Finding Yourself Through the Service of Others

In the early 1900s Shishir Bajaj's (WPO Mumbai) grandfather, Jamnalal, was involved in the Freedom Movement in India alongside Mahatma Gandhi, even spending time in jail as a freedom fighter in his battle against the British. Driven by strong ethics and a will for Indians to govern themselves, he added philanthropy to his arsenal of weapons, along with his strong political ideologies.

As a philanthropist he opened the first temple to the downtrodden, now 100 years old. While Jamnalal never saw his cherished dream of an independent India, dying five years before independence day celebrations in 1947, his principles and convictions have been passed down through generations.

His legacy is presently in the care of Bajaj, chairman and managing director of Bajaj Hindusthan Sugar Company, the largest in Asia and fifth largest in the world. The principles that his grandfather learned under Gandhi have been applied to this large industrial business, one that almost qualifies as a regional government in scale and impact.

Jamnalal saw at an early stage that there was a need for new companies to feed the economic challenges of building a new nation, and formed the sugar company in 1931.

"Because my grandfather was too busy with the freedom movement, he set up the business and let my father run it," says Bajaj. And in a move that predates Bill Gates and Warren Buffett's Giving Pledge campaign by 80 years, Jamnalal formed a trust for the wealth because he didn't want to own more than he needed. Two foundations, the Kamalnayan Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation and Jamnalal Kaniram Bajaj Trust now support more than 100,000 families in 701 villages, positively affecting the lives of more than 615,000 individuals within the Wardha and Sikar districts.

In keeping with the family tradition of social change, Bajaj's son Kushagra suggested the formation of an action plan five years ago that scaled the company's social good onto a much larger platform.

"The number of villages we'd like to cover in the next five years is 1,000," says Bajaj. "There are about 700 districts in India and if we can capture just two I think it will be a seriously good achievement."

As the most populous country on earth with slightly more than 1.2 billion people, two districts is not the small number some would imagine. Some of the projects Bajaj is involved in include sustainable agricultural practices and women's self-help groups. A water resource project has seen 82 rivers deepened, 74 miles of riverbed rejuvenated and schools built at seven of the 10 sugar factories.

As Gandhi has said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

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