

SVP India

Ravi Venkatesan knows how to ‘conquer the chaos’ of doing business in India. Under his leadership between 2004–2011, India became Microsoft’s second-largest market. His recent book²⁰ argues that if you can ‘win in India’, you can ‘win everywhere’ and while giving fascinating insights into the complexities and opportunities of the giant Indian marketplace, it is clearly guided by a strong ethical compass. ‘A company doesn’t endure unless it lives in harmony with all its stakeholders’, he says, quoting J. Irwin Miller, the founder of engineering corporation Cummins. Ravi admits that his business values were shaped at Cummins, where he spent the bulk of his professional career before joining Microsoft India. ‘At Cummins, a manager was held responsible for the creative ways in which he or she engaged employees in community service. We grew up in that ethos.’ The move to Microsoft was a natural progression, confirmed in his job interview with Bill Gates who, he recalls, told him ‘Ravi, you’re now 40; if you ever dream of a platform to change the world and certainly change India, you won’t find anything better than Microsoft.’ As chairman of Microsoft India, it was Ravi’s responsibility to improve the Indian public’s perceptions of Microsoft

²⁰ Ravi Venkatesan, *Conquering the Chaos*, Harvard Business Review Press, 2013.

and to 'do well by doing good' through technology. Looking back over his seven-year tenure he is particularly proud of Microsoft's computer literacy programme that has so far trained 735,000 government school teachers, who in turn have taught IT skills to 35 million students.

Working for Microsoft has brought Ravi into close contact with a unique community of technologists and philanthropists, and specifically SVP's Seattle chapter. Will Poole, a senior Microsoft employee, and his wife Janet Levinger are active members of SVP Seattle, and through friendship with Ravi, they suggested that the collective giving model pioneered by SVP could be relevant for the burgeoning professional class in India's own 'silicon valley'. The couple, together with SVP partner and technologist, Pradeep Singh, did more than making a suggestion: they raised a significant grant to help get SVP in India off the ground. 'Without that generosity and a lot of hand-holding, it's unlikely anything would have materialised,' admits Ravi.

In the middle of 2012, an SVP chapter in India started to take shape, with ambitions from the start to be a significant force in philanthropy, rather than an isolated local effort. 'You start small and insignificant,' says Ravi, 'but particularly after my experience of Microsoft, I knew we had to plan for scale — to be one of the largest and most influential organisations on the Indian philanthropy landscape'. Ravi wanted an opportunity that offered, in technology-speak, a 'Plug & Play' platform for anybody with socially transformative ideas. 'We needed to be entrepreneurial in our DNA, so if someone came along with a transforming healthcare idea, for example, they could come to SVP, call up the five partners, use our brand and collective ability to raise resources and do something'.

While SVP is a proven and well-articulated model of collective giving, Ravi does not feel constrained by a blueprint. He is confident that SVP is a global network of talented individuals that has developed a model that stood the test of time, but is convinced 'we have to figure out what makes sense for us here in India'. The SVP Network was supportive of this "flexible franchise" approach to finding the right Indian identity for its newest chapter.

One key flexibility lies with its organisational structure. SVP chapters in North America are normally independent entities, each paying a membership support fee to SVP Network. Ravi says that with Indian regulatory bureaucracy requiring at least six to nine months for each registration, it makes little sense to set up city chapters as independent legal entities. Instead, SVP India is an umbrella for each new chapter, and the primary entry point for the network's support.

This novel structure is being led by SVP India's CEO Arathi Laxman, a veteran IT entrepreneur, who like Ravi is looking to use the skills and connections of a private sector career to serve the cause of philanthropy in India. Arathi's mission is to create a secure foundation from which SVP India can grow at a pace that keeps its partners engaged and motivated in an initiative that has the ambition to make a significant impact in a country of 1.2 billion people. While Arathi was leading SVP at the national level, she was responsible for setting up and making the first chapter in Bangalore operational. With the Bangalore chapter functioning, she is now focused on the India strategy and assisting with chapter formation in Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai and Pune. She is conscious of the significant human and financial resources that are required as the chapters grow, and the challenges partners face when dealing with the very different culture of non-profits.

Before starting SVP in India, Arathi worked on a project funded by the World Bank over a two-year period, helping a rag picker community build a business selling recycled paper products and create the necessary market linkages to ensure its sustainability. She says, 'When I started that project, I thought, "I have been a part of four successful start-up organisations and have advised numerous others, how difficult can this be?"' She believes the 'realities of translating leadership and capacity building from the corporate world requires co-creation of solutions, it requires a deep understanding of the environment and a different set of resources and capabilities are at play. You learn humility; you learn to participate in creating. The rag picker experience was invaluable for me to understand organisational capacity building, which is the cornerstone of every SVP chapter and critical to creating impact and ensuring

sustainability. This is part of the learning journey for all of us at SVP in India.'

Ravi believes it will take time to get many of the high value partners, such as company CEOs, to engage directly with non-profits but he is already seeing that many of their partners' spouses 'rolling up their sleeves and working with NGOs', which indeed reflects SVP's practice in the U.S., where membership of a chapter is very much a family affair. Ravi sees the proven core model of SVP as a starting point for India rather than an end point. He says, 'There is a core grantmaking model but we also need to be entrepreneurially opportunistic. We need to run lots of experiments and from them figure out what's worth pursuing.'

Ravi admits that social enterprise is a big trend in India which SVP India needs to explore: 'Already we have a number of partners keen to support social enterprises, for example, we have one partner who could donate land for an enterprise accelerator, and there are social investment funds willing to offer us grants if we move in that direction and are clear about the role we could play.'

In July 2013, SVP India gained legal registration as a Section 25 non-profit company under which individual city-based circles will be local chapters. The chairman of each chapter will sit on the SVP India board to help steer countrywide strategy. Livelihood, including job creation and vocational training, will be an overarching national focus area for all chapters. Each group will then choose additional localised social and environmental challenges that particularly touch on the well-being of their communities.

Bangalore, the first of SVP India's chapters, has chosen waste management as its local issue. The rapid expansion of Bangalore as India's 'Silicon Valley' has placed much of its post-colonial infrastructure under stress. The problem of sorting, collecting and disposing of domestic waste in a city of approaching 10 million people has vexed Bangalore for decades. The municipality's 'zero waste' programme is being piloted in 22 of the city's 198 wards by private sector contractors. SVP Bangalore's partner, V. Ravichandar, a corporate consultant who is passionate about civic engagement, is offended by the city's

growing mountain of untreated waste. He is leading the chapter's efforts in finding an effective entry point and strategy for SVP to engage in waste management, by harnessing the resources and skill set of the chapter's partners.

Something of an existential crisis affects many highly driven and successful business people contemplating life priorities beyond the pivot age of 50. This was true of Ravi Venkatesan, who has written about shaping his life priorities after a 30-year working life and the prospect of another 30 years yet to be lived out. Similarly, Bangalore's chapter chair, Akila Krishankumar, spent six months in reflection after retiring from a Fortune 500 technology company in 2013, resisting what she says is 'the natural temptation to accept board positions and to take on jobs.' She soon found that SVP would give her the opportunity to use her skills and networks while making a social impact on Bangalore and India. She feels that in India, wealth creation is still a new experience for many people and this 'helps people not to forget where they have come from.' Akila uses speaking engagements at business conferences to share her passion for the potential of SVP and is delighted that the chapter has been 'growing at a rapid rate' to 65 partners by the end of 2013. She says that the 'concept of venture philanthropy is interesting to many business people, who have been chequebook philanthropists but want to be more involved in giving, who want to know how their gifts are spent.' Akila believes such people are willing to give SVP membership a try, but need to know that working in collective model offers them the flexibility to engage at a level of time commitment that does not compromise work and family.

The combined experience of SVP's U.S. chapters has helped Bangalore set expectations about commitment levels and refine their pitch to prospective members. 'In U.S. chapters, we know that at any one time a chapter will have a range of partners who write a cheque and might not actively participate to those that are highly engaged and driving the chapter's agenda based on their availability of time,' says Arathi Laxman, SVP India's CEO. 'Educating partners [about philanthropy and Indian non-profit culture]

will be much harder than recruiting them,' says Akila, 'but it is a key priority.'

A rapidly growing network of SVP Indian chapters is important for the formation of the subcontinent's philanthropy culture, especially amongst a large number of highly talented, internationally experienced business people. It will also have an impact on SVP Network, which in 2013 has focused on global expansion with India being a key player. There is little doubt that as India adapts a core model suitable for the Indian context, where scale of impact is a given, that its learning and experience will shape the future of the global network.