

Chinese Possibilities

A shift in context often sparks a new idea or opportunity. My recent visit to resurgent China marked a significant personal shift in outlook towards China. Visitors to Beijing and Shanghai talk admiringly of their spectacular growth, frenetic shopping and the hyper fast Shanghai Mag Lev train. I would like to share my experience in discussing 'the story of Agastya Foundation' with students, current and prospective social entrepreneurs, business people, journalists and others at the invitation of Ashoka (www.ashoka.org) and the Jet Li One Foundation.

Without exception, the audiences at the eight venues where I spoke on Agastya's scintillating ten-year voyage and the challenges of social entrepreneurship were inquisitive and hungry for information, insight and perspective. We discussed Agastya's growth and evolution, and how its hands-on teaching-learning methodology could be replicated in China. My audience was keen to learn how Agastya sparks curiosity and creativity among poor children and government schoolteachers. Can curiosity be measured? A spontaneous demo of the Tipped Top from Chennapatna provoked a few giggles, excitement and sighs of wonder followed by a brief discussion on learning science through toys. Does Agastya foster critical thinking skills? Is Agastya leveraging India's formidable IT skills to educate rural children? The interactions grew lively, intense and personal. What about values? What does it mean truly to feel another person's pain? How does one instill 'humanistic' skills? What's Maya (illusion)? Could I narrate my personal story? Was there a defining moment that caused me to switch from banking to social work? How did I persuade my wife to move from London to Bangalore? A woman asked, somewhat tensely, if she should quit her job with an MNC to start her dream social venture. The discussion moved on to the challenges of social entrepreneurship. Are the risks and opportunities of social entrepreneurship different from those of business entrepreneurship? How does a social venture raise money? How can it scale up, sustain itself and transform the environment? How should a social entrepreneur approach and work with government? Will Agastya support social ventures in China?

The dialogue touched more sensitive ground as a powerful business leader quizzed me over dinner about Indians' perception of China. Considering India's historical spiritual influence on China - "our gods look like Indians" and "many Chinese business leaders have embraced Buddhism" - and our mostly conflict-free history, why do Indians fear China? We discussed Chinese history, the 1962 war and Pakistan and whether Chinese society lacks institutional memory. Which model - China's top-down or India's bottom-up one - will in time produce superior results? A guest revealed the interesting, if worrying, prospect that China's one-child policy could create a nation of prima donnas. Another expressed horror at the stark inequities between India's urban super rich and its slum-dwellers.

At a discussion with social entrepreneurs in Shanghai I depicted facets of creativity and leadership through inspiring stories, of the Buddha, Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Einstein, Feynman and J. Krishnamurti among others, and hastened to ascribe the lack of Chinese stories to my relative unfamiliarity with Chinese history. I described Chanakya's 2500 year-old rice bowl stratagem as an example of creativity in warfare and drew an instantaneous response that Chairman Mao had conceived and prosecuted a similar strategy in his war of liberation. Several participants offered interesting ideas. Like the man in the Mao Cap (I had mistakenly called it a Guevara cap) who suggested that Agastya should launch a Lab in a Tricycle. I mentioned Agastya's new Mobile

Auto Rickshaw Science Lab, which drew a blank followed by animated discussion – what’s an auto rickshaw? Or the young woman at Peking University who wants to transplant the Agastya Mobile Art Lab in China. A professor shared with me offline established research on power and creativity, demonstrating that open ‘visitor’ societies have been more creative than ‘insular’ societies. On a much lighter note a student at Fudan University wanted to know if Indians are smarter than Chinese.

Almost everyone I spoke to expressed readiness to engage with the poor and the minorities overlooked by China’s unbalanced, roller coaster growth. Beijing and Shanghai are not representative of China, they said. Several socially minded entrepreneurs expressed interest and enthusiasm in replicating Agastya’s grassroots education model in rural and Western China. A consultant at McKinsey was keen to connect me with Chinese students in California interested possibly in interning with Agastya. The head of a non-profit incubator offered to send a box of traditional Chinese toys to demonstrate to Indian children, promising a much-needed spur to Agastya’s overdue mobile toy lab. Was rare idealism impelling my young listeners to reach out to those less fortunate than they? A Westerner advised me privately that ‘only a Chinese can succeed in China’. This was swiftly countered by a Chinese, ‘Westerners do not understand China’.

The lackluster environment of many Chinese schools – rote-based learning, lack of curiosity, inquiry and creativity – is not dissimilar to that of most Indian schools. The conditions in both countries are ripe for radical change; the possibilities for collaboration, and the potential benefits of this for India, China and the world, are enormous.

I came back from my Chinese sojourn refreshed and recharged with respect for China’s youth and well-intentioned social entrepreneurs. More social and spiritual exchanges can help to build constructive relations and perceptions between Indians and Chinese. Perhaps Agastya should commence an initiative to spark curiosity in Chinese schools? To my delight a few days after my visit I was informed that a box of traditional Chinese toys from Shanghai was on its way to Agastya.

Ramji Raghavan

Agastya International Foundation

www.agastya.org

May 5, 2010