framework of five E's, Endowment, Environment, Education, Effort and Equality of Opportunity. My guest today is Makrand Sahasrabuddhe. Makrand is a development professional, a coach, a facilitator.

We will understand much more about Makrand today. He is also an alumnus of IIT Bombay and IIM Ahmedabad, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay and Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, two of the most premier higher education institutions in India, where entry is very competitive and very coveted. And most of the people who go to IIM Ahmedabad follow a certain path.

They join the corporate sector, they work hard, they climb up the ladder, they go to the boardrooms. But Makran chose a different path. He worked in the development sector in India for several years, then he worked for Oxfam for another 8-10 years perhaps and then he came back to India, back to the development sector.

We will understand the story, why he chose that path, what are the things he considers now which are important in the areas in which he is working. So let us get going. Thank you Makran for joining us today.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (1:38 - 1:39)

Thank you for inviting me.

[Vidya Mahambare] (1:40 - 2:20)

So let us start with endowment. So by endowment we mean the birth lottery, where you were born, the place, the family you are born into, because in a country like India, social hierarchy also matters a lot. Looking back you feel your inherent traits - some people are born with some kind of talent or excellent health or stamina or whatever now you consider where your inborn qualities which helped you or lack of it, whichever way.

So maybe let us start there and we will see your journey.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (2:20 - 5:16)

Thanks. I was born in Mumbai, a middle class family and a very typical middle class family in socialist India. There were times my mother was a homemaker, we should not call it homemaker at that time, but homemaker.

My dad, I remember for a few years had to work two jobs to keep us afloat, but at the same time we were comfortable in the sense that there was no sense of deprivation and socially also, how should I put it, in the highest social hierarchy in India. What I grew up knowing and what I think is a major part of my endowment was two things. One is that I was always surrounded by books at home and my earliest memory is my mom and my dad both reading a lot.

There was a point in which my mom, after taking care of her home and everything else, decided to go back into her education. She had to stop her education after inter, what used to be called inter then. And so she decided to do her BA and then, so she did that through SNDT University externally managing the home and her studies.

There used to be a forced one year gap between the BA and BEd and in order not to lose momentum, she did her first year of MA as well. And so she did her BA and then started working and I was, I think around 11 at that time when she started working. So reading, study was the first thing that I saw and that sort of has stayed with me and I think that is a big part of my endowment, that's one.

And the second thing is that very early on my parents decided that I will go to an English medium school. I don't know why. My father came from Karnataka, studied in Kannada medium to begin with and my mother came from Chitrakoot and Konkan and studied in Marathi medium but they put me in an English medium school and the school closest to home was one that had been built for children of civil aviation employees, airport high school.

So I just went there and started an education in English where most people around were still going to Marathi medium schools. So that I think helped in terms of my ability to access literature, studies even later on. So that was I think a good part of the endowment.

And lastly, I think I inherited good health from both parents and that is something that we don't normally mention. You just mentioned it. We don't normally see, we sometimes don't even credit, we think it's our own, how should I say, effort that has led to our good health.

Yes, you need to still maintain it but at the same time there is a genetic lottery and I sort of won that genetic lottery in a way.

[Vidya Mahambare] (5:17 - 6:37)

Yeah. So just for the audience, SNDT is in India a women only university and many women use that, many of my family members also studied in the SNDT and B.Ed is Bachelors of Education. Those who want to go into the education sector and take up teaching as a profession in India, they need to do this B.Ed. So as you said, I think there is a lot of research that kids see growing up, especially in the first five years of their life, even the vocabulary and books and all and that influence stays with them forever. And of course, as you said, English is in India the language of climbing up the ladder. So that was an excellent start. You also covered in that little bit of a home environment, how the environment was.

What about the broader environment, that is you talked about the school, maybe your friends, teachers, how the system was when you were in the school, what was that environment and how it complemented say your home environment. At home, like after school, was there a freedom or a chance to go out in the open and play like what used to happen in those days because a lot of the learning comes also from free play and just being around. And so how was it that time when you're growing up?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (6:37 - 7:08)

The couple of things that have stayed with me, one is that, yes, there was a lot of freedom. I mean, very frankly, we had a house on the ground floor and there was always there's an open

area in the front and none of us would be inside the house anyway, come back from school and you are out playing with friends and luckily there were no TV at home, there was a radio, there was no TV at home. And so like I said, a lot of books, but no TV.

So, we had to go out, we had to create our own entertainment and my parents did not really think it was their job to keep me entertained like it was in that time.

[Vidya Mahambare] (7:08 - 7:09)

Yes.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (7:09 - 9:27)

So, that was good. The second thing is in my school, because this was a school for civil aviation employees, children of civil aviation employees, people were, kids came from all parts of the country. I mean, literally we had a little union of states within our class and it was absolutely fascinating and we had kids from different religions, we had kids from different castes as I found out later, it was not something that you could talk about, but it was kids from different castes and the unifying factor for all of us were all lower middle class.

In my class, there was one kid, in all the 10 years in school, there was just one kid who had a car at home and there was one who had a scooter at home. Some of the lucky ones had cycles, not their own, their father's cycle. Everybody else would walk or take a bus or sing.

So, there was that way a level playing field in a way and tremendously diverse environment and so at some point of time, somebody would be celebrating a festival, somebody would have a different type of ritual at home, food that used to come in the tiffin would be very different and I think that the strength of diversity that I learnt at that time, I sort of still carry it with me and so that is something that broke my heart when my son went to school. When my son went to school many, many, many years later, his classmates were just people like him.

All of them from what I would really call the economically and socially elite in the country, though it was not one of those public schools or international schools, it was a regular school, but still there was not much diversity and definitely economic diversity and so I think he missed out on that a little bit, but then times have changed. So, this is the way it is, I think now, my time, everybody would go to the same type of school, government school and so yes, it has changed, but that environment I think helped and I think the love for diversity that I have or the passion almost for diversity that I have still have and I still, most of my fights on social media are with people who want one country, one this thing, one state, one that thing and I would say no, no, no, thousand flowers bloom type of thing. So, most of my fights are on that and I think I owe it to the school environment that I grew up in.

[Vidya Mahambare] (9:27 - 10:50)

Yeah, I think one of the unconscious biases that we talk about when we teach behavioural economics is what we call this affinity bias and affinity bias most of us or many of the people develop not because they necessarily, you know, consciously want to be in people who are similar to them, it is just that when they are growing up it happens, how we are saying about your son, we end up with people who are very similar to us, similar socio-economic background and then just automatically that happens and then we lose out as you are saying on so much of diversity, so that is an excellent and the schools I think have definitely, I agree with your change, like there is a sorting happening in the schools only nowadays, you know, compared to how it

was when we were growing up. So, and in India which is an amalgamation of so much diversity, regionally as well as religion and all that, so that was very important.

Also the freedom that you said, the kids had freedom to just go out and there was no helicopter parenting, that it is parent's job to, you know, you to keep kids always engaged with this class, that class or, you know, something of that sort, yeah, so do you remember any books that you read in the, means I am sure you read lots of books, that is how it was at home, anything that you still remember, which your favourite books as a child?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (10:50 - 10:55)

It was interesting, I read Somerset Maugham before I read Annie Bratton.

[Vidya Mahambare] (10:55 - 10:55)

Okay.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (10:55 - 11:39)

Because Somerset Maugham was at home, so short stories, books, I mean, stories like The Narrow Corner, Cakes and Aisle, Moon and Sixpence, these are the books I read literally before I read Annie Bratton. And at the same time, since my mother was also doing her BA at that time in Marathi literature, there was poetry of Keshav Sood also available at home. So, I don't think I understood it fully well, but it was still fun to read.

And some of the stories I have gone back to as an adult, and I obviously read it with different eyes. But yes, I mean, those are the type of things that are available at home, Perlis Buck was always available, Aldous Huxley was available, and including A Bunch of Thoughts by Goldwalker, that was also available at home.

[Vidya Mahambare] (11:39 - 11:42)

So, both English and Marathi literature.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (11:42 - 11:43)

You had a lot of it available.

[Vidya Mahambare] (11:44 - 12:31)

I think one of the things you did not explicitly mention, but I am just deriving from what you have said, that your mother took up studying well after you are grown up and decided to do BA and MA and so on. So, perhaps that also tells us something about gender equality at home, because maybe not many mothers would get that chance to go back to, or allowed to go back to college and study and then work. I suppose she worked also later on.

So, maybe you saw that also around and whether, because what we see in the childhood around how the relationships are between at home, in different genders or parents, I guess that somewhere also stays perhaps.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (12:31 - 13:56)

It does, and you are right. Though when I look at it from an understanding of gender and gender equality today, I would feel that it was not all hunky-dory, in the sense that, yes, my mother had the opportunity to study. She had the opportunity to go out and sing.

My dad was supportive, definitely. I mean, it would not have, in those times, it would not have happened without the support. But that support was just a shade above Eden Block, rather than the type of support that one would expect today.

Today, I see. So, it was that different. So, she had to deal with everything at home and then focus on her studies. So, to that extent, it was not as if my dad took up a major part of household care. And household, unpaid housework. It is not as if he picked that up.

But definitely, he did support. And which, my mother, I do not know where she got, I am looking back, I do not know where she got the energy from to, literally, I could see her having 16, 17-hour days, especially since she had to study, it was homeschooling. I mean, it was not that she was attending lectures.

It was one of those external types of things. So, she had to set her own pace and study, clear those exams and then move on, clear those exams and move on. So, very, very remarkable effort.

After a 12-year gap between inter and first year of. It did help tell me that with effort, if you are determined enough, a lot of things can be made possible.

[Vidya Mahambare] (13:57 - 14:25)

So, let us move to a different question about the environment. You have seen different types of environment as you grew up. So, you grew up in Vile Parle, which is a typical middle class suburb used to be in those days in Mumbai.

Then you studied in Mumbai as well as in Ahmedabad and then you worked in India, you worked in Africa and in several places. How do these different environments, you think, are different or anything that strikes about if you compare different environments?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (14:25 - 14:53)

Well, culturally, most of these places are different. Ahmedabad, I do not know much because we led a very, very sheltered life on campus. Our outing was limited to finding good places to eat because the mess food was terrible.

And till the money lasted, we would go out. Otherwise, we would just stick with the mess food. So, very, very sheltered, except when the outside world intruded in a way after the Babri Masjid demolition.

I was in Ahmedabad at that time. So, there were riots there and so the environment had changed.

[Vidya Mahambare] (14:53 - 14:54)

So, what was that year?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (14:56 - 16:44)

1992. The one thing I think about the environment that I realised only when I went to Afghanistan for the first time and I stayed there for a year.

One thing I realised was freedom, safety. These are the things that come in an environment which we sort of take for granted, at least as a male in India. Let me clarify.

My experience is very different. Your experience in India would be very different. But as a male in India, the type of freedoms that I get were severely curtailed when I was in Afghanistan.

So, I had to follow security protocols. I could not just wander around, especially towards the later part of my stay. And that brought me to a realisation that there are so many things that we take for granted.

It is ultimately just a lottery of where you are born. You could be born literally anywhere in the world. And I was, for all the problems that we face in India, even at that point, I felt that, no, there are some things that we have got right, some things that we are enjoying much more than other people.

And so, literally, even today, not a day passes before I think that, when I read some news that I could be that person. Whether it is Gaza or whether it is Syria or whether it is Latin America, I could be that person. I am not.

And it is just a lottery when I happen to be here. So, yes, the environment does matter a lot. And a lot of things that we take for granted become part of, it is like, it is like a sense of entitlement.

After some time, you do not even realise that it is an entitlement, that you are taking it for granted. You just take it for granted and you want more and more and more, which is not bad. I have seen it make a lot of difference to people.

[Vidya Mahambare] (16:44 - 17:36)

Yeah. And so, and because of that, we do not then appreciate, means we do not even realise we have that. So, there is no question of, you know, appreciating that we have so much freedom.

Yeah, very true. And we will come back to your Afghanistan journey and all, little bit later on. But endowment, environment, maybe let us talk about your education.

You went to two very premier higher education institutions in India. You first became an engineer, went to IIT Bombay and then became an MBA in IIM Ahmedabad, where you academically gifted from the beginning to crack the competitive exams or was it a big effort or how did even that process happened or is it because everyone used to become good, good students used to become engineers in those days. That is how it happened or how did that whole thing, you know, unfolded?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (17:36 - 19:40)

Gifted student, no, absolutely not. And it is one of those classic things, you know, you get cattle crushed into a particular line, you used to get cattle crushed. So, I realised quite early that biology is not for me.

I was not too bad in mathematics. So, engineer. And then if you are thinking of engineering, then IIT was an option, took the exam, got a lowish rank.

I do not think I will pass now at all, even if I study. It was a different type of exam and it was a different type of structure that I just passed. And the funny thing is that it took me about four months to realise that I am not cut out to be an engineer.

I do not enjoy it. I spent the remaining three and a half years in IIT doing everything that I had a chance to do. So, I played every sport badly, all sports uniformly badly.

I took part in student organisations, student politics, did a lot of trekking, did everything. Yes, I did enough academically to clear out in four years. That is about it.

But I decided that this is not for me. And I was in the metallurgical engineering stream, which meant steel, steel factories and iron factories. I was saying, not for me.

I realised that I do not look at things like an engineer would. And I saw some brilliant people as classmates. What I did enjoy at that point of time was that the peer group was composed of very smart people, extremely smart people from different places in India.

So, there was no homogeneity there. There were very, very rich kids. And there were kids from villages we did not know existed.

Even in Maharashtra, kids from, we did not know these places existed. And they were there. So, there was a lot of diversity.

And the one thing that IIT taught me, and I am very grateful for that, is that it taught me humility. Because there was nothing that one thought one was good at that somebody would not come up with.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And so, that was very useful.

So, you could always, one, you could learn from others. And secondly, if once you are, once you decide you are not competing academically, then life was brilliant.

[Vidya Mahambare] (19:41 - 19:45)

But that is difficult to accept, right? Means, but you made peace with it early on only.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (19:45 - 20:05)

Very early. Lots of us did. Lots of, because a lot of people realised that this is not for them.

But at that point of time, it was quite silly to get out of, leave the course and go off somewhere else. So, people just continued. But a lot of people realised that engineering is not for us.

So, my first opportunity after I graduated and moved into a business development marketing type of job. First opportunity.

[Vidya Mahambare] (20:05 - 20:37)

So, let us stop there a little bit and we will come back to the next part. But then how do we fix this? If the premier institutes, engineering institutes in India attract students after a very, very competitive exams, who then do not want to become an engineer, because they realise that it is not for them, how do we change the system at the entry only, so that, say, majority really want to be in that field or they are, because this is like you thought you would like engineering, that is how you entered. But after entry, you realise it is.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (20:37 - 21:00)

No, I did not know, I did not know whether I would like it or not. I knew that I would not like medicine. Let us put it that way.

And there were not too many options. There were only three options when I was growing up, you could either become, if you are good enough in your academics, you become a doctor or an engineer or a charter accountant type of thing. And the least unpalatable option was the engineering option.

Let us put it that way.

[Vidya Mahambare] (21:00 - 21:30)

No, no, but how do we now change the entry criteria? What should we do, so the people really who are passionate about engineering only, because these places are so few in number, right. All the IITs put together are like very small numbers, only a few thousands perhaps, right.

And those are the top engineering schools in India. So, hopefully the majority should go there who want to stay in that field. So, how do we ensure that? I have not thought about it, but how do we, should we change the entry system?

[Makarand Sahasrabudhe] (21:30 - 22:13)

I do not know, because you are taking in people who are 18. And most, the system now is that people start studying when they are 12, literally, start going to coaching classes and skipping junior college to go into one of those affiliated institutions. And I do not know how to fix this, because I do not think they know that, very few people, another thing, nobody knows, but few people at 12, 14 know what they want to do with their life.

And I think the education system just crushes us there. But I would not be too critical about it, and I see that even today when I talk to fresh IITians or IITians, kids who are in IIT, they are not necessarily happy. But it is still a ticket to a job.

[Vidya Mahambare] (22:13 - 22:13)

Yes.

[Makarand Sahasrabudhe] (22:13 - 23:19)

And it is acceptable, I mean, it is reputed, they are still reputed institutions. Being an engineer still gives you a job. And to a very large extent, we have been told in India for decades that unless you study, you will not get a job.

I mean, that has been almost the end point of everything. And fair enough, I mean, that is what I think. So, do we need to fix it?

Perhaps not. But what we need to make possible is that engineers will realise that they are not cut out to be engineers, they should not get into engineering. Because that is how pools collapse and research does not get done.

The skills that you get in an engineering job in terms of thinking in particular frameworks or in just by learning from peers last your lifetime. They have lasted me a lifetime. I have not used my engineering, I still, I mean, I faintly remember the iron-carbon diagram, but that has not been relevant to my life.

But at the same time, some of the things that I thought, thinking from first principles, going back to basics, working something out, which I learned during engineering, have helped me even in the profession that I chose. So, there is nothing wrong in.

[Vidya Mahambare] (23:20 - 23:22)

No, nothing wrong from an individual viewpoint.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (23:22 - 23:37)

From an individual point of view. And even from a society's point of view, I think that over a period of time, things will shake out and things will settle. Right now, we are just into a stage where there is still a lot of memory of socialist poverty.

[Vidya Mahambare] (23:38 - 23:38)

Right.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (23:38 - 23:58)

And so, there is this thing that we need to succeed, I need to succeed, my children need to succeed. Once you take that for granted that there is a future and that the future is, well, not bad, then people will experiment. I already see children of my classmates from IIM and IIT choosing to not go into STEM and go into the humanities.

[Vidya Mahambare] (23:59 - 23:59)

Yeah.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (23:59 - 24:00)

Because they can afford to do it.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:00 - 24:01)

Yeah, you can take higher risks.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (24:01 - 24:02)

You can take a higher risk.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:02 - 24:04)

If ground is made, then you can take higher risk.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (24:04 - 24:19)

And I think as an overall society, we start moving up the economic ladder, then this frenzy for, I must have a job when I am 21 so that I support, start supporting my family and engineering is the only real ticket will stop. Stop. And then hopefully the craziness will stop.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:19 - 24:23)

So, then similarly now, MBA, how did?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (24:24 - 24:25)

MBA, I wanted to, I wanted to do MBA.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:25 - 24:27)

You, that you really wanted to do?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (24:27 - 24:29)

Yes. Okay. So, yes.

I wanted to do an MBA, I worked for three years.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:30 - 24:31)

Before, before.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (24:31 - 24:34)

Before, between IIT and MBA, I worked for three years in Mumbai.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:35 - 24:36)

And that was in the corporate sector?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (24:36 - 24:41)

That was, yes, CMC limited. And it was a business development job in the western region.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:41 - 24:42)

Okay.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (24:43 - 25:21)

I wanted to do an MBA because I felt that I went in with the idea that I will want to get into industrial marketing and have a career there. Because I was not bad with the business development job that I was in. And so, I needed sharper skills.

An MBA also gives you great CV value and opens up new doors, etcetera, etcetera. So, my, when I went in, my objectives were very clear to first get good management education. And secondly, try and build a career towards marketing management and that type of stream.

That is how I got in. But then life intervened.

[Vidya Mahambare] (25:22 - 25:54)

No, before that, before life intervened, can we talk a little bit more about, because now there is a lot of talk. I am also in an MBA school, as you know. And there is a lot of talk about how relevant MBA will remain and whether kids should do it.

What did you, what were your takeaways in IIM Ahmedabad in terms of, you did not go in a, you know, typical this thing. So, but leaving that aside, just those two years, right, how did they shape you? You know, what are the things that you remember?

And what do you think the relevance of MBAs are even now?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (25:54 - 27:15)

Okay, this might be hindsight. And it may not necessarily be at what I was taking away at that point of time. One was, I obviously learned new things. New technical things. For instance, I had had nothing to do with management accounting or finance before. And I learned a hell of a lot, things that I would have never learned on my, learned with difficulty on my own.

So, there are just new things that I learned. What remains striking for me from my two years in IIM has been the conversations that we used to have, because everything was done in groups,

everything was done in teams. So, the conversations, the arguments that we would have on different subjects was one thing that I would really take away.

IIM Ahmedabad had this policy, I do not know whether it was written down and how it was, but they had a policy where there would be a lot of diversity in terms of the undergraduate degrees that people came in with. And the amount of work experience that people came in. So, there is a lot of mix.

And so, every question, people approach with a different perspective, depending on where they came from and how they came. So, I take away a lot of, again, the diversity part, again, looking at things from different perspectives. And I took away frameworks, frameworks for thinking.

It gave good frameworks for thinking. Not all of them are applicable everywhere. Some of them need to adapt from corporate into the type of work I did, I need to adapt them.

But at the same time, they did give a framework for thinking and articulation.

[Vidya Mahambare] (27:15 - 27:17)

Which remains important even today.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (27:17 - 27:20)

In any job. Anything, articulation. Anything, articulation.

[Vidya Mahambare] (27:20 - 27:21)

That is one thing that AI cannot replace.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (27:22 - 27:39)

No, no. So, that, I did take away that. And again, working with some very, very brilliant people, just being around them and having arguments about movies, sports, politics.

It was fun. It was good. It is an important part of growing up.

[Vidya Mahambare] (27:40 - 27:44)

Correct. So, yeah. So, life intervened.

What happened?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (27:45 - 29:28)

At the end of my first year, we were supposed to do a two-month internship in some place. And that was essentially to get an idea of what an office looks like. I had done it for three years.

I was not really looking to look at another two months. And there was this one NGO in Pune, which had put up a one-page cyclostyle, literally a cyclostyle or set of sheets saying that they wanted an intern for two months. So, I applied.

And I got selected. And so, I came to Pune for my internship and two months. And then, this was a small NGO called the Society for Service to Voluntary Agencies.

It had been started by top health professionals in Pune at that time. And the CEO was an ex-IAS officer, Health Secretary Government of Maharashtra. And then, somebody who had worked

with the World Bank on and helped frame policies in Burkina, diverse places like Burkina Faso, Indonesia and things like that.

So, I worked with him. It is a small place. So, I worked with him for two months.

And at the end of two months, he made me an offer to come and join him. And I told him I needed time to think. And which I did.

And then, I went back and thought for a few months for the first term. And then, I wrote to him and said, yes, I will join. And I literally opted out of placement in the second year in IIM.

I was the only one from my batch to do that. I did not need to go through the placement mess. And that was also liberating because then, suddenly in my second year, I did not have to focus on any specific area to build up a portfolio of courses.

Then, I could do anything I wanted. So, literally, I took up that opportunity to do courses in environment management, in finance, in economics, in marketing, in decision support systems, IT, anything. I mean, anything that was offered, which looked interesting, I just did the course.

Because I was not building up a portfolio. And then, I came and joined the NGO for three years. I stayed there for three years.

[Vidya Mahambare] (29:29 - 29:54)

But what made you take that decision? Because I suppose you are looking at a career which would have been perhaps like more, as you know, traditionally, if you say more lucrative, and the path would have been very pretty straightforward out of IIM Ahmedabad and corporate ladder. What had happened in those two months or with this particular person, who was?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (29:54 - 29:55)

Mr. V. Srinivasan.

[Vidya Mahambare] (29:55 - 30:05)

So, Mr. V. Srinivasan. What exactly do you think happened there so that you decided to opt out of IIM Ahmedabad placements and joined?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (30:07 - 30:52)

Now, it sounds very all fine since it worked out for me. But at that point, it was a bit silly and a bit brave and a bit courageous, a mix of all that, I think. I am not sure that I would jump in today.

Knowing what I know now, I would not necessarily have jumped in. But I just wanted to take a chance. Because the thing is that if I did not like it, I mean, one of the things that I had discussed with Mr. Srinivasan was that, if I did not like it, if I got bored, if he is saying, I would leave. And then there would always be a possibility of an entry into a thing. I mean, it is not as if the placement season in IIM is the only way to enter a job. So, there was always that safety net.

And I decided that if I do not take that chance at that point of time in my life, then I will never do it.

[Vidya Mahambare] (30:52 - 30:53)

Right, yeah.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (30:53 - 31:30)

So, that was also that, a bit of bravado. I am not certain that I was able to convince too many people that that was the right decision to do, right decision to take. Definitely not my father, who never could understand why I was doing what I was doing.

But it was okay and it was fine. And I often joke that I single handedly brought down the average salary of the passing out in my batch by a significant amount, by just joining an engineer at that time. But looking back again with the benefit of hindsight of the last 20 years, 20, 30 years, I can say that it was a good decision, a great decision to take at that time.

[Vidya Mahambare] (31:30 - 31:39)

Yeah. So, not something that you had consciously planned or anything of that sort, you just happened to and you thought you would experiment. You know, why not?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (31:39 - 31:39)

Yeah.

[Vidya Mahambare] (31:40 - 31:49)

Because reversing, going to the corporate and coming back here is very difficult. So, why not try this first and if it does not work out, you can always go back to corporate life.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (31:49 - 31:54)

That was the thinking at that point of time, but it kept interesting and 30 years later, I am still here.

[Vidya Mahambare] (31:54 - 32:45)

Yeah, yeah, of course, yes. But see, I suppose the, you know, the kids are growing up now or suppose, you know, there are people currently also who, you know, deeply worry about inequality and, you know, they worry about social injustice and, you know, wanting to help, but are there the compromises that you had to do in terms of your lifestyle or anything of that sort or it was, or because you always grew up just middle class, you are fine with whatever.

I am just thinking about how today's current people approach it because many of them take out loans. Nowadays, you know, MBA is also done on the back of, you know, the loan, bank loan and so on, which they have to repay and then they need a certain level of salary to be able to repay that back. So, if they want to enter the development sector, is that bit more difficult?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (32:45 - 35:01)

It is difficult, and I will tell you why, for two reasons. Again, the one reason that you said is that it just costs so much more to do an MBA, I just cost that much more and so, in a way, that is a, it is like the student debt in the United States. It is always playing on the back of your mind that there is a debt and I need to, I need to earn enough to pay it off.

That is one. And second thing is that over the last 30 years, the environment in terms of the development world has also changed. India has changed, the world has changed.

So, the type of things that NGOs do today is very different. In general, for civil society organisations and civil society organisations around the world is not very conducive. Around the

world, there has been a crackdown on freedom of organising and freedom of expression, whether and does not it matters which country it is, there has been a crackdown.

Some of it has come through legal measures in terms of restrictions on funding, some of it has come on through restrictions of what it is that you can work on. So, the opportunities that way are limited, that is one. Secondly, when I finished my MBA, a lot of the NGOs in India were still at that time being run by people who came in through an ideological approach.

Young people who had been involved in the Sampoorana Kranti movement of J.P. Narayan or some people who came from the Sarvodaya movement that Gandhi had started, Gandhi and Gandhi's disciples started many years ago. Or the communist, the Yuva Kranti Dal or there are a lot of people who came in with an ideology. The world has changed again, now it is professional, everything is quote unquote professional.

We have professional masters of social work, people getting into NGOs, we have companies getting into social work through CSR, which is well, it is still in infancy. So, we will still, the jury is out on how well it is working and how well it will work. So, the environment has also changed and opportunities have changed.

And it is rather difficult, there are not too many options, there are some great NGOs even now in India, but they are limited and the type of skills that they look for are very, very different. And also what happens is that in many cases, most of our students coming out do not really necessarily have the skills that can contribute to these NGOs directly.

[Vidya Mahambare] (35:01 - 35:02)

Such as?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (35:02 - 35:38)

You need to build on that. So, you need to work on that. For instance, doctors can do it.

Kids who have gone through medical school can come out and work with a primary health care centre or a small NGO running a health programme in a tribal area. They can do that because they are trained for it. Engineers cannot.

Engineers do not necessarily have the skills that can be immediately deployed. They still really need to go and get their hands dirty and do something. So, some professions can still think of it.

Some may not be able to do it very easily. And like I said, everything is changing. So, it is difficult to find out, to take a plunge.

It was much easier when I was younger.

[Vidya Mahambare] (35:39 - 36:22)

Right. So, now coming to the fourth effort, your entire career. So, you joined Mr. Srinivasan and there you worked for a few years. You can tell us what exactly the issues that you worked and then how did the transition to Oxfam happened and what was your experience there and maybe eventually whether you, you know, because I have read a lot that you have written about, you know, about global north influencing essentially the global south even in the development sector and so on. So, yeah, so what are really, what was your experience at Oxfam, how you left and

came back to India and what are the challenges that still remain where significant effort is required?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (36:22 - 38:52)

I had to put in a lot of effort because I did not have any academic grounding in the work that I was doing. So, I had to literally learn on the job by just reading, talking to people and doing things myself. And that, I was fortunate enough to work with some really, really very, very good people.

In India, in different parts of India, who taught me a lot of things very selflessly and I sort of owe everything that I know to them. But there was a lot of effort involved in studying and understanding. I worked for three years with Soswa, Mr. Srinivasan. We used to work essentially on policy, a policy for NGOs in Maharashtra. We worked on the reproductive health rights for women and capacity building of smaller NGOs. So, there was a diverse portfolio and we used to work on that.

After that, I started with a business partner, I started a consulting firm for, a development consulting firm for working with NGOs in India. And I was associated with that for about 11 years or so, where we really took, expanded our work from within Maharashtra to different parts of the country and I ended up working in about, good solid fieldwork in about 10 different states in India, doing it really well, learning a lot on the way. And also, but what happened at that point of time was that I felt that my learning was getting a bit limited.

And so, I decided that I needed some exposure into a larger organisation where I can learn more and beyond the boundaries of India. I looked around, I used to always admire Oxfam for some of the brilliant work that it has supported in India over the last 3 or 4 decades. And I got an opportunity to work in Oxfam, Afghanistan in an area that I was technically qualified for.

I had a lot of experience and a lot of understanding of the area, which is around programme quality, which involves programme design, monitoring evaluation, impacts assessment, learning. It is a combination of all that. I got an opportunity to work in Oxfam in Afghanistan and suddenly, I was transported from a place where I was a very big fish in a very tiny pond into where I was a minnow in an ocean of talent.

So, literally, I had access to talent within Oxfam, the entire confederation, Oxfam, Great Britain, across the world. There was never a question of, I am running into this issue, there is somebody out there who knows, who has done it before. I could reach out with one or two degrees of separation and.

[Vidya Mahambare] (38:53 - 38:54)

So, can you tell us a little bit about Oxfam?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (38:55 - 41:42)

So, Oxfam started somewhere in the 40s and it started in a church in Oxford, Oxford United Kingdom and it started essentially as a humanitarian agency meant for providing relief to Greece during the Second World War. Greece was starving and that is how it started. Over a period of time, Oxfam became one of the, is I still think, one of the premier international NGOs working in very different parts of the world.

At its height, Oxfam was working in about 70, 75 countries around the world. Over time, taking off from its base in Great Britain, Oxfam set up in different parts of the world and now it is a confederation of nearly 21 or 22 different organisations. The Oxfam confederation is again active everywhere.

So, again, people from different parts of the world, Global North and Global South, though I think these are outdated terms, very frankly. There is not really anything anymore Global North or South. It was an enormous opportunity and Oxfam kept, I think I must have done a decent job.

So, I kept getting offered slightly higher and higher responsibilities. So, I moved from a small country programme in Afghanistan to supporting five country programmes in South Asia. I moved from there to supporting 10 country programmes in Horn of East Africa and I moved from there into a global role where my remit was essentially everywhere that Oxfam works.

I was working on, again, programme quality issues all 13 years of my life in Oxfam. I was working on those issues. And again, tremendous learning in terms of cross-cultural experiences, working with different types of people around the world and being able to see the world from different and from very different eyes, with very different eyes.

So, one goes to Tanzania and does not just go safari, but one goes and works in a small village to understand what the issues of a small cooperative which is fighting a mining conglomerate are and trying to understand it. So, yeah, it really helped a lot and it also helped that I stayed in a technical area. And interestingly, over time, I reached a stage where I was not managing any people and I was not managing any budgets.

And I think, right at the beginning, you talked about hierarchy and different everything, but I was very happy with doing that. I was, I had the space and the freedom to carve out what I wanted to work on. And when needed, I would set up teams from across the world.

I used to know people, so I set up those teams. We come together for a project, we work on it, it is banned. And so, no people management, no budget management for me and I could just focus on what I loved doing most.

And that is how I ended my career, no people, no budget.

[Vidya Mahambare] (41:44 - 41:59)

So, these are the things which work well in, you know, in international NGO kind of a setup. What do you think does not work well in, say, Oxfam, whenever you are there? Were there any issues where it is, maybe you think these agencies could improve?

[Makarand Sahasrabudhe] (41:59 - 44:20)

Oh yeah, many, many. I mean, seriously, and they are trying, I mean, everybody is trying. Right now, there is a front crunch.

I mean, there is a serious crunch on all sorts of funding. You still get somehow funding for humanitarian crises, but the crises are multiplying so much. And even within the crisis, you get more funds when there is a war as compared to, let us say, deprivation or environmental degradation happening because of climate change.

So, climate change is very slow, you know, it is not visible, it is not high impact. So, there is this funding issue. Then there is a credibility issue.

Like I said, around the world, governments are clamping down on NGOs because, well, nobody likes to be held accountable. Nobody likes to be asked questions as to why are you selling arms to a hostile power, which is then using the arms to kill its own citizens. Nobody, no government likes because there is an arms lobby and things that are behind it.

So, that is a problem. The second, and therefore, it means that NGOs should also become more effective and efficient in the way they work. But there are limits to that as well because the amount of oversight that is being imposed under different, for different reasons, some of them valid, some of them not so valid, different reasons is making life very, very difficult for NGOs.

So, for instance, all the moment you start complying with all the anti-terror regulations, you will suddenly find that you are not able to work in a conflict situation at all because there is some clause somewhere, some comma somewhere that you will not be able to see. And so, that is an issue that NGOs are facing. But the biggest self-made issue which still has not been cracked and there is still a lot of rhetoric around it is the issue of giving up power.

I mean, to a certain extent in this world, a lot of things work on power. A lot of things work for, people work for and towards power. And that has not been very easy.

So, international NGOs especially have tried to say that we will localise, we will partner and we will work with local organisations. It has not happened to the extent that it should yet and it is still in the area of rhetoric. And I think the big reason is power.

And the big reason is, another big reason is that traditionally we have always had data flowing from the south to the north and knowledge flowing from the north to the south. And which can...

[Vidya Mahambare] (44:20 - 44:21)

So, that acceptance that reverse is possible.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (44:22 - 45:18)

There can be knowledge here and there can be talent here and you cannot necessarily measure the talent in the global south with the same parameters that you measure the talent in the global north or even knowledge. That has still not been internalised. So, that remains an issue towards genuinely localising.

But just circling back to the earlier question where you said, that has also made the realisation that localisation needs to happen has also meant that there are very, there are much fewer opportunities for people like me, let us say, to go and work in the Horn of Africa. Fewer opportunities. They are still there.

But now, Horn of Africa people will work in Horn of Africa. Because there is that amount of this thing, they do not need to quote unquote import people from outside. So, that way the opportunities of working in international development are also becoming fewer.

But there could be more. Localisation is someplace, something more that I and you have not yet managed. There are some who have made more progress than others, but otherwise it is in name.

[Vidya Mahambare] (45:18 - 45:24)

So, were any of these reasons why you stopped working for Oxfam or what happened?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (45:25 - 46:43)

When I stopped working in 2021, two triggers, one trigger was the COVID pandemic. I was working from home, even with Oxfam globally, I was working from home from 2013 onwards. But I used to travel very frequently.

And that was to give me a lot of energy. Meeting people, being in the field and talking to people who are actually doing the work would give me a lot of energy. That stopped.

In 2019, late 2019, early 2020, travel stopped. And then I found myself sitting in Zoom meetings, thinking about policies and programmes in abstract. I mean, and basing all the things that I was contributing on my knowledge of a few years ago, from what I had seen a few years ago, there was no live thing.

So, to that extent, it was a bit demotivating to do that. And secondly, I, in 2021, I had completed 30 years of work. And I had decided a long time back that I will quit when I will complete 30 years, and I just quit. I quit full time work.

I am still in the field. I do a few assignments when I feel like it. I have some of my own criteria to decide which assignment I will take up or not.

And so, yeah, I do not want to, I did not want to do full time work anymore. I wanted to sort of literally manage my own time in the way I wanted to do.

[Vidya Mahambare] (46:44 - 47:08)

So, does that explain your self description on your LinkedIn or on your blog post that wanderer and I cannot pronounce, it is a beautiful French word, I think, but I cannot pronounce French. So, maybe you can tell us, was that an identity then you had decided like 30 years ago only that this is how I am and I will quit or it emerged over the years?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (47:08 - 48:15)

Okay. So, I describe myself as a coach, facilitator and flaneur. Right.

Coach is something, Oxfam gave me an opportunity to learn how to be a workplace coach. So, I did that and I am very grateful for that and it really gives me a lot of pleasure and in working with people on that. Facilitation of group processes and managing group processes is what I have, is a skill that I have evolved over time, over the last 20 years literally.

Flaneur is an aspiration. A flaneur is a person who wanders around aimlessly observing human nature. It is an aspiration.

It is something that I would really like to do and be part of the thing, be part of a crowd and at the same time not be a part of the crowd, just observe what people are doing and have the time and the space to be able to do that. So, a classic image, if you ask, if you Google flaneur and say image, you will have a gentleman with a top hat and a walking stick walking in the garden and just looking at things. I do not want to be that, but it is an aspiration.

I really want to know a bit better.

[Vidya Mahambare] (48:15 - 49:01)

Yeah. So, actually meditation we say is like just a witness. You just witness the things that are happening and observe without necessarily adding our own thoughts to it.

So, the first step is just to observe. So, in your long career and now you are again self-employed, especially in the field that you have been, the development, the last T, equality of opportunity. Have you seen the equality of opportunity improving over the years for people who say they do not have, they start off with endowment because we started with endowment and there are many people who do not start off with good endowment in one way or the other.

Have you seen the equality of opportunity improving or where are things now?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (49:01 - 51:06)

Complex question, complex answer. Yes, I mean, short answer is yes, the opportunity has improved. But the reality also, and especially in a lot of places and in the developing world, the reality also is that a lot of these development organisations are started by people who have faced the problem themselves.

So, you will have survivors of domestic violence working on issues of domestic violence with other women. They start an organisation and work with other women. You will have survivors of caste-based bonded labour starting organisations and working on it or.

So, to that extent, they did not have any endowment, but through effort, they managed to break through and create something that could then give opportunity to others like that. So, to that extent, it is, and which is why some of the stories of people that I have heard are very, very inspirational. Working with them has been a true inspiration.

Opportunities have become better. Like I said, the localisation has contributed to that, that suddenly you have very senior roles in even international, there are not too many international organisations left in India. But when you look at the other developing countries, there are a lot of senior roles available to locals, which were not available to locals.

You used to always have an expatriate from Europe or the US or Australia coming into those roles. So, those opportunities have improved. But on the other hand, the overall sector has shrunk a bit.

So, there is a balance to be sought at that point of time. But the entry barriers into some of the multilateral institutions are still very high. So, for a young professional who wants to get into, let us say, the World Bank or the United Nations or Asian Development Bank, for an Indian, the entry barriers are still very high.

They were very high even when I entered. And so, I always joke that the first assignment that I got with Oxfam was the critical one. After that, then your effort matters and then your reputation precedes you.

But just getting in itself was more difficult for a person from a developing world than from somebody who comes from the West, let us put it that way. It used to be that way. It has changed now.

[Vidya Mahambare] (51:06 - 51:14)

Okay. Okay. So, that way, the equality of opportunity is improving.

But why did you say in India, there are a lot many international organisations left?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (51:14 - 51:15)

There are not many left.

[Vidya Mahambare] (51:16 - 51:20)

Why is that? Is it anything to do with our laws or taxation or anything?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (51:20 - 51:49)

It is essentially to do with successive governments and not just this one. Even the NPA government, I mean, the Manmohan Singh government did have laws which restricted what are the type of funds that NGOs could use, raise and use. This government has even been more strict.

So, the changes to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act have meant that a lot of NGOs just cannot operate in India. They cannot, they can neither raise funds, nor utilise those funds, nor manage those funds.

[Vidya Mahambare] (51:49 - 51:52)

So, they do it via third, do they partner with Indian NGOs and?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (51:52 - 52:22)

They used to partner with Indian NGOs at that point of time. But over a period of time, it has become now, so a lot of international NGOs had entities in India. So, Oxfam, there was an Oxfam India.

There was an Action Aid India. There is still HelpAge India. And then they work with local partners.

But now, down the chain, everybody needs to have those FCRA type of regulations and type of setup. And in general, the funds flowing into these organisations are also limited. India is no longer India, because, because we keep talking of the India shining in one way or the other story.

[Vidya Mahambare] (52:22 - 52:25)

So, aid, we do not want, I suppose, we do not invite aid.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (52:25 - 53:16)

Exactly. So, we do not, even bilateral aid is now limited to four or five countries that we take bilateral government to government aid on. So, we do not encourage aid into the country.

And so, there is really no space and the civic space is being shrunk. So, there is really no space for international NGOs in India. I am not 100 percent sure that they are needed either.

I think there is enough talent in India and there are enough resources in India, that if Indians wanted, I think we could and we should take care of our own problems. Because there is an adequate amount of rich India to be able to help out. It is a question of being able to shed the

past knowledge of poverty and think that, okay, we are secure now and it is our responsibility as citizens to help others.

I think that will take time, but otherwise, there is enough wealth in India and talent to do it.

[Vidya Mahambare] (53:16 - 53:43)

Is there any Indian organisation currently which is, Indian organisation which has become an international NGO? How something, exactly, there is enough prosperous India and enough wealthy India and there are funds and there is talent. Is there something homegrown, which not only works on Indian issues or in India, but say they are working in, how Oxfam would have started decades ago?

Is there anyone like that currently, who is working maybe in?

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (53:44 - 54:18)

Interesting. Often, I cannot think of any, often. Whereas, interestingly, Bangladesh had BRAC, which is now an international NGO working in different parts of the world.

BRAC really went from being a Bangladesh NGO to this thing, but India, I am not certain that, but again, it is also very crazy to expect that simply because India is so vast. It is a subcontinent, it is more like a subcontinent and there is enough scope to, I mean, there is never going to be enough, we are never going to be in a place where we have done everything in India and now let us go abroad. It is not going to work immediately that way.

[Vidya Mahambare] (54:18 - 54:40)

So, coming towards the close, fascinating journey, if you now holistically think of all the five E's, anything that really stands out any of that, where you, which you think contributed the most in how your life shaped up, it can be endowment, it can be environment, education, your own effort.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (54:40 - 55:03)

I think endowment, I will not take anything away from endowment. Endowment really, really helped shape who I am and effort. Everything else contributes, it is very difficult to assume, but if I have to pick two, then you have to put in the efforts, especially when you are trying to do something new, you have to put in your own efforts as well, trying to learn and endowment, it always helps.

[Vidya Mahambare] (55:03 - 55:38)

Okay. So, last question. If you are, thinking of a 22-year-old now and in this world of AI and, you know, all sorts of things and how the development sector has changed, what you will tell a young person who really is distressed, who he looks around and there is lot of inequality, even though India is growing well and so on, and we have brought out lot of millions of people out of poverty, but nonetheless still lots needs to be done and the person wants to contribute, what he should be doing, he, she should be.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (55:39 - 56:46)

First and foremost, I do not think that they necessarily need to jump into and work with an NGO, they do not need to do that. There are many ways to contribute and it is not just about money, there is, but there are many ways to genuinely contribute. One is, I can write an essay on this, but

broadly, I think whatever profession they are in, doing it honestly, doing it well is a great start, frankly.

If you are, and again, at some point of time, they will have to start thinking about what their purpose in their life is, what, I think without a purpose to their life, it really does not, because then you just look at external stimuli and validation. So, you need to decide your own purpose and that purpose itself will give you the path. There are so many things that one can do and so many things that one should do, but it is a lack of clarity of purpose and lack of clarity of who I am and why am I here and what can I do to make things slightly better than the way I found them.

It is possible for almost anybody to find a way to contribute and you do not necessarily need to be a NGO worker or anything like that. Just most of the time, just do your job well and with honesty, I think that should be good enough.

[Vidya Mahambare] (56:47 - 56:53)

On that lovely note, thank you very much, Makran. I have learnt a lot and had a wonderful time chatting with you. Thank you.

[Makarand Sahasrabuddhe] (56:53 - 56:53)

Thanks for inviting me.