Classrooms, Boardrooms and Social Impact
By Girish Ananth (PGP 13)

I have recently started a video podcast on YouTube, called "Raahi: Impact Journeys." In the last decade, I have worked on delivering systemic and technology solutions across a range of sectors at McKinsey & Company and at Peepul, an education non-profit. Somewhere along the way, I realized that there may be a gap to be bridged - typical management graduates lack the nuanced development/impact perspective of social sector professionals, while typical social sector professionals don't have structured exposure with key management concepts.

At a point when careers in the social sector are becoming possible and sustainable for management professionals, I started the "Raahi : Impact Journeys" to share social impact perspectives, in the hope that it may help inform and influence all unique journeys.

In the inaugural episode, I spoke with Prof. Ankur Sarin, of the Public Systems Group of IIM Ahmedabad, on education, public policy, and the complexities of creating meaningful change. The conversation also delves into the background of the Winter School held in December annually, by the Right To Education Resource Center, a student group and action research initiative at IIM Ahmedabad.

Excerpts from the conversation below, mildly edited for readability.

I would love for you to give a quick introduction of yourself.

I've been here at this institute, IIM Ahmedabad, for 16 years now. My primary membership is in the Public Systems Group, which, in a way, is dealing with public policy. It's a historic name that we've had—Public Systems. But I also am a sort of secondary member of the Economics area and the Education area. So, in a sense, that covers my realm of interests and the training that I have received over the years.

What are the top two or three pieces of research that you were really excited by, that you really enjoyed working on?

I think the one piece that, in some way, perhaps instigated much of what I even continue to do was during my thesis. I was looking at the impact of the Mandal Commission on education attainment. To me, this just seemed like such a big, important, significant question: what has been the impact of affirmative action on the groups that are targeted? And I was quite surprised to find, in some ways, very little evidence around it. That was, you know, a completely econometric exercise, etc.

The second piece of work was around social mobility, and we were trying to understand who makes it to places such as the IIMs. What are their social backgrounds? And we were looking at different tiers of institutions, etc. Although not very fancy econometrically, the nature of the data, and again, the question itself was a catalyst for many things, including my work on the Right To Education (RTE) and the RTE Resource Center.

The Right to Education Resource Center (RTERC) was essentially a desire in some ways to say, can we do research which is meaningful for the communities around us? So, we are an Institute of National Importance – how do we relate to the communities around us?

It would bother me that we, as this large, prestigious, coveted, respected institution, were not doing enough to sort of impact the community that lives directly outside us, right? And so, it was this idea of action research that I started, perhaps experimenting with, that led to many other such projects, including one that I've done most recently with Dr. Ajazuddin Shaikh (or Ajaz *bhai*, as I call him), where we're really trying to understand substance abuse among children.

What have been maybe two, three non-intuitive insights or things that you feel like people should know but they don't at the moment, with respect to education?

I don't know if people don't know, and to what extent, but I think when it comes to something like a complex system like education, there are some things that we end up prioritizing and other things that we end up neglecting.

I think the most fundamental being that we forget, in some ways, the most important person in all of this: the child. Whenever we talk about systems, the child comes last, right? Every year (at the RTERC Winter School), I get a reminder that when you talk about a system, we neglect the most important person, the child. And I think that's something that is a constant reminder, and if I would say that's if there's one thing that others also need to be reminded of, it's that.

It's not at all an easy thing to do, but if the obsession is first with scale, and then with the child, then the child will always get neglected, right? But if you put the child first and then say, yes, there are many children out there –then you create a system which recognizes the uniqueness, the diversity of children. Then you create a system with that objective, of nurturing the child. You don't create a system for the sake of creating a system.

So who are some other interesting, inspiring, perspective-shifting people that you've met – not just in education or recently? You've been working on many different things and meeting very interesting people. What are some other stories that might be interesting for us?

So, by virtue of doing things like this, one comes across many different stories. And I think, for me, the most fascinating ones have been ones that actually pertain to the students of this institution themselves. And around IIMA, this big brand, there is often one single story about what an IIMA

graduate is or who an IIMA graduate is, and, you know, what are they here for and where should they be going.

And I've seen, at least in terms of my experiences, that's just not true. And so one of the most mind-shifting experiences was when one of the people of RTERC, he stayed behind to work on RTERC. Now he was coming from a background, where his parents were not really aware of what goes on at IIMA, so their friends had somehow convinced his parents that this guy has actually failed, so he's continuing to be on the campus. So I mean that's also the sort of background we have for students who come to this place.

Last year I heard another story about another person very closely involved with RTERC, who convocated and she broke down; she was like, 'I never thought people like me were even going to be even coming here in the first place'.

I think the opportunity that this gives as a faculty member to learn about my own students, has been also one of the most fascinating insights that I've received.

I agree with you, I think there is a story around what a student who goes through IIM A becomes and should become, which shapes those narratives, no? And perhaps as part of breaking that, maybe a question for you would be – if someone is graduating from IIM A or any other premier institution and if they have this conscience that tells them that they want to do something meaningful, there are those whose circumstances won't allow a full-time role within, say, education, healthcare, human rights, anything of that sort. But what would you say that they can do that could help them have a salve to their conscience?

Before we get to your question, in terms of conscience and what you can do, I think more fundamentally we've got to change aspirations. Aspirations both that the institute has for the students and the students have for themselves. I really think we need to, as an institution, adopt more 21st-century goals than stick to the 20th-century goals that perhaps shaped the institution to start with.

I think the institution has shown its capability in creating partners, CEOs, and students - now there are others doing it as well, right?

And even as a student, (having) another Partner coming out from the institute – I don't want to devalue the achievement, but if we have to continue to be leaders, right, there are far more complex problems that need to be solved, that need solving.

And so even before the sense of sort of saying, 'Do I have a social consciousness around this?' It's a question of, 'Well, here are where the problems are, the complex problems, the challenging problems, and this is where your intellect, this is where your smartness needs to be put in.'

Now, to your question in terms of, yes, it's not an easy path even if one has this aspiration and has this goal. And sometimes it's also about resources and sometimes it is about other aspirations – and there's nothing wrong in that. But I think what one can do at the least is not become an impediment to good work that is actually happening around it, right?

I mean, if one can just learn to appreciate it and not diss it, I think that itself would be a contribution that is a huge help for folks who are actually trying to do it. You don't need to walk the path, but don't decry those who are walking on it.

Yeah, that is fair. The most wicked problems lie in the social sector: it is extremely hard when everything is interlinked, there are interdependencies between the different themes that you work on, and there is no clear right answer, which is the perfect testing ground for someone who wants to be a good management graduate.

So, on one side we're looking at the institution looking to evolve its aspirations and create more, say, social impact-oriented leadership. It's like you give them the same hammer, but the nails that you hit are things that will directly impact society. And on the other side, what you spoke about, students' aspirations for themselves and how that is going ahead.

I'm not very comfortable with the distinction between social impact versus other sectors. I'm not comfortable with this nomenclature because I truly believe, to the extent that I just take it as the absolute truth, that all corporations, every entity has a social impact. The question is, what is the nature of the social impact that you want to be creating and you want to be working towards, right? So I think no one should be under the impression that somehow they are not doing something which is socially impactful. And I think that consciousness needs to be embedded to start with. This also goes back to your earlier question, right?

And moreover, what you are also doing is changing, changing and reflecting society in some form. Are you reinforcing the status quo? Are you—you know, reinforcing sort of hierarchies, or are you trying to challenge that? So I think those are things that, even, no matter which business one is engaged in, they can be thinking about those issues.

So I want to double down on that one that you mentioned earlier. One of the things that you helped me rethink was that businesses are for profit maximization. You had a different take on that?

So yes, that's what I have also been taught in some ways, that, 'the business of business is to do business.' And when we say to do business is to maximize shareholder value, right? And this has been taught as an axiom, as a sort of a truth, which is, yes, 'this is what it is and this is how the world works'. But my contention is that most economic activity, at least in terms of the number of people doing it — is actually not driven *per se* by a profit maximization motive. Yes, there is a profit motive but there is also a desire to be covering costs, there is a desire to be meeting expenses, living a decent life etc.

So, this is again a part of the disciplining or training that happens, "No, it is just about profit maximization." I think that's the part that needs more awareness.

In the full episode, we speak about the education system, public policy, business, the need to evolve the institute's aspirations towards creating social leaders and much more.

Watch the full conversation on the "Raahi: Impact Journeys" YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/@raahi.impact or access through the QR code.