

ImpactIndia

Q&A With... **Ram Shriram**

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Ram Shriram

SILICON VALLEY INSIDER RAM SHRIRAM IS FOCUSING A GREAT DEAL OF TIME, MONEY, AND ENERGY ON HELPING INNOVATIVE NGOS IMPROVE K-12 EDUCATION IN INDIA.

Over the past 25 years, Ram Shriram has established himself as a Silicon Valley insider. He was an executive at Netscape and Amazon and an early investor and founding board member of Google. Shriram also serves on the boards of PaperlessPost and Zazzle. In 2000, he founded Sherpalto Ventures, an angel investment fund. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* named Ram and his wife, Vijay, one of the 50 most generous donors in the United States in 2014. Ram recently sat down with Radhika Nayar, who leads Dasra's US fundraising efforts, to talk about his approach to giving—in particular, his interest in K-12 education in India and commitment to improve it. He begins by sharing formative childhood experiences in India that have shaped his values. He goes on to offer advice to fellow philanthropists interested in giving to India, describing two projects that he has invested in: Magic Bus and Gooru.

Dasra: *Let's start at the beginning. How were you first exposed to philanthropy?*

Ram Shriram: My journey started at a relatively young age. After my father passed away, my mother went back to college, and we moved in with my grandparents in India. My grandparents had started a K-12 school, and my grandfather would spend a lot of his time at the school—raising money, worrying whether the school had enough teachers. This was the 1960s, when India was further behind in terms of economic development than it is today. So it was even harder back then to do a lot of those things. I watched him do this from the time I was 11 years old until I was 17. I wondered why he was doing all of this work, and he told me that for him the reward was seeing how so many kids that he didn't know were able to come to school and get educated. That made all the difference for him. That was my first introduction to philanthropy, and what a beautiful thing it was.

● *In your professional life, you have been extremely successful at spotting and cultivating business leaders and*

selecting the right companies to invest in. How do you screen for talent and organizations when it comes to your philanthropy?

It's easy to spot talent when you are running a business or investing in an entrepreneur, because everyone is focused on one thing: they want their company to have a lot of customers and they want to make a lot of money. It's a little different when it comes to a nonprofit. There, the objective is built around passion, sincerity, efficient use of meager resources, and touching the end beneficiary. Those sorts of things are more intangible and harder to judge. In a couple of cases what I have done is to back people I had invested in when they were business entrepreneurs, who came to me and said that this [creating an NGO] is what I want to do next in my life.

That's how I ended up supporting Magic Bus. Matthew Spacie founded a company called Cleartrip that sells airline tickets, hotel rooms, and other travel services. It is the number two travel website in India. After that business was successful, he told me that he wanted to leave and take his money and work with street kids.

He was inspired to do this because he used to play soccer with these kids. In Mumbai, you can live comfortably in a nice high-rise apartment building and still have a shantytown near your doorstep. After meeting these street kids he said, "I have to do something about this." He formed Magic Bus and now has about 300,000 street kids in the program. [See "Case Study on Magic Bus" on page 10.] When he started, I seed-funded Magic Bus.

It was a similar situation with Gooru. Prasad Ram used to run Google India and later worked at Google headquarters in Mountain View [California]. What he wanted to do was build a massive set of free resources on the Internet for K-12 teachers and students that could serve as a platform where other people could plug in their resources. Today, five years later, we have 15 million different resources on the site—such as quizzes, lesson plans, and textbook chapters.

● *What areas do you focus your philanthropy on?*

We're not such a large foundation that we could have multiple foci. I would urge people who want to do something philanthropic to do one thing really well. We focused on education. Magic Bus is focused on providing vocational training to kids who come from environments where they can't go to school, have to work, and may not even have a home. They use sports to get their attention, but teach them life skills, such as being honest, punctual, and respectful of each other, which they don't learn by living on the streets. Magic Bus puts the kids onto different vocational tracks—training them as store clerks, auto mechanics, and drivers. Being a chauffeur or an Uber driver in India, for example, is actually more lucrative than working in a BPO [business process outsourcing] job.

At Gooru, we are focused on using the Internet to improve K-12 education. The Internet allows us to do this at scale. The challenge is to get more schools to adopt it, especially public schools. Our initial focus has been the United States, particularly



large California school districts like Santa Ana, Riverside, and Oakland. Some of these school districts have 70,000 to 90,000 kids. The teacher can use Gooru both as a classroom aid and to augment her teaching and instruction. A lot of the work to create Gooru, including programming and content, was done in India. So we asked ourselves, “How do we get people in India who are working on Gooru excited about the impact it could have in India? That has just started. I can’t say we’ve had a big impact yet. The challenge of doing this in India is that many of the children we want to reach don’t have Internet access. So we may not initially touch the people with the greatest need.

Instead, we may touch people just above them—students and teachers who already have Internet access and can use better educational materials than what they’ve had.

● ***What lessons have you learned about philanthropy that you can share?***

The first thing is to pick an area of focus that is of particular interest or passion to you, such as health care, education, or clean water. Back in 2004 and 2005, before we realized we should have only a single focus, we had a second focus on clean water. We did a pilot program and spent maybe \$100,000 before we decided that it was a wasted effort. It turned out that clean water defies an easy solution in India. It takes infrastructure development, the involvement of local government and municipalities, and also the education of the public about personal hygiene and cleanliness. That’s not an easy issue to solve.



The second lesson is to pick the right NGO to work with. I got lucky because of my entrepreneurial connections and the kind of people I picked. But there is a bewildering array of choices of NGOs in India. You need to pick one that will do a good job in your chosen area. If you don’t know the individual, you can do a small pilot and see how it goes. If it does go well, then you can work more deeply with that organization. The third lesson is to find a way to remain engaged with the issue and with the organization. Don’t just give money. You don’t have to be physically present, but you do have to stay engaged mentally with the effort so you can make a difference in how your money is spent.

● ***When it comes to philanthropy and NGOs, what can the United States learn from India, and vice versa?***

I think both countries can learn from each other. Indian NGOs can learn a bit

more from US NGOs about being transparent and making sure that the people they hire to work at the organization are committed to the mission. In a for-profit business you can have mercenaries, but in a nonprofit you can have only missionaries—there is a big difference between the two.

US NGOs can learn from Indian NGOs about how to spend capital far more efficiently and frugally. A number of US foundations spend an inordinate amount of time and resources doing analysis and then not giving away enough money. The other thing the United States could learn is to have donors give more while they are

living, rather than creating foundations that are multi-generational and that tie up funds. India has a different problem: there’s not enough generosity. That’s the first step, and once that is solved then we can worry about whether it’s multi-generational or not.

● ***You have said that you will be spending more time on philanthropy. What inspired you to do that?***

I’m spending more time on philanthropy because it’s very rewarding. I think almost everyone will reach that Zen moment in their life when they say, “Now I move from taking care of my needs to taking care of something beyond my needs.” It happens at different times in different people’s lives. Once you determine that there is more you can do with your life and your money, then it’s a question of figuring out what, where, and how you should do it. ■