ADCLOD Podcast Series with Social Impact Founders

Ramji Raghavan, Founder, Agastya International Foundation

Neharika Vohra: Welcome to the ADCLOD podcast series with social impact founders, an initiative by the Ashank Desai Centre for Leadership and Organisational Development at IIM Ahmedabad, where we document and celebrate the leadership journeys of India's homegrown social entrepreneurs who have built impactful institutions from the ground up. In today's episode, we have the privilege of speaking with Ramji Raghavan.

He was educated at Rishi Valley School, Delhi University, and London Business School. In 1998, while serving as Vice President of Mergers and Acquisitions at Citibank, he made the remarkable decision to leave a distinguished career in international finance and return to India to ignite curiosity in the country's most underserved children. In 1999, he co-founded the Agastya International Foundation in Bangalore, with the mission to spark curiosity, nurture creativity, and instil confidence in economically disadvantaged children and government school teachers.

What began as a 172-acre barren plot of land in Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh, intended for a school, turned into a mobile science lab — a shift born out of necessity when the money to build buildings ran out. Today it has grown into one of the world's largest hands-on, mobile science education programmes. Agastya operates across 19 Indian states with over 190 mobile lab vans, 130 labs on bikes, 135 science centres, and 500 night village school centres. It has directly reached over 41 million children and 250,000 teachers, and is on course to reach 100 million children by 2032.

Ramji is an Ashoka Fellow, a recipient of the Google Global Impact Award, and was felicitated by Chelsea Clinton for Agastya's global commitments. Ramji, welcome to our podcast — it is a true honour to have you here.

Ramji Raghavan: Thank you, Neharika. It's a pleasure to be here, talking to you today.

Neharika Vohra: So we'll start off, Ramji, by getting a picture of Agastya today — its scale, the range of its programmes, campuses, and mobile infrastructure, because you have a very interesting format: you have vans, you have bikes, you have night schools. What does Agastya do, and how does it do it?

Ramji Raghavan: So, as you said, our mission is to spark curiosity, nurture creativity, and instil confidence and the spirit of caring in economically disadvantaged school children, teachers, and headmasters across India. The way we do it: we have a 172-acre campus — a creativity lab — with about 16 or 17 experiential learning centres. It's all about hands-on, experiential learning, because we find that's the best way of sparking curiosity, nurturing creativity, and building confidence. Over the years, this campus, which was barren wasteland, has turned into an ecological preserve — there are some 600 species of plants, shrubs, and herbs.

There's a lot of learning, therefore, about nature and ecology on the campus. We've built experiential centres for science, mathematics, arts, and design thinking and innovation, a centre for creative learning, and the Agastya Vidyachal Academy for school teachers and headmasters. It's a kind of school for schools — it's not a school itself. We bus in about 600 to 700 children every day, and they experience something they just don't get in their own schools, in the government system. It's not even available in most private schools, so it's a very impactful, liberating learning experience.

Then the outreach consists of all these vans — mobile science vans, mobile innovation labs, increasingly mobile AI-on-wheels digital labs that go around 24 states in India — and labs on motorbikes, which is a lower-cost version of the mobile science van that increases our reach into more remote areas.

Then there are the night village schools — about 500 of them — where we typically train a local village student, usually 16, 17, or 18 years old and still in school, or sometimes a college student who lives in the village, to run a night school every day based on the Agastya way of experiential learning. We also run programmes through satellite TV and digital channels. If you put all of that together, we're now reaching about 8 million children — a combination of in-person, remote, and digital reach across India. In a sense, it's become the world's largest creativity laboratory.

Neharika Vohra: Wonderful. So these 600–700 children who come every day — is there a period for which they come, like a month, or just one day? How does that work?

Ramji Raghavan: Typically they come for a day, and repeat visits about eight to ten times a year. There's a whole set of catchment schools, and we schedule visits working with the schools — each child, say from fifth grade to tenth grade, comes to the campus eight to ten times a year.

Neharika Vohra: And these schools — are they government schools, affordable private schools, or any school?

Ramji Raghavan: These are government schools, but in addition, we have a programme called Bandhu, or "camps at campus," where we get children from private schools in Bangalore, Bombay, Chennai, Hyderabad, and other places. They come and spend five days experiencing the campus — that's a different kind of programme. But the vast majority of students who come are from local government schools. We also get school teachers from across India — about 3,000 a year — who come to the campus for training.

Neharika Vohra: Wow, that's amazing. So how many full-time staff does Agastya have? What you're describing requires a lot of people, and you're spread across different states — so how do you manage such a distributed team?

Ramji Raghavan: Yes, it's very distributed. Full-time, we have about 1,400 to 1,500 staff, plus around 500 part-time teachers in the villages — nearing 2,000 in total. On top of that, we have about 20,000 college students whom we train to teach, and they're volunteers — we don't pay them. So the mission force of Agastya is about 22,000: 2,000 we pay, and 20,000 do it for a certificate, as pure volunteers.

As for how we manage it — like any organisation, you have to decentralise responsibility. We have about 800 teachers, or around 1,300 if you include the village teachers, teaching day in and day out. Some are stationed in a science centre; many are in the mobile vans, labs, or motorbikes — we call them "Ignitors," a combination of igniter and educator. They report to area managers, who report to a region manager — we call them Chief Experience Officers — and the region and general managers report to the head of operations. So it's an organisational structure with a lot of delegation. Is it easy to manage? No — it's very distributed and spread out. Some districts have just two or three employees; others have 20 or 30. That's the nature of the beast, so over time we've built systems and processes to ensure quality. There's a quality assurance programme too: a roving team of about 70 master trainers, whom we call "Catalysers," who travel continuously around the country observing classroom sessions and giving feedback — real-time quality assurance. That's how we manage the organisation day to day.

Neharika Vohra: And how easy is it to attract people to work with you? Once they're there, do you manage to keep them, or is there a lot of churn?

Ramji Raghavan: We get a lot of churn, especially at the frontline teacher level, because it involves constant mobility, and not everyone wants that — they'd rather have an office to go to than travel to 20 schools a year, eight or nine times each, in the heat and dust. It takes a physical toll, so there's a fair amount of churn.

How do we manage that? It depends on how you look at it. Agastya's goal isn't to hog or monopolise talent — our aim is to positively infect the wider system. So we actually welcome a certain amount of churn, because it means people carry our way of teaching and learning out into the broader system. If our teachers move into the government school system, where there's more security, all power to them. We see our people as resources we train and motivate, some of whom then go and make an impact elsewhere. Churn is a negative in the obvious sense — you have to keep training and retraining people — but in a broader sense, it's a positive. It's like a university: you don't want all your students hanging around for years; you want them to go out into the world.

In terms of attracting talent, it's always a struggle — we advertise, reach out to B.Ed colleges, and we've now built a national reputation, so it's easier than in the early years, when it was genuinely difficult. What do we look for? We hire people who aren't necessarily from Delhi University, the IITs, or the IIMs — such candidates usually aren't willing to spend the year out in a mobile lab. We get people from second- and third-tier colleges, many from small towns and villages, and what we really look for is a "BEE" degree — not Bachelor of Electrical Engineering, but Bachelor of Energy and Enthusiasm: young people with the drive to make a difference in their own village, town, or community.

Fortunately, many people fit that description, because they've come through a fairly rigid, inorganic education themselves, and when they encounter Agastya's flexible, organic way of learning, they feel, "This is how I should have learned," and want to bring that back to their own area. Using Maslow's hierarchy — while money matters, roti, kapra, makaan — many of them are really motivated by a higher purpose; they want to make a difference. That's one reason people stay. The other is freedom: in a mobile van, no one is breathing down your neck day to day. So while there's churn, because people sometimes get better-paying jobs elsewhere (we pay decent wages, but not the highest), many stay on because the work feels meaningful, and because Agastya offers a decent wage, security, progression, and a lot of freedom.

Neharika Vohra: Wonderful — so there's more to how you attract them than I expected. Since we're talking about people: how do you keep them trained and skilled — both the initial training and the ongoing upskilling?

Ramji Raghavan: When someone joins, they're thrown right into the job, because our philosophy is learning by doing, with a senior person supervising, correcting, and doing some hand-holding. It's experiential — not too much theory and book knowledge; it's about making it happen. After a few weeks, they come to our campus, where twice a year we run formal training programmes,

which are themselves very experiential — senior Agastya staff and resource persons train them, but always by doing: if it's a science concept, they see it, touch it, and run the experiment themselves. We encourage a lot of questioning — that's a key skill — and they also learn classroom management and the importance of caring.

After that, they go back and are fully immersed in their jobs, and our Catalysers — that roving team of real-time trainers — walk into a class, observe an Ignitor, note their observations (sometimes taking a short video), and give feedback the same day. That real-time feedback is far more powerful than offline feedback. So the philosophy is: experiential, learn by doing, real-time feedback, a lot of questioning, and an emphasis on relationship — particularly the relationship between the Ignitor and the student.

We've also drawn on cognitive science research into how children absorb knowledge, and designed our classroom sessions around it. There's something we call a "super-start" and a "super-finish": the first 15 minutes of a 45-minute class are when the mind is most absorptive — prime time — then attention dips a little, before another prime window in the last 10 to 15 minutes. So our sessions are designed to make full use of that.

As for upskilling — we've become something of an innovation engine; I'd argue we're right up there by world standards. When you constantly innovate, your staff are almost forced to learn how to deliver each new innovation. If we create something around nature-centric learning, the staff has to learn that in order to deliver it. So it's a continuous, experiential, innovation-driven upskilling process.

Neharika Vohra: Two more questions on context. I know at least two people who've done a lot for creative science education in India — Professor Arvind Gupta, for instance, and the Centre for Creative Learning at IIT Gandhinagar. Do you partner with them?

Ramji Raghavan: Yes — we have a good relationship with IIT Gandhinagar. I know Arvind personally; he's visited our campus, and we've sent people to train with him on low-cost creativity and learning methods. We try to stay as open as possible to new ideas. In the early years — especially the first ten — Agastya didn't have the resources we have today, so I brought together scientists and educators, many of them retired from DRDO, TIFR, the Department of Atomic Energy, and IISc. They were keen to help, and much of what we built early on was created by them. We've had the same open attitude with environmentalists and ecologists who helped regenerate the land on campus, often pro bono. A great deal of what we've built has come from such partnerships and collaborations.

Neharika Vohra: Absolutely — it's said it takes a village to raise a child, and for an organisation, it's more than a village. One last question on this: from some of the work we've seen, the school system can be very resistant to incorporating something like this. How have you managed that resistance, and how have you been able to go into schools and run classes?

Ramji Raghavan: The chief secretary of a large state once told me why his government had signed up with Agastya. He said: if you come in with something very disruptive, you create fear and resistance. A lot of what we do is aligned with the school curriculum — how we teach it may be radically different, but the underlying concepts and curriculum line up closely, so there isn't a problem there. Second, it's scalable — when you tell a senior official, "give me a chance to pilot this," they're thinking, "I'm in charge of educating 10 million children — is this scalable?" Because a lot of what we do is highly scalable, governments tend to respond positively at the top level.

Then there's the pedagogy. Take this top, for instance — you place it on a surface, it sits on its base; spin it, and it tips over and spins on its stem instead. It's deeply counterintuitive — nine, maybe nine and a half, out of ten people who see it have their mind awakened; they think, "Arre, yeh kaise hua?" — because it's unexpected. That's the "Ooh." Then they want to know why or how it happens — that curiosity-driven investigation is the "Aha." And because this is also a toy, it naturally invites play — that's the "Haha."

So everything we create, we test against: is there an Ooh, an Aha, and a Haha? If all three are present, no one can resist it — especially the Aha and the Haha. The Aha takes work, because it involves investigation, learning, frustration, and bottlenecks before the moment lands — that's the surprise — and the Haha is the fun, the joy. Over the years, I've seen grey-haired, jaded teachers who've seen it all respond completely differently once we bring in this kind of engagement — that's the seduction that matters in bringing a classroom to life. Teachers have come to our workshops and said, "We've been to training workshops for thirty years, and this is the first one where we actually had fun, learned something, and felt woken up." That's how you engage people, and how you get them to come back.

Neharika Vohra: And the foot in the door — absolutely. The Ooh, the Aha, and the Haha — I really like that. Let's move a little away from pedagogy now, to you as a person. You left a career in international banking for something so elementary, yet so powerful. What led you to make that leap?

Ramji Raghavan: Like most things, it evolved over time. As a student at Rishi Valley, I read a couple of books — one was *Lost Horizon*, about a mythical Himalayan kingdom called Shangri-La, and another was *The Glass Bead Game*, by Hermann Hesse, about a school full of creative children. I combined those ideas, and as I grew older, I thought it would be nice to live in a place like

Shangri-La — maybe mythical, but maybe one could build it. I was very interested in creativity, though I can't claim to have been particularly creative at school myself.

I also used to listen to J. Krishnamurti speak whenever he visited. He talked about the importance of questioning and observing — your own psyche internally, but also the external world and the creative experience. That took root in my mind and heart. More recently, I read a book — I forget the title — that described something called a "paracosm": many creative people, or people who go on to build creative learning environments, create an imaginary world when young, typically before the age of twenty, and keep populating it as they grow older. Apparently it takes deep root, and you can't quite let go of it. That gave me real insight — I realised I'd essentially become a kind of victim of my own imaginary world. It isn't really about passion; it's something deeper than that.

Krishnamurti, at a more fundamental level, made me question the meaning and purpose of life. As I got older, I told myself I was doing well in finance, that I was ambitious — my father had retired as CEO of several companies, and I wanted to be like him. He'd even told me, when I was younger, that I'd make a good CEO, which gave me a lot of confidence. But I was living in two worlds — my imaginary one, and the world of banking and competition. I was fully invested in the latter mentally, but my heart wasn't in it; my heart was in my imaginary world. I was also discovering that I didn't want to report to anyone — I wanted the freedom that if I didn't feel like getting up to go to work one morning, I shouldn't have to. So an aversion to routine became part of it too.

I reconnected with an old friend in London, a very spiritual person, who — back when I was at LBS, a year his junior, in my early twenties — had told me that while I might want to become a CEO, that wasn't my karma, that wasn't my nature. I disagreed with him vehemently at the time. He said, "You can disagree, but I'm telling you — you'll end up doing something very different." He turned out to be right. When I reconnected with him years later, he said, "The angst you're going through, I spotted eighteen or twenty years ago." I don't think I'm unique in this — many of us go through it. But in my case, I felt that if I were on my deathbed, I didn't want to look back and think, "Ramji, you should have tried that."

It was a big decision. I remember once being held up at gunpoint in a restaurant in Puerto Rico and thinking I was going to die. It's a long story, but at the end of it, I was preparing to tell the man I held no enmity towards him, and to ask whether he'd send me back to my parents in Madras in a casket. Looking back, I realised that when the chips were down, I wasn't thinking about my career at Citibank, or my bank balance, or becoming a CEO — I was thinking about my mother. That helped clarify that when it really matters, none of that other stuff matters very much. So I decided to do what I actually wanted to do — even though it meant my income dropping close to zero, and giving up the other benefits of corporate life. There's no free lunch. I had to make the call, and I said: let's plunge in and do it.

Neharika Vohra: Very nice — I suppose that's the only way to do some of these things. As an organisation, you partner with the Jhunjhunwala foundation, government bodies, IIMs, IITs, and international institutions like Harvard and Lehigh — a lot of stakeholders and funders to manage. How do you do it, and what has it taught you?

Ramji Raghavan: You have to have a very open, porous, and questioning mind — and the organisation has to be the same way. If you question with an open mind, you're willing to embrace diversity and even strangeness. So you say: this is my vision, this is my mission — how I get there, the route can vary, and I have to stay open about that, rather than rigid or inflexible. Once you start from that place, you begin exploring partnerships and collaborations at multiple levels, and see how they fit. That's a skill of synthesis that comes with practice.

The beauty of running an organisation like Agastya is that one day I could be sitting with someone like Rakesh Jhunjhunwala, who sadly passed away a few years ago — or his wife, Rekha, who now sits on our board and is a billionaire in Bombay — and the next day, interacting with a village school child in Jharkhand or Andhra Pradesh, or with a senior bureaucrat or politician, before getting a call from someone at IISc or an IIM. Each conversation is very different, because each person brings a different perspective — but they're all stakeholders in what we're doing, interested for their own reasons. So you look for the common thread, and that's what you focus on. It's about interpersonal skills, and learning to articulate your vision differently for different people — if I go up to a child and just say "Ooh, Aha, Haha," even without explaining what it means, the child can connect with it from the sound of the words alone. You build that flexibility, both as an individual and as an organisation.

We've found that the sheer diversity of people who get involved with us makes things richer. Just before this conversation, I was with a professor from NCBS who studies insects — we're building nature-centric exhibits, a thirty-foot termite hill and another thirty-foot beehive on campus, and he and his students are genuinely interested in our work. It's heterogeneous, and therefore rich, and potentially very innovative — though it brings challenges too, since very few of our people have studied at an IIM or IIT. Managing that diversity always brings challenges, but that's exactly the skill you build: synthesis, integration, and letting people pursue what they want to achieve, provided it fits the mission. You give them the opportunity, and connect their work to Agastya's larger purpose. That's critical.

There's a story about John F. Kennedy, after he announced that America would put a man on the moon before the end of the 1960s. He visited NASA and saw a janitor carrying a broom, working hard late in the day, and asked him what he was doing. The janitor said, "Mr. President, I'm helping put a man on the moon." He genuinely believed that, as a janitor, he too was helping put a man on the moon. So what you need to do is connect each person's work to the larger mission. If you can do that, someone like Rekha Jhunjhunwala feels Agastya's mission connects to her own goals; a bureaucrat believes it will help them do their job better; a school student feels it will open up the wider world to them; teachers feel the same — and so do our cleaning staff and drivers, in their own way.

There was a cleaning lady I tried the "JFK test" on, about a year ago. I asked her what she does, and she said, "I clean all the lab equipment and the premises." I asked why she does what she does, and she said, "If I do a good job, the Agastya Ignitor can teach better, and the children will learn better." She didn't talk about curiosity or creativity, but she'd found her own connection between her work and Agastya's end goal. If you can achieve that, you can build a lot of partnerships — even apparently contradictory ones — and create something where two and two is no longer four; it's five, or even twenty-two.

Neharika Vohra: Wonderful, thank you for sharing that. I also want to ask about funding — a lot of what you do can't make you self-sustaining, since you're constantly spending money. How do you fund yourselves, and what are the challenges around that?

Ramji Raghavan: Funding is always a challenge. In the early days, we had zero funding — but on reflection, that lack of funding forced us to think and act in ways we wouldn't otherwise have. Necessity is the mother of invention; many of our most transformative programmes came out of not having money. So while funding is essential, it isn't always a blessing — sometimes the lack of it is a blessing in disguise; abundance, in a sense, can make you poorer.

That said, a large portion of our funding — perhaps 70 to 75 percent — is corporate CSR. Another 10 to 15 percent comes from individuals, such as Rekha Jhunjhunwala, Ram Shriram, Desh Deshpande, and others, and the rest comes from governments who contract with us for services. It's a constant challenge, because none of this is guaranteed forever — you have to keep re-earning that support every year. The Rare Family Foundation, the Jhunjhunwala family's foundation, has been with us since 2003, and the Government of Karnataka for a similar length of time, but most others tend to commit for a three-to-five or three-to-six-year stretch, which is fine — people's priorities change, and we have to plan around that.

So it's a constant effort to promote our work and make it visible and tangible. Anyone who visits our campus — about a two-hour drive from Bangalore — invariably says, "I've never seen or experienced anything like this anywhere in the world," and signs a cheque. But not everyone can travel there, so we use our mobile science vans — if someone in Bombay or Ahmedabad wants to see what we do, I can have a van brought over the next day. Visibility and tangibility matter, alongside press coverage and word of mouth; a lot of people simply call us wanting to explore a partnership. And the most important thing underlying all of this is trust.

Rakesh Jhunjhunwala, in Agastya's early years, used to say, "I look at the crusade and the crusader" — that's how he evaluated investments. Trust matters enormously, and showing people what you're actually doing builds that trust. Governments, especially, need to be confident they can trust you to deliver results, so you have to keep people informed, show them your work, and have the right metrics to measure performance, outcomes, and outputs. We don't have a shareholder-return metric, but more of a social-return one — we worked with IIM Bangalore years ago to develop some of these measures — and the quality of our partnerships also helps people see this as a serious organisation they can trust.

Neharika Vohra: Very nice. Since we're on the subject of trust, which I completely resonate with — how do you build trust with the communities themselves? They're your beneficiaries, and very often they've had people come and promise their lives will be fixed, only to be let down. How do you build trust there?

Ramji Raghavan: A couple of things. First, whether it's an individual or a whole community, you have to create that Ooh-Aha-Haha experience. When we launched our first mobile science van — a product of pure desperation — in 2002, a few weeks in, I asked the person running it, Balram, how it was going, and he said it had been a huge success. I asked why, and he explained that initially people thought he was a medical van or a missionary and would run away. But once he stopped and brought out hands-on learning models and experiments made from things like coat hangers, it immediately piqued the curiosity of the children and the wider community, and they came to see what it was. From there, he got the chance to demonstrate interesting science experiments and slowly won the community's support and enthusiasm. So you show them something that creates the Ooh and the Aha first, and then you work, over time, on the Haha.

In that sense, we've never really had a problem. The second point is that we never ask communities for their own money, because the programme is funded by a donor or the government — so they're not out of pocket, though they are out of time; they have to make the time, because they see the value. For our night-school village programme specifically, we don't bring someone from outside to run it — we train someone from the village itself, so people feel that one of their own is involved. What matters most through all of this is consistency and commitment — if you appear and disappear, people quickly conclude it wasn't real.

I remember visiting a village one night, as part of our night community visits, and while most people were happy, one man — suffering from a disease that had caused massive swelling in his legs — called me over and said, “All this is fine, but can you solve this problem?” We weren’t in healthcare at the time, and I had to say, honestly, I couldn’t. He told me not to waste their time if I couldn’t solve problems like that. On the way back that night, I called an ambulance service and asked them to go and look in on the village. You will encounter people who point out, fairly, that you’re not solving the problem that matters most to them — there’s no water in the schools, can you solve that? There are things you simply can’t solve, or that fall outside your mission.

But on our campus, we do a lot of work for the wider local community too — not just the children, but their parents. We run a programme called Anjani, named after Mashelkar’s mother, that works specifically with parents. So we work with children, school teachers, and parents, and over time, hopefully, that builds a genuinely positive reputation — but it takes continuous effort; you can’t let go of it.

Neharika Vohra: Yes — that’s true of so many things in life. Just a couple more questions. Fifty percent of your beneficiaries are girls, and you make a special effort to reach them, even though many girls are pulled out of school early. How do you make sure they actually get the experience you want them to have?

Ramji Raghavan: Wherever we go — say the government identifies twenty schools for the mobile science van, sometimes shaped by where a donor’s factory happens to be — we typically don’t choose the community ourselves. In a classroom of thirty or forty children, we’ve found roughly a fifty-fifty ratio, and at the school level, the girls seem to be just as engaged as the boys, often more so.

We recently completed a study in the Barak Valley in Assam, led by a team from Texas A&M University, looking at the impact of our mobile science van against our core mission — curiosity, creativity, and confidence. Two other findings stood out. One was a substantial increase in science knowledge, which makes sense, since we teach a great deal of science. The second was genuinely striking: a complete shift in gender perception. Before the mobile science van arrived, boys generally believed girls weren’t as deserving of science education as boys were. After the visits, that view had completely changed — boys said girls were just as deserving, if not more so.

A lot of our activities are organised as group work — sometimes all-girl groups, sometimes mixed groups, depending on what the children themselves are comfortable with; we never force it. Because everyone is doing, observing, and experimenting, with dedicated time for questions, girls become very actively engaged. So we’ve never found this to be a mountain to climb — in fact, when we’re developing case stories, we often have to look harder for boys, because the girls tend to dominate.

Neharika Vohra: I hope that continues to be the reality once they join the workforce.

Ramji Raghavan: I remember one of our earliest case stories, from 2008 — two girls, Rani and Roja, sitting under a tree on a hot summer’s day, started chatting, and Rani asked Roja why it felt cooler in the shade. They thought maybe the leaves and branches were protecting them, and then the Aha question came: would different leaves have different cooling effects? That curiosity led to a science project, and nine months later, working with their Agastya Ignitor, the two girls won an award at the IRIS national science fair, competing against some of the best young minds in India, on the cooling effect of leaves. One was the daughter of a carpenter, the other the daughter of a marginal farmer — and one of them went on to become a professor of life sciences at a university in Karnataka, after completing her PhD. We have thousands of stories like that, of girls and boys transforming their own lives.

Neharika Vohra: In a way, you’ve already answered my next question, about measuring the impact of your work — you’ve mentioned the Texas A&M study, and tracking the careers of your beneficiaries. Are there other ways you measure impact?

Ramji Raghavan: Yes — with IIM Bangalore, we developed a questionnaire that’s been refined over the years. Case stories can be documented for a thousand, two thousand, maybe three or four thousand children a year, but we’re reaching eight million — the questionnaires can be administered to tens of thousands, even up to a hundred thousand children, so they scale far better.

Beyond those two, we now run a daily classroom assessment that measures children’s understanding of a science concept before and after each class — we collect that data for a couple of million children every year. So altogether we have concept knowledge measured daily, curiosity, problem-solving, and leadership skills captured through the questionnaire, and the deeper, high-bandwidth case stories — together giving a fairly complete picture. It’s by no means perfect, because measuring curiosity and creativity is a very different thing from measuring school grades, which we don’t do. But people from across the world have come to see our work and told us that no one else is measuring curiosity and creativity at this scale. We have a dedicated impact measurement and assessment team that works with the Texas A&M researchers, and we’re now also using AI in our measurement work, and to build chatbots that help teachers become better teachers. Like everything else here, it’s a continuous process.

Neharika Vohra: Absolutely. You’ve also had the opportunity to influence national education policy — through the Prime Minister’s National Knowledge Commission, and through state-level MOUs. Would you like to say anything about that?

Ramji Raghavan: I served on the Central Advisory Board of Education for a few years, and was glad to contribute to the National Knowledge Commission, and more recently to the New Education Policy. A lot of policymakers, across the political spectrum, have either seen Agastya in action, given our scale, or heard about it. So I'd like to think we've played a fairly significant role over the years in shaping how policymakers think about experiential learning and the importance of curiosity — Arvind Gupta, of course, was a pioneer here too. When we started Agastya, words like "curiosity" and "creativity" weren't really part of the everyday lexicon. Now you'll see hoardings in any major city claiming "my school is number one in curiosity and creativity" — whether that's actually true is a different matter, but at least the language has changed. So I'd like to think we've had some real impact on how people think about learning — the importance of joy in learning, flexibility, and a focus on questioning.

With the rise of AI, a lot of people are now coming to us because they've heard it's important to know how to ask the right questions of an AI system — so, in a roundabout way, AI has made people see new value in what we've always done, even though that value was always there. One thing we haven't done well enough, and need to improve, is our internal documentation — making it more reader-friendly to the outside world, so people can replicate our work without necessarily having to come to us directly. That's an ongoing project, so that other NGOs, organisations, and schools can build on what we've done, just as we've built on the ideas of others before us.

Neharika Vohra: Wonderful — and that's so important, building on each other rather than reinventing the wheel each time. I'm sure a lot of what Rishi Valley and Krishnamurti gave you became part of the foundation for what you built, and hopefully what you've built becomes a foundation for others too. Over twenty-five-plus years of this work, any regrets, or moments when you thought, "why did I do this?"

Ramji Raghavan: There are no regrets as such — but could some things have been done differently, or better? Yes. On the positive side, the way Agastya has evolved, certainly in terms of reach and scale, has gone well beyond my original idea — I never imagined mobile vans or labs on motorbikes; that wasn't part of my imaginary world at all. My original model was more centralised, but these have become hallmarks of what Agastya does. So a great deal has happened that's beyond what I originally pictured.

Some things haven't happened, though. Our campus in Kuppam — I'd say it's genuinely one of a kind in the world — but the original plan was to build five such campuses across India, and that hasn't happened. Perhaps, in the early years, if I'd been more aggressive — even securing that one piece of land wasn't easy — I should have pushed to secure two or three more potential sites across the country, rather than being satisfied with one, even though that one turned out to be a major achievement in itself. It's a lot harder to do that today, so that's probably a miss.

The second thing is that, in the early days, I used to talk about Agastya as a movement, but I think it ended up being built more like an organisation — though, of course, a movement needs some organisation; it's a matter of degree. Maybe I should have taken a more free-flowing approach. Given my own background, perhaps if I'd been someone like Anna Hazare, I'd have approached it quite differently — in fact, we actually went and met him, to ask how he'd think about broad-basing something like what we're doing. Today we're focusing more on replication — flow over rigidity, more openness, less concern about proprietary knowledge — and perhaps some of that could have been built into Agastya's DNA more deeply, earlier on.

We're reaching eight million children a year today, which few organisations manage — but if we'd thought that way more deeply, and implemented it earlier, we might be reaching fifty million a year by now. The people I surrounded myself with were exceptional, but most of them came from running large, fairly conventional organisations. Maybe I should have had someone like Anna Hazare in my advisory group early on, to help think through how ideas can spread rapidly across a very large population.

Neharika Vohra: I think you've done remarkable work, and there's always more to do. One last question, on succession — what happens after Ramji, and have you thought about who takes over?

Ramji Raghavan: There's no single individual lined up right now, but we have a fantastic team. One of our board members feels we shouldn't even be thinking in terms of one successor, but rather two or three people running the organisation together, possibly in some kind of rotation. If we go with that model, I think we have three or four people who could genuinely be part of that group.

I once asked a potential successor what he felt I'd contributed that he valued — he'd just come back from a course at Harvard that covered succession planning, and he said the value I'd added was vision, connectivity, and possibly innovation, and that the first two — vision and connectivity — weren't as strong among others at Agastya. So what we're trying to do now is turn those into organisational capacities, rather than something that depends on one individual.

That's actually part of the reason we're building the termite hill on campus — beyond the science and nature learning involved, termites show remarkably complex, self-organising behaviour as a colony, with no single individual directing it. That's probably hard-wired genetically, but there's a great deal to learn from it — ideas like stigmergy, self-organisation, how complexity emerges

from simple rules. As the saying goes, termites and ants individually aren't smart, but termite colonies and ant colonies are. I'm genuinely interested in evolving Agastya in that direction — strong people, in a rotational structure, built around principles of complexity and self-organisation.

There's a third element too, which may sound less logical, even a little irrational. Agastya is named after a Maharishi, and one of the things said about the sage Agastya is that the most important things often happen at the very last moment — just when things seem on the verge of failure or collapse, something turns the tables. That's part of the nature of Agastya, in a way — so rather than naming a single successor, what we're really working towards is this three-person, self-organising, rotational model. We're not a corporation. There are things we do that resemble one, but plenty of other things we do that are very different.

So, succession, yes — but really it's about the philosophy enduring: the Ooh-Aha-Haha philosophy. When I think about sustainability — of money, of people, of anything else — my view is that the philosophy itself should endure, as long as some structure exists for it to live within. But even if that particular structure changes, it matters less than the philosophy itself continuing to permeate the system. That, ultimately, is why Agastya exists.

Neharika Vohra: Interesting — a different way of looking at it. Before we close, there may be young people listening to this — students at colleges like ours, or sitting in an Agastya mobile lab right now. What would you tell someone who says they want to spend their life in education or the social-impact sector?

Ramji Raghavan: What I'd say is that self-awareness matters enormously — which means constantly exploring your own mind and your own psyche. That's a strong trait within Indian philosophy generally, but unfortunately, I don't think our education system, or even most parents, do enough to encourage it. A lot of people finish their education with very little real sense of what they want to do, or why, or what they're actually good at — they haven't thought it through, so they end up lurching from one thing to the next.

So the first step is to start inquiring within your own psyche as you grow — observe yourself in action. What did I like? What didn't I like, and why? Did I like something because of the money, or the fun I had, or both? Getting to know yourself properly is continuous work, and it involves asking hard questions and challenging your own assumptions.

The second thing, as you do that, is to experiment — to find what you genuinely like, which means staying open to a lot of different experiences. Many of us aren't, because of our own conditioning, and because we've never questioned it. So question your assumptions, keep your mind open, and expose yourself to a wide range of things — because that gives you a far better chance of discovering something you wouldn't otherwise have found.

Then, develop patience. This is something I didn't have, especially in finance, where you're always chasing immediate results. Agastya taught me the real value of patience. Good outcomes don't arrive like an exam result — in life, things take time to unfold. You might know roughly where you want to end up, but the route there can be tortuous and winding. While holding on to a goal, ask yourself: am I actually enjoying the process of getting there? If you're not, even reaching the goal might not feel satisfying. Focus on the process, and you'll find that life isn't a straight line — it's a winding path. Rather than letting that frustrate you, embrace it, and treat it as part of the fun. Embrace ambiguity — easy to say, much harder to do — and learn to live with greater and greater uncertainty. It isn't easy, which is why you need to practise and test yourself, rather than constantly chasing closure and certainty, which doesn't really exist.

Whatever you end up doing — social entrepreneurship, the corporate world, or anything else — building the capacity to be creatively adaptable will serve you well. I think creative, adaptive intelligence is the single most important skill you can build, because it lets you deal with any challenge, in the social world or elsewhere. Living with uncertainty and ambiguity also means building courage — you need a degree of it. As you learn to experiment, taking small steps first and then bigger ones, you build that courage, along with your capacity to take risks — not gamble, but take considered risks. They needn't be financial; they might involve people, or ideas. Build those skills through experience — consult widely, you don't have to follow every piece of advice, but listen with an open mind, and look for unusual connections. Picasso said what really excited him was making unexpected connections, and that's a skill you can develop, provided you've built enough connections of your own to draw on in the first place.

For a young person, scientific studies have shown that people who develop a personal vision early — even an imagined one — tend to do much better over time. So from a young age, ask yourself: do I have a vision? You'll probably find you don't. Then ask: what is a vision, really? Is a dream the seed of one? And start to populate that dream. Learn to build a personal vision over time — it can keep changing, but develop the habit of having one.

Neharika Vohra: Just for the last couple of minutes — you were talking about what you'd tell young people, and you've already touched on handling ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty. Is there anything else you'd want to add?

Ramji Raghavan: Perhaps it's asking a lot of a young person, but: ask yourself whether you stand for something. There's a well-known line about Julius Caesar's rival, Pompey, a great general — Caesar is said to have remarked that Pompey had merely *done* something, while he himself was *for* something. So ask yourself: is there something you're for? It might be transforming your own village, or teaching, or anything else — but ask the question. Over time, that clarity tends to come, and it's what gives you the energy and the passion to keep going, because persistence matters enormously. You have to be for something in order to stick with it — otherwise, it's easy to let go.

Neharika Vohra: That's so beautifully put — very meaningful. Thank you, Ramji, for this remarkable conversation, and even more, for the work behind it. We hope to keep learning from you, and that you'll continue to reach the millions of students and teachers you already have. Thank you for your time, your effort, and the honesty with which you've shared this whole story with us.

Ramji Raghavan: Thank you, Neharika — it's been a pleasure. Please do visit our campus, and the next time I'm in Ahmedabad, I'll call and stop by.

Neharika Vohra: We'll do that — please do let us know, and we'll find something for us to do in Ahmedabad too. Thank you.

Ramji Raghavan: Excellent. Thank you. Take care. Bye.