

GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY OF A SELF-RELIANT VILLAGE: STUDY OF KUTHAMBAKKAM IN TAMILNADU

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KUTHAMBAKKAM VILLAGE is 40 km from Chennai. The village was once infamous for riots, poor sanitary conditions, illicit liquor brewing, unemployment, poverty and violence against women but all this changed when development was accorded priority. Nearly 160 families were previously engaged in brewing illicit arrack in the village, which has a population of 5500, were motivated to give up this nefarious activity and take up honest income-generating activities by forming self-help groups. There are 1,175 houses, including 400 huts, of which 315 were upgraded into pucca structures. This change was brought about with the efforts of Elango Rangaswamy.

ELANGO RANGASWAMY is a chemical engineer, a native of the village and now Panchayat President of the village. When elected, he pledged to develop his village. He quit the Central Electro Chemical Research Institute, Chennai in 1994 and started working on a rapport-building exercise in his village for two years, then independently contested and won the 1996 Panchayat election. He has achieved much that any leader could be proud of - community-integrated housing, indigenous industry, gram swaraj and other ideals of local government. Elango was re-elected in the 2001 elections with zero campaign cost. This speaks for the faith the villagers have in him.

As president, he started building houses for the villagers to replace the thatched roof ones. He obtained assistance from the government to buy raw materials but insisted on the villagers donating in their

labor. He re-built the main roads, sewer lines and other village essentials. At this point he ran out of ideas to keep the villagers gainfully employed. Then he thought of producing many of the common items consumed by the villagers, such as food and everyday consumables. Instead of spending money to procure the same items from larger towns such as Chennai, he started producing these items in his own village. In 6 years, Elango succeeded in reforming a village where 80% of the men folk used to be unemployed and drunk.

Since the successful transformation of Kuthambakkam, several neighbouring villages have sought Elango's advice. Elango is now in the process of creating an academy in Kuthambakkam that will serve as a place to teach and train panchayat presidents from other villages.

INSPIRATION FROM MAHATMA GANDHI

AND OTHERS: Elango found inspiration from the lives of personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, J.C. Kumarappa and Kundrakudi Adigalar. He was committed to revolutionise Indian villages with government support. He read Gandhian literature and was impressed by Gandhi's economics and philosophy - "India needs production by the masses and not mass production". He wanted to do something on a micro level. So he decided to work for the upliftment of his native village Kuthambakkam.

He is now on a mission to create model villages based on the Gandhian philosophy of self-reliance. He wants to empower

panchayats in the spirit of the Panchayat Raj.

WATER DRAIN CONSTRUCTION: On the outskirts of the village was a factory that polished granite slabs. It had a huge disposal problem with its random off cuts which it was willing to pay to be carried away. Elango employed local labour, and built a drain which had smooth granite mosaic walls. Of the budgeted Rs.15 lakh for this project, Elango spent just Rs. 4 lakh, half of which went in wages for local folk. But the specification was to build the drain with rubble from a nearby hill. He had violated 'prescribed norms'. In other words, he had deprived transporters of their ferrying opportunity and contractors of their civil works. Vested interests worked overtime. Elango was suspended from office under Section 205 of the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act [TNPA].

He was devastated. He thought he had made a novel environmental, economic and development statement -- and he had been thrown out and humiliated for his pains. Why had he not heeded those that had said politics was a cess-pool? Why had he abandoned a promising career? What had he to show for Sumathy's support? He went into a deep depression. He thought of quitting.

Sumathy made one of her rare visits to Kuthambakkam. She held him and asked him if that was the end of his passions. Was he going to give up because of this one set back? She had brought a book for him, 'Satthia Sodhanai', a Tamil version of Gandhi's 'My Experiments with Truth'.

Elango says he had heard of the book but had not read it. His predicament gave it immediacy as he read it. It seemed written for him. He understood the mind of a dogged man who had faced greater odds. The book taught him grit. Within a few days

he was in Chennai calmly telling the Secretary to the Government: "No, I will not sue you but I will sit in protest until you convene a plenary session of my village. Let your charges be read out, my defence heard and the villagers decide my fate."

He contacted the press. On Jan 10, 1999, 1300 people gathered and Elango defended himself. Before the sun set on the day-long trial, the Government sent in an order revoking the suspension. The entire village had rallied behind him. "I understood Gandhi that day," he says. "First be truthful, and then be fearless. I understand the Panchayat Act, and I don't dispute that the ad-hoc manner in which some work is done technically violates the act. But think of it like this - there is ideal construction material available with a local industry - they in fact have so much of it they are willing to feed our workers if we will simply take it away! So we use this [granite] to make the storm drain, and not the specified rubble. We save many lakhs of rupees, but we have also violated the procedural and technical standards.

This is where Gandhi comes back into my life as an inspiration. It is not merely in making the panchayat self-sufficient that I draw strength from Gandhi, it is also to assert that *dharma* is essentially more important than the law. Also, because I know the laws and understand them, I can see the purposes for which they are created. That purpose is more important than the law. I wrote to the authorities and said "I have not made any money from this procedure, the drain works well, and the people are happy. We have saved money, and ultimately a good thing has been done. Yes, I did not follow the law, but I believe that a just thing was done". The authorities stopped trying to remove me. This kind of explanation may be hard in large communities, where people don't know each other. In the panchayat, people know me, they can judge the justice of my action

themselves. And I use that awareness as my strength."

GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY AND ELANGO RANGASWAMY: In some of the interviews, Rangaswamy expressed his thoughts on Gandhian philosophy.

Q. You're often introduced as a Gandhian ...
Ans. I do not say that I am a 100% Gandhian. Maybe 40%, 50%, some such number. What I mean is that I have found many of Gandhi's ideas, especially in *My Experiments with Truth*, to be a source of strength and inspiration for my work, and I believe that many of the problems I face can be solved by applying that thinking. The label "Gandhian" is something I'm not sure about. Sometimes I think that if I tell people that I practise Gandhi's thinking or Kumarappa's thinking, they may laugh at me, and say that Gandhi is all fine, but not really practical for our times. But then I also think that if I am trying to do something for the betterment of my village, and for my country, and if I find the strength for that work in Gandhi, why should I be diffident in saying that?"

Q. You are a panchayat chief, with responsibilities for your own village environment. That must offer plenty of opportunity to try out Gandhi's ideas on *gram swaraj*.

Ans. You can look at this as an economic idea, or as Gandhian thinking. The village produces a few things, and tries to sell them, typically in Chennai. Most of the things we sell are "unfinished products", such as harvested crops, unpasteurized milk, nuts for oil, etc. We send these off somewhere like Ambattur to be processed, packaged, and transported back to us. Typically, there is a 100% markup in price in that process. We think of ourselves as consumers only of finished goods, but there is no reason why we cannot be the buyers of the unfinished goods as well as the processors who make the finished goods. In the same move, you can eliminate all the middleman costs, and also find employment through new economic

activity. From this there is self-reliance, a sense of pride and independence. You can call that *gram swaraj*.

Of course, I do not suggest the Gandhian way of the 'charka' as the means to eke out a living. Since times have changed, one has to keep pace with modern trends and changes in science and technology. A village that produces groundnuts, for instance, must think of establishing an oil extraction unit to liberate itself from its dependency on cities for oil. This will also help generate employment opportunities within the village.

PANCHAYAT RAJ AND ELANGO'S VISION: The 73rd constitutional amendment in 1992 widened the Panchayat Raj base and made Panchayats local self-government. Now there is an elected Panchayat at every village level functioning as government for that village with the people's support in the form of Gram Sabha. There are financial and power devolutions in the form of financial commission grants and other governmental schemes.

Despite the existence of the Panchayat Raj constitution for almost a decade almost all over the country, there is no significant growth among panchayats to function as local self-government. There are supporting institutions, NGOs and govt. departments to make panchayats deliver the constitutional mandates. In this situation, if there are demonstrating models for total development by the panchayats, they will create a ripple among other panchayats by showcasing the role models. This will be easy to replicate as more and more models use grassroots democracy.

ELANGO'S VISION AS A PANCHAYAT LEADER:

a) To eliminate hunger and create a self-reliant, self-sustainable village economy in which all the able-bodied have employment opportunities and people develop pride and

confidence in their skills and in the village.

b) To provide resources for locally-made products to be value-added to the highest possible degree within the village so that wealth generated stays with the villagers.

c) To provide a model for the development of the rest of rural India, by creating and demonstrating solutions in his own village.

INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT OF KUTHAMBAKKAM:

This was thoroughly discussed among the villagers at ward and street levels, and accepted after suitable alterations.

1. Eradication of illicit arrack trade. The one compelling reason Elango went back to his village was that women were beaten up, humiliated and exploited by their alcoholic husbands every night. With assistance from the local police and newspapers, Elango was able to bring about a change the Gandhian way. Boys from the Loyola College helped by performing street plays. After years of persistence, the men agreed to quit alcohol provided they were given alternative means of employment. Elango gave this rehabilitated group of more than 200 families employment in putting infrastructure (houses, drains and roads) in place for the entire village. From among the most notorious villages for illicit arrack trade in Tamil Nadu five years ago, Kuthambakkam now figures at the bottom end of the list.

2. Low-cost compressed mud-block housing:

The Panchayat started its work with the establishment of a "Samathuvapuram" (a township of equality) of 50 twin-houses (now one of the 6 hamlets of Kuthambakkam) in October 2000. A Harijan family and a non-harijan family live together in every twin-house. The villagers are responsible for laying the foundation and building the walls at their own cost. The government helps with roof tiles, doors and windows.

3. Roads and street lighting:

Unlike in the cities, village roads are used for more than transportation. They are used

for socializing by the men and women folk in the evenings, are converted into children's playgrounds during vacations and into clean plinths for drying grains during the harvest seasons. The rehabilitated families laid good interior concrete roads in every part of the village at a low cost. With government support, all highway and union roads were also repaired, and re-laid, where necessary.

4. Rain Water Harvesting and Water Supply:

The Panchayat has desilted and deepened six ponds in and around the village, as a result of which, the water table does not go below 13 feet even during the summer. An overhead water tank has been constructed, and a water pump installed in every hamlet. These are connected to every cluster of houses.

5. Self-help groups (SHGs): 18 women's SHGs have been formed, which are being trained to undertake income-generating activities. 130 boys have now come forward to form self-help groups.

6. Literacy and Education:

The illiteracy rate in Kuthambakkam is as high as 60% among women. A local balwadi has been constructed as part of the Samathuvapuram. The village has two primary schools and one upper primary school. Primary education enrollment is 100%, with a 99% dropout after the 8th grade due to the distance to the school. The villagers have built toilets for these schools. Elango has been motivating the teachers to refrain from child beating or any form of harsh punishment for the children. The village has an Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) education centre equipped with a television, which benefits village youth. "The drop out rate is 98% in our village mainly because of the distance to the school," says Elango. He praises government officials and his colleagues at the Panchayat who provide strong support for his work. "As long as you are committed, honest and transparent nobody can stop you. Once they understand that you will not sacrifice quality for anything you can win co-operation from all sections of the

population," he says.

7. Employment generation Small-scale rural industries are being set up to provide permanent employment for the rehabilitated families. The village has trained 90 women in making woven leather shoe uppers for a shoe company in Mumbai. They earn a monthly salary of not less than Rs.2,000 each. Another unit has about 12 women making jute products like bags, footwear and folders for export.

7.8. Information Center and Computer Education Center

The TNF (USA), is helping set up an information center by donating six computers, and training the village women in operating them.

PROJECTS AND EMPLOYMENT: men and women receive training to engage in revenue producing activities. In most of the projects listed below, the resulting products are cheaper and the process provides employment to the village men and women.

1. Toor dhal processing: Raw Toor dhal is processed and sold in Kuthambakkam and neighbouring villages.

2. Soap making unit: Using an age old bullock cart wheel fitted with bearings and pulleys, Elango has constructed a machine to mix soap ingredients and make soap.

3. Low cost toilet: A well maintained toilet is essential for maintaining health and hygiene of the rural (or any) population. Elango has set up nearly 200 low cost toilets in his village.

4. Ground nut oil production: In this section, the ground nuts are shelled. The oil is extracted. Some ground nuts are used to make ground nut candy.

5. Leather Unit: Elango secured a contract with a shoe manufacturer. The women in the centre knitted the top portion of a shoe.

They also produced some hand bags and purses using jute and other materials.

6. Rural Technology Resource Center: This aims to demonstrate sustainable village industry packages, networking with other institutions like universities, Gandhi Gram Rural University and IIT colleges to spread this grass root work.

SAMATHUVAPURAM [HARMONY ESTATE]. One of the housing concepts that the Tamil Nadu Government promoted was Samathuvapurams [Harmony Estates]. The idea was to make different castes and religions live together in a campus of about 50 dwellings each. Over 150 came up all over the State. Most were shoddily built mockeries left to fast buck contractors in cahoots with local leadership. Elango demanded --and got-- a say in the design and execution.

He got HUDCO to design a soulful campus. Local soil was pressed by people into mud blocks to build the houses. The community hall was designed to be an activity centre where vocational courses and village businesses are now run. The money set aside for that darling of the Government --a commemorative arch-- was used to build a meeting place. Of the Rs.88 lakh that the project cost, over a fourth was spent on wages for villagers. More was saved by using local materials. Villagers assimilated many cost effective building technologies. Houses in this Samathuvapuram are about 40% larger and better designed.

For the buildings under the project, "we made bricks without burning. That saved us not only the cost but also our environment," says Elango. The bricks were a mix of red soil, cement and sand, which was dried and cured by a locally available cheap block-making machine. For the 900 odd families of Kuthampakkam, 'Samathuvapuram' this reflects the whole community-organised,

eco-friendly ethos with complete communal harmony. No communal tensions, no illicit brewing, no thefts, no gang fights. Every one in the village is engaged in a constructive activity irrespective of age, gender or caste. "The whole village has developed - all its basic amenities satisfied - good drinking water, proper roads, proper lights and proper drains."

ECONOMICS FOR VILLAGE CLUSTERS: This approach recurs in Elango's economic thinking which is deeply influenced by J C Kumarappa. "If you bring in the contractors you are exporting jobs," he says. He got a door-to-door survey done in the village and found the village consumed Rs 60 lakh worth of goods and services per month. Elango discovered that nearly Rs 50 lakh of that can be produced at village level. Since then, he has been evolving an economic theory of village clusters. About seven or eight villages form a free trade zone. They identify and produce goods and services without overlap. They consume each other's produce. And the money stays back and gets invested in human development.

Ever the Gandhian and a Kumarappa acolyte, Elango challenges the theory of competition being good at all levels. For villages it is co-operation that holds the key. Extreme Competition Theorists are heartless. 'People have to be able to begin again,' says Elango. "Especially if they are able to see where things went wrong the first time."

He could spend his life basking in the successes he has wrought so far but he has chosen to evangelize village-centred development. He is a family man with longings for his loved ones. But he lives a solitary life for his cause, Gram Swaraj [the autonomous village]. Most of all, at a time when it is the vogue to belittle Gandhi, he adores the great man as the one who truly understood India. The career path of Rangaswamy Elango needs to be widely

known. Just fifty more Panchayat leaders like him across India would act as nodes from where sensible village development could radiate in all directions.

SOME OBSERVATIONS: Elango Rangaswamy has been able to introduce the ideas of Gram Swaraj and development in Kuthabbam. Being a native of this village he knew it very well. He quit his job and joined the village for its all-round development. In the water drainage project, when he was frustrated, Gandhiji's "My Experiments with Truth" showed him a way. Then he applied Gandhian ideas of Gram-swaraj and development in his village. In the era of globalization, when the issue of Gandhiji's ideas is raised, this is one experiment whose success can be shown.

Elango has also changed his ideas regarding employment opportunities for the people in the village. Attempts were made to give employment to adults through toor dal processing, ground-nut oil, soap-making, low-cost toilet, jute articles etc. At the same time there was an issue of providing employment opportunities to youth. After 10th or 12th grade, when the youths do not have any work, they get frustrated and there are cases of starvation. He thought that the land/ buffalo/ cow based economy was not useful for the youths. So Elango executed two outsourcing projects - the production of stove burners and producing material for first-aid-kit bags. These projects gave employment to nearly 75 youths.

The basic idea is to provide employment to the youths in their villages. In the current situation big companies employ some rural people. But time, money and energy is spent in reaching the companies. Instead of that he asked the companies to outsource some of its work in the villages. Elango has an engineering background and he assured the companies that quality work would be done. The company gave training wherever necessary and both projects are now

running well. Elango wants to replicate this in neighbouring villages with out-sourcing work from other companies.

The present situation of big companies in the cities has caused large scale migration which in turn leads to slums and related problems. These can be curbed if employment opportunities are made available to villagers in their villages. Elango's attempts are in that direction.

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