

It takes a village

Vishwas Kulkarni meets Arvind Gupta, Rangasamy Elango and Kavalam Panikkar, who were felicitated in the city for their work at the grassroots

By Vishwas Kulkarni

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Seated at a table at the Chambers of the Taj Mahal hotel, the clinically corporate ambience is at an awkward cant from the heroes it intends to celebrate. Yet, One India One People has noble intentions, and its vivacious managing director Suchitra Hegde is gearing up for an award ceremony to be held there on Saturday evening. "The organisation is about redefining patriotism, it's about going back to our roots," says the lady. What helps the organisation rise above the Good Samaritan NGO vibe is the dynamism of the three stalwarts, humble men of sizeable achievement: Arvind Gupta, a man who has been designing toys for three decades to popularise science among kids in rural areas; Rangasamy Elango, a pioneer of Panchayat Raj in Tamil Nadu; and the legendary Malayalam thespian Kavalam Narayana Panikkar. While Panikkar threw up a career in law to follow his passion, Gupta and Elango both were scientists who gave up lucrative options in engineering to engage the nerve ends of our society, the many hamlets that we perhaps only see as dots, a cartographer's speckle.

Learn at play

"It took me two years at TELCO to realise that I wasn't into making trucks. So in 1978, I took off. The seventies were very politically charged. In the science community there was an earnest belief that if you cannot do any good for humanity, at least do no harm to it. So many colleagues stopped making bombs, for instance," says Arvind Gupta, who then went on to research schools in rural India for five years. It was at the weekly bazaars of Madhya Pradesh's villages that Gupta began collecting bangles, rubber tubes, matchsticks — materials with which he made science fun for kids who couldn't afford Lego or Tell Me Why, or even Tinkle, come to think of it.

"It was a beginning but I went on to teach in over 1200 schools over the country, and I produced

over 70 television programmes on science for Doordarshan." The toymaker is gung-ho about the State-owned channel, exuding an enthusiasm that is contagious. "Doordarshan has more reach even today than all the satellite channels put together. Its territorial reach is immeasurable." Did his parents have any issues with him moving from the sciences into poorly-funded public schools? "My parents were illiterate, simple people. As long as I didn't hurt anybody they were happy with whatever I did to make a living," says the maverick with a smile.

Back to folk

Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, 81, has had an illustrious run. Having headed the Kerala Sangeet Natak Akademi for 10 years through the 1960s — the only person to hold the post for so long — Panikkar used this opportunity to forge alliances with folk, tribal and classical artists, many of whose disciplines were on the wane, even facing extinction. "The purpose of putting people like Panikkar out there is that they have always given back to society while being in the backdrop, it is a silent dedication to resuscitating India's heritage" said Hegde, when commenting on his significance.



Kavalam Panikkar

A recipient of the Padma Bhushan in 2007, Panikkar says, "We have moved ahead, but we can't have a future by erasing our past." His organisation Sopanam in Trivandrum has been at the cutting-edge of arts revival by merging folk arts and music with mediums such as traditional poetry and theatre.

Small homes, big dreams

For Rangasamy Elango, it was Rajiv Gandhi who paved the path for his return to innocence — the man still remembers a visit by the late prime minister to a village in Tamil Nadu, and how Gandhi was shocked to learn that a groundnut vendor's daily profit after eight hours of toil was Rs 3. "He made a note of this in his diary. He said, 'This must change.' In his time, Gandhi did push significantly to make the villages more autonomous," says Elango. When the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act (TNPA) was passed in 1994, the future was crystal clear for the budding politician with genuinely good intentions, if such a combination can truly exist.



Rangasamy Elango

The visionary firmly believes that "village people don't care if you have an engineering degree, unless you are giving back to the community. That was the first thing I realised when I revisited my village. Some of the dropouts from my school had moved on to becoming milk vendors, tuck shop attendants, whatever came their way." The man pioneered among many changes in rural life the concept of Samathuvapurams (Harmony Estates). These low-cost houses encouraged people from different castes to live, quite literally, under the same roof. Economic self-reliance, similar to the ideal pitched by the Mahatma, has been a leitmotif in most of Elango's initiatives.

He developed a cluster of seven villages and even formed a free trade zone within these closely knit cantons. "Rural India was always at an odd clash with the idea of India. A key problem is that the bureaucracy that we inherited from the British was never meant to protect Indians. The so-called Collector of a district was exactly what his moniker entailed. He was there to collect taxes, exploit the citizens. It was a system meant to keep the people out of the loop. It's not very different from what makes the SEZs so controversial these days. In the

1820s, the Brits had the Land Acquisition Act to grab the land of poor farmers. We are using a variant of the same law to squeeze out the poor."



Elango, Panikker and Gupta at the felicitation at Crystal Room, Taj