



## “Good Stories Are A Mirror To Our Souls” – Raghu Ananthanarayanan

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Posted on February 5, 2017 at 5:23 am

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(I met Raghu a couple of years ago when a group of like-minded consultants, facilitators and thought leaders had started an interesting experiment. We had been in touch off and on, after that. Then came his book *Leadership Dharma – Arjuna, The Timeless Metaphor*. Raghu wanted me to meet him and his publisher to discuss possible ways to market the book. Those conversations drew me to take a closer look at Raghu and his body of incredible work. The interview that follows is about the unique connection he makes between the characters in the Mahabharata and leadership coaching in today's context. Right through you will see Raghu's fascination with stories.)



Raghu – Inspires, enthral, encourages people to be the best they can be

*When did your love affair with Mahabharata start?*

I was very fortunate in that I grew up in a joint family till my teens. My grandfather would gather us cousins and read to us from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. When he narrated the stories he would sometimes stop and speak about his own life and how he had acted in similar situations. Often he shared his mistakes. Looking back, this must have left a deep impression on me. All my work with the Mahabharata invites people to do this, to immerse themselves in the archetypal heroes and discover themselves through the exploration of the drama of these characters.

*What about the Mahabharata drew you to it? Why this special fascination with Mahabharata?*

I have been fascinated with how discussions about the various situations in the Mahabharata have helped me to converge my imagination, my curiosity and my logic when seeking to understand my inner processes. There is still a world of the Mahabharata that exists in India. It exists in casual conversations when one says “Don't be a righteous Yudhishtira!”. It exists in serious enquiry when a spiritual teacher uses the Mahabharata to illustrate how a profound philosophy plays out in daily life; it exists when one has a discussion with the Koothu artists or an N.Muthuswamy about the power of the drama to enable us to understand the human condition. I have gained immensely by joining in these conversations.

*Your involvement with various fields is fascinating- Engineering, Management, yoga, theatre, people development– how did it all start? Who was your inspiration in all this?*

Engineering was not a very thought-through thing. I was a good student, I got into IIT

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without much difficulty, and I find the application of science to solving practical problems fascinating. I continue to apply myself to understanding how systems work. Psychology is my area of study by choice. I contemplated dropping out of Engineering to study psychology but did not find a great place to learn it. So when the opportunity to study it with Prof Pulin Garg presented itself to me, I naturally gravitated to it. I am an artist, I used to paint, and this led me to be a regular visitor at Cholamandalam Artist Village. I not only ended up learning from them, but many artists have also become dear friends. The Theatre is part of that world. I met NaMuthuswamy there, his integration of Koothu and modern theatre was exciting. There is Mahabharata at the centre of this convergence, and psychology!

*I notice that your description of the Mahabharata characters is somewhat different from popular notions. For instance, I heard you say "Arjuna is half man, half woman." Whose version of Mahabharata do you quote as your source of authority?*

The way the Koothu artists discuss the Mahabharata characters and the situations in which the unique features of the heroes come through is a revelation. These discussions not only reveal a very intimate and detailed understanding of the Epic, but they are also always an "inside-out" discussion, self-referential and self-exploratory. The Pandavas are therefore seen as human beings, in archetypal familial and societal situations who are able to evoke a higher part of the self. The Kauravas are human, as capable of the Pandavas, but fail to awaken their higher selves. The higher self is awakened because the Pandavas are introspective, they see life as a Yogic SAadhana.

Na Muthuswamy, for example, describes the uniqueness of the Indian idea of heroism by using the example of Arjuna. As Brihannalla (when he is incognito in Virata's Court) he explores his feminine side and is a very accomplished dancer. This ability to integrate his masculine and feminine sides allows Arjuna to be vulnerable and open to the teaching of Krishna and to befriend him.



Change does not stop with make up

I have also had the privilege of having many discussions with Kamala Subramaniam and listen to her ways of understanding the Epics.

*When did you start your work on people development? What or who took you in that direction?*

Just after I finished my B.Tech, I entered a phase of an existential

crisis. The Vietnam war was at its peak, Forrester and a group of eminent scientists had published the "Club of Rome" report. Closer home, the Naxalite rebellion was hotting up. A few of my colleagues in IIT were drawn to asking fundamental questions about life: "What should I be investing my life into?" "should I be part of the system that is obviously converting the technological dream into an environmental nightmare? What were the hopes generated through the Gandhian struggle, and are we betraying them?" And so on. I got married to Sashi a few years after graduating, and both of us were asking these questions very seriously. We met Dhrampal and were very deeply impacted by him. He had lived with Gandhiji, and displayed a huge commitment to things Indian and conviction in our genius. It was through his urgings that Sashi studied Vaastu Shastras and I moved into studying Yoga with Krishnamacharya. We were also very lucky to meet J.Krishnamurti and engage with him intimately till he passed away.

Yoga is all about the mind, JK is all about self-reflection and Dharampal is all about asking what will make India a viable and proud nation? That's been my life path from the 70's.

*Tell me more about your relationship with Pulin Garg. How did he influence your thinking and work?*

I was introduced to Pulin and his work by a friend and colleague who knew of my interests

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and suggested that learning the Behavioural Sciences with a master like Pulin might be the way I could integrate all my areas of interest and my talents. That has turned out to be right. Pulin was very insightful about human processes and group dynamics, and his family was intimately connected to Gandhiji, and his interest in Yoga and the Upanishads was very deep. The couple of decades I spent with him as his student, his apprentice and his colleague were intense and helped me shape my professional identity.

*You are a great believer in stories to convey messages. Is that what attracted you to the theatre?*

Narratives are the stuff of life! All psychological "cures" are a process of enabling the person to discover a coherent and meaningful story of their own lives and their futures. Without a coherent story, there is no meaning. Yes I, am entirely convinced about the power of stories. Good stories are a mirror to our souls. Just listen to a well narrated Zen or a Sufi or an Upanishadic story. They can keep your mind in a state of enquiry for a long time.

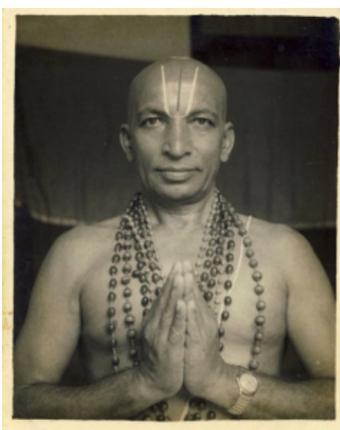
*How did your involvement in Koothu Pattarai start? When did you start using that for corporate training? How was the response?*

My involvement with Koothu-p-Pattarai (KPP) started when I was in college. It got strengthened when Anmol Velani (who was the Founder of The India Foundation for the Arts) invited Sashi and me to be involved with KPP; Sashi to design their proposed auditorium, and me to teach Yoga. I also conducted several labs for the actors and worked with them in the preparation phase of their performances to enable actors to explore and evoke their own selves through the characters they were enacting. Many of the plays were from the Mahabharata. With Anmol's help, I started experimenting with a Laboratory learning mode using theatre called "Learning Theatre" (LT). Initially, Rudraprasad Sengupto and I co-designed and co-facilitated the LT. In early 1980 Mr M.V. Subbiah wanted me to help him design an innovative and compelling programme to help transform their hi-potential Managers into Leaders. I used the Learning Theatre as the central behavioural programme. We ran this module for the Murugappa Group for almost a decade. The LT has been a great success, and I have used Theatre based experiential learning in Corporate training for many decades. The "A Leader Prepares" is a very successful Leadership Development programme I have been running for TCS from 2006. As we speak, I have conducted 55 of these programmes (24 participants per batch). The central theme of this programme is the exploration of the Pandava Heroes as the five models of Leadership.

*I notice an amazing clarity in your definition of various concepts. Where does that come from?*

Thanks for that compliment. I think it comes from the years of learning Yoga from Krishnamacharya.

His way of teaching the Yoga Sutras (which I studied for ten years) was fantastic. In the first round, one learnt to appreciate the key messages of the Sutras and some nuances as the Yogacharya gave the overview. Then one memorises the sutras. Then one is taught the sutras word by word. The same word appearing in different places are differentiated (and one knows them because the sutras have been memorised). The root words and so on will be discussed, and the meaning then has a roundedness and a lucidity. The understanding of the Sutras grows by expanding into larger "wholes". I have found this way of learning really wonderful and very useful for self-reflection. One is not being linear about life experiences or oneself. The usual ways of



Yogacharya Krishnamacharya

learning are linear and to get a grasp of the whole, and its essence takes a long time. I guess I have internalised this and that's what is getting reflected.

*What is Mahabharata Immersion? Why did you start that? Who is it meant for? What happens there?*

The Mahabharata Immersion is in many ways a culmination of decades of work in understanding the inner workings of people. It is through laboratory learning, dialogues with colleagues about the Archetypal heroes of our Purana, helping theatre professionals express themselves with authenticity and intensity, using theatre to enable managers to "become the best that they can be" and above all Yoga. It is a laboratory learning process, and any person with some familiarity with reflective and experiential learning methods who approaches our Purana, the Mahabharata in particular, with an open mind can benefit greatly from this immersion.

*I learn that you have also put together something called Pandava Profile. Is that an Indian answer to the MBTI, EQi, etc? How does it help the individual?*

There are similarities and differences between Eastern ways of understanding human beings and the world and the western ways. Just as there are convergences and divergences in the inner world of human beings. To illustrate, the idea of a hero in western mythology is quintessentially Herculean. It is an individual against the world, having to prove himself against great odds. Rambo is a new form of this hero. The Pandava heroes are very different they are driven by a commitment to the system, to their family and their people. This commitment enables them to transcend their conditioning and their limitations. They engaged in a long struggle to establish Dharma; This struggle goes through stages of compromise, rational debate and so on, before the ceaseless oppression of the forces of adharma are confronted in a battlefield. And even then, questions that arise from a compassionate mind are dialogued before plunging into battle. This attitude to life is a very different than the utilitarian and individualistic philosophy of the current western models. So my colleagues and I have been searching for ways by which the behavioural learning can be anchored on assumptions and practices that are more compatible with our genius. Sumedhas, Academy for the Human Context that a few of us have co-founded ([www.sumedhas.org](http://www.sumedhas.org)) has kept alive the heritage of Pulin and has focused on researching the Indian mind, and finding ways of evoking its best possibilities. My work is focused on the Pandava hero



Arjuna being prepared for the enactment of the penance



A Mahabharata Immersion Session in progress

archetypes and is built upon years of enquiry and study. It looks at the archetypes and potentials and propensities that each of us has in some unique proportion. Since the stories of the heroes are available as a cultural resource, the Pandava Profile enables a person to understand oneself not based on some theory, but on the inherent wisdom of the story.

Situations are presented in the Mahabharata that one can compare with, the internal tensions, the patterns of self-expression, the areas of entrenchment, ways in which the hero transcends limitations are all available as "trigger questions" for self-reflection. So the whole process of self-awareness becomes more "inside out" and less "expertise and theory" dependent. I believe that this is a more compassionate, less therapy based and more accessible way of empowering a person to grow and evolve.

*I understand you have used Pandava Profile in your coaching for corporate leaders. Can*

*you share one or two examples how it worked?*

When I help leaders to look at themselves through this lens, the first thing it does is it helps them understand their inner world without judgement. When I was working with a young entrepreneur who was taking over his family business, this was the kind of resolution that came after the coaching: "Ah! I have a high Yudhishtira propensity that goes along with the Bhima in me. That's why I can be organised and intense. I insist on discipline and demand performance. But I also tend to be pulled between my impulsivity and dependence on precedence. This is the tension between my father and me, I project all traditional practices on him and see him as opposing my drive. But I see that I value policy and rules too. It is my own inner struggle to balance the two.: or "Yes I ought to invest in the Nakula aspects so that I can be more empathetic to my people. It is a value that the family has been renowned for. I can see how important it is to create a sense of belonging. I cannot bring in an idea like meritocracy without also respecting belonging" And so on. This then led to many discussions where other aspects of the heroes and their actions are studied; their shadow sides are examined. This exploration was very intimate without becoming personal; the heroes became the mirrors to this person's inner realities. Also, the situational behaviours were understood and become frameworks for meaning making and decision making. The nature of Dharma Sankata was deeply understood. The ideal leader is not a super problem solver but a wise person who balances diverse pulls and creates a safe ground for action thus empowering the team. Also, and very importantly, this young entrepreneur was very interested in music. While we were examining the Arjuna characteristics the discussion centred around the need to invest in his own softer sides, his artistic and aesthetic self. All this led to a new way of looking at quality. What he treated as an auditing and strict adherence became a celebration of craft! The whole coaching process was not only very effective and transforming it was beautiful and even playful.



Discussions on the characteristics of the Pandava heroes- at the Awakening Arjuna programme

*I understand that in addition to the Pandava Profile you also use something called 8 Personas. What is that? Where is the concept from? Is it also from Mahabharata? How do you use that in coaching?*

If you look at the various Arts in India, you will find a remarkable weaving of ideas from the Puraana, the

Upanishads, the Vedas, Sankhya, Yoga, Buddhist and Jain thought. Whether it is dance, music, sculpture, architecture, the martial arts, folk art or koothu the warp and the weft of the practices and philosophies of the darshanas under pin them. In my Inner work, I have followed this tradition of integrating the practices based on a foundation of Yoga. Dance uses the idea of the Navarasa as its central exploration. Krishnamacharya has said that a true Yogi is one who can experience the full depth of the rasa appropriately, without any distortion of residue. He called this a form of aekaagrata. I have used this idea and the embodied expression of the rasas in the form of the personas that dance uses like the victim, the warrior, the friend, the saakshi and so on to encounter the many selves within us, understand them in their functional and dysfunctional dynamics. The Heroic archetypes like the Pandavas display various nuances of the navarasa and the personas in functional ways, while the Kauravas do so dysfunctionally. An exploration of the archetypes from within necessarily implies the exploration of the rasa and the personas.

*When did you think of writing Leadership Dharma? What prompted you?*

My boom Leadership Dharma was many years in the making four years or more. It captures my experiences with helping Organisations transform by working with the leadership team. The Long case study that forms the central narrative is a true story but embellished and fictionalised. It also fictionalises the key elements of the Leadership Development process that I have designed. It came out of a discussion I was having with one of my mentors who urged me to share the process I was using in my consulting. He

said the extensive use of narrative, theatre and Puranic frames would be very valuable for others to learn about.

*Would you agree that LD is not like any other modern management books? As in you are not delivering a formula or a mantra? What is your plan to help people understand benefit from the book?*

The design of the Awakening Arjuna programme to train coaches and facilitators is the outcome of the book. Again I must thank my mentor for asking the question "now that the book is written how will you really empower people to use it?" My own learning has been through apprenticeship and a gurukula of a kind. The learning has been to hone my listening and become very sensitive, listen to the unstated and the implicit, surface the tensions and the dharma sankata and to enable my clients to evoke their own wisdom in engaging with their issues. While learning from books and research studies has enhanced my capabilities, the experiential learning has been the bedrock. I am hoping to empower others to understand the approach and to be able to use it by offering a comprehensive set of offerings: a programme on coaching, the Mahabharata Immersion and mentoring. I am also designing leadership training modules that can be independently facilitated.

*In today's outcome and result obsessed world, how would you measure the success of your book and its concept?*

I am hoping that the book is widely read and discussed. If people come forward to learn the entire process through the Awakening Arjuna Offering that would give me great joy and satisfaction. I am hoping to create a "community of practice" that is grounded on the principles, philosophies and pragmatics of an Indian approach to behavioural work.

*What has been the corporate world's response to it? What are some of the criticisms that you might have encountered?*

The book and all the methods I have developed have happened in Corporate Consulting assignments or the lab settings. So I guess I should thank the corporations that have valued my work for allowing me to innovate and deploy my learning through all these years of my work. My concern is that our wisdom and the priceless philosophies that are found in the Puranas are sometimes looked at through a religious lens. Strangely, I have had many European, American, Chinese and Japanese people in my programmes. They have been fascinated with this approach and often discuss the similarities and differences between their heroes and so on. It is overzealous Indians who become skittish.

*Do you have any plans to take it to the US universities? Like Harvard or Stanford etc.?*

I would be honoured to take this approach that is based firmly on our wisdom across the globe, especially to other celebrated centres of learning. No plans as of now, but I would welcome ideas.

*If someone is keen to try this concept in their organisation, what would your advice to them be? What are the three things they must do to make this work for them?*

Firstly, their interest ought to be born out of a commitment to develop and evolve themselves and their organisation. This genuine human commitment is essential for any attempt to make a meaningful change. Secondly, to understand that change in culture is like revitalising the soil. It is not an application of fertiliser or weedicide. It is akin to the acuity and the love a farmer has to his land, one that turns it to be fertile for many generations. Thirdly, honesty to the self. Any attempt to make changes involves the process of looking at ones own disowned sides and the unintended negative outcomes of leadership decisions. The ability to ask "In doing what I am doing doing, what am I really doing?" and listening to answers that are not palatable is essential.

*Based on your current experience of applying LD to organisations, which kind of organisations seem to respond well to it? Organisations with new CEOs? In the throes of change? Having growth pangs? Caught in the M&A trap?*

In my experience, there are three contexts in which organisations have used my

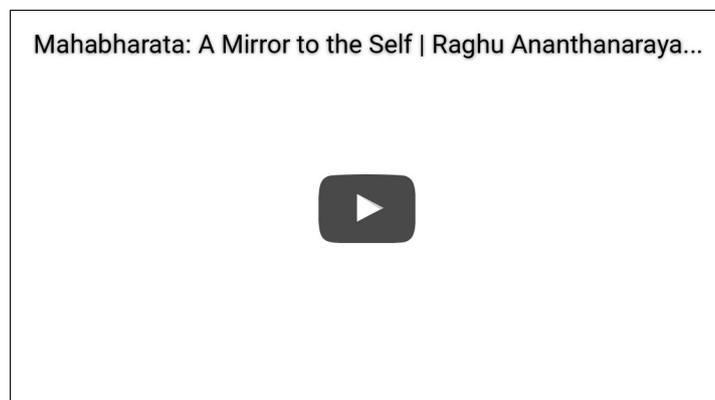
consulting expertise and benefitted. In my early years, I was enabling sick industries to turn around. The urgency that potential disaster brings in is powerful. But, it also has limitations in terms of the speed with which things have to happen and the compulsion for certain outcomes that other stakeholders demand. But people and the organisation is open to listening. Second, organisations that are successful, but have a great urge to grow and excel. These organisations are very demanding, but once convinced, they invest the time and the effort necessary for making the change. Thirdly, of late I am being approached by organisations at the threshold of a shift. Entrepreneurial organisations wanting to become professional and to expand after having achieved initial success. I think the approach my colleagues and I bring in is ideally suited for mid-sized organisations at the cusp of growth.

*Have you thought of translating this in Hindi and a few Indian languages? Do you think it will be welcomed by a lot of ambitious family-owned businesses?*

One of my friends has already suggested a translation into Tamil. I would be thrilled to have it translated into Indian languages and for more people rooted in the traditional ways see the methods we propose as a way to build a bridge to modernization.

#### Raghu's TEDx Talk

Post our conversation Raghu delivered an interesting talk on this subject at a TEDx event in Hyderabad.



Raghu brings the concept alive in just 20 minutes in his unique inimitable manner.

You may contact Raghu at [www.raghuananthanarayanan.com](http://www.raghuananthanarayanan.com)

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