

'Giving' need not follow a playbook

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In giving, 1+1 could be greater than 2: Sometimes 'giving' comes with the intent of individual glory



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Two recent press reports got me thinking if there is a best practice in ‘giving’.

The wife and two daughters of late Prof R S Ayyar of IIT-Bombay donated two flats in Mumbai and instituted a chair in the civil engineering department. IIT, they said, was Prof Ayyar’s life.

Dr H M Venkatappa donated Rs 14 crore to rebuild the government school in Ramanagara, Karnataka, where he was a student. He said, ‘I am what I am because of my sincere and hardworking teachers. When I am blessed with good fortune, I should give back to my school.’

These are illustrative. In a heartening trend, we are increasingly hearing of similar acts of generosity. “Giving” can be for any cause of value, it need not be dictated by a theme. Some philanthropists like to support a theme and go deep and some like to do it in a specific geography. There are others like MacKenzie Scott, a consequential philanthropist according to some, who has committed more than \$40 billion and operates on her terms. Scott’s method of selecting donor recipients is not fully understood, and many reckon she has already donated to 1,257 different groups. That’s big and quick.

‘Giving’ need not wait till one is gone. I have heard many philanthropists say that their biggest regret is that they started to give very late in life. They felt they could have engaged in philanthropy from the time it became clear they had more than what they could enjoy. The money, which lay idle (in a sense), could have resulted in beneficial outcomes in their lifetime. This philosophy also guides ‘term endowments’ that are designed for accelerated outcomes while the donor is alive. Many philanthropists believe they are only trustees of the wealth that happened to come their way. Gandhi spoke

about it and ancient Indian texts underline this – ‘if anyone keeps more than what s/he needs at the time of passing, it amounts to ‘steeya’ (theft) from the universe that bestowed such wealth on them’.

All ‘giving’ need not come only from the richest. It is even more commendable when people give when they have only just enough for themselves. Oseola McCarty was a washerwoman who drew global attention when she set up a trust through which a portion of her savings (approximately \$150,000) was given in scholarships to the University of Southern Mississippi. It was an extraordinarily generous gift given her low-paid occupation.

In 1967, scholar and writer DV Gundappa (DVG) won the Sahitya Akademi Award. He was presented with a cheque of INR 1 lakh at a civic reception in Bengaluru. Without a second thought, DVG handed it over to the Gokhale Institute of Public Affairs. He could have used the sum to end his own financial crisis, but DVG believed in spending public money only on more deserving causes. Today, the Gokhale Institute has over 60,000 books and promotes political and social education, so essential for public participation in governance.

All ‘giving’ need not be money: The Azim Premji University has received book collections from the celebrated scientist P M Bhargava and eminent educationist David Horsburgh among others. These are perhaps even more valuable than money because the collections have been curated with love and care. Both Bhargava and Horsburgh had invested a lifetime in their scholarly pursuits and their choice of books reflects fine discernment. If not gifted, these books would have been lost forever.

In giving, 1+1 could be greater than 2: Sometimes ‘giving’ comes with the intent of individual glory; it lacks the purity of purpose and is more noise than substance. However, there are brilliant examples to the contrary. Warren Buffett decided to give a large part of his fortune to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation because he felt it would lead to better outcomes. In doing so, he exemplified Harry Truman’s words, ‘It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit’.

In giving, every little helps!

(The writer is Chief Communications Officer, Azim Premji Foundation)

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