

Academic Leadership in India: The Case of Liberal Arts Education

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Abstract

Liberalization in the 90s opened the economy in India and with it the job market and a surge in professional education followed as it ensured immediate employment. The movement saw the growth of a strong community of scientists and management experts who went on to become leaders in multinational companies and the rocket-man Dr Kalam, the President of the country. As time went by, the need for holistic thinking even in professional careers (to be supplemented with soft skill) brought the focus back to education in Humanities and Social Sciences to create holistic leaders and citizenry.

This paper describes the narrative of rebirth of Liberal Arts education in India. It is an initiative that has resurrected the humanities from its conventional approach to nurturing curious and inquisitive minds; from theory based 'teaching' to 'experiential learning by doing' and active application. As a result, the 'joy of learning' is back into the classroom.

This paper is about one such journey – founding of a liberal arts school at Mumbai. It is about the journey of a dean: from finding inspiration in the writings of J. Krishnamurti and Tagore to identifying the purpose of program design; the positioning of an India-centric model that is both 'context-specific' and 'context-free'; the search for students and faculty who could learn/teach in trans-disciplinary subjects; the infusion of values in the new school; the governance by 'distributed leadership' and the challenges of managing different stakeholders. Even the milieu at large is still grappling with 'what is liberal arts' and 'what is its future'.

Above all, it is about lessons learnt about institutional leadership, lessons substantive enough for use by any dean.

Recent incidents of 'intolerance' have dominated the collective conscience of people in India, as they have elsewhere too. In democracy, freedom of expression and the right to dissent has become a double-edged sword. The liberal expression of an artist or a film maker is hostage to the social, political and ideological politics of the non-liberals. Ironically, language, the vehicle of deliberative thought and empathy is used as a tool of manipulation within which liberal and non-liberal identities are constituted and alienated. Peter Brooks voiced similar concerns when he spoke at a seminar on 'Humanities in Public Sphere': "no one trained in the rigorous analysis of poetry (read humanities), could possibly engage in such bad-faith interpretation without professional conscience intervening and say: this is not right." (Brooks: 2014) To me, the operative word here is the role of 'professional conscience' to nourish the public sphere by nurturing probative and ethical interpretation of language. Brooks supports *New Yorker* journalist Jane Mayer's view that 'distortion of language' is 'distortion of reality' (Brooks: 2014). The 'intolerance' in public sphere can find a palliative in the 'interpretive enterprise' inherent in the study of Humanities. It is a task, entrusted to the 'professional conscience'.

It is within this context that three years back, I was asked to find a School of Liberal Arts in Mumbai and the job became my 'calling'. Amid the clamour of job-oriented education, this is the story of starting a school in Liberal Arts, narrated by the founder Dean. It is about the thought process behind the architecture, the trials and travails of implementation and the satisfaction of seeing the school come alive. Above all, it is about lessons learnt in institutional leadership, lessons substantive enough to share with others.

The purpose of this paper is to situate the current challenges in higher education in India in a present that is confusing and a future that belies certitude. As the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world looms large, the current job market cannot predict what professions will survive or disappear in future. Academia needs to find answer to two important questions: 'what will hold a student in good stead in future?' and 'which curriculum will create responsible citizens and great leaders for that future?' According to Judith Butler, Humanities can fulfil the promise as it serves a double purpose: it deals with "how we learn to think, to work, with language and images, and to read, to make sense, to intervene, to take apart, to formulate evaluative judgements and even to make the world anew (Butler: 2014) and; 'humanities offer certain kinds of skill development that are important for economic growth' (Butler: 2014). In other words, Humanities impart an 'intrinsic value', complete in itself and for itself; as also 'instrumental value' to other professions by virtue of the skills that study of Humanities entails.

Consequently, the decision to establish a School of Liberal Arts at Mumbai in 2016 became a 'blue ocean' initiative for its timeliness and location; it is the right time as the current incidents portend and the right place because Mumbai is the vibrant home to liberal arts thinking and attitude and one could discover learning context in people, places and events.

In order to understand the current challenges in higher education, it is necessary to take the narrative from 1947 when the trajectory of higher education in India is situated.

Background

The history of higher education in India must take into account the sociological perspective as a determinant of forces at play. A newly self-governed nation was forging its identity and formulating national policies in the face of ever shifting goals of society. The education had to cater to the idea of nationhood, inclusive growth, rise of technology and the global aspirations of current generation. In the former case, the crisis in India is quite different from the global scenario and in the latter, quite similar to the concerns of *Generation Now* anywhere in the world.

Higher education in Post-Independent India

The narrative of higher education in India can be traced back to the legacy of the colonial past. India, in 1947, was a fractured nation fraught with regionalism, caste, creed, language and culture on one hand and; large population, poverty, illiteracy and stunted self-confidence on the other. Integration of the Indian states and inclusion of all the marginalised societies was the biggest challenge for higher education during the Nehruvian era. Sociologist Andre Beteille, writing a series of editorials for *Times of India*, captures the 'unhappy state of education' during the early decades: 'with limited seats, access to university education became the prerogative of intellectual elites with privileged background and (felicity) in English language, resulting in the isolation of democratic masses' (Beteille:2000). This period saw the rise of several new Universities; shortage of faculty and declining rigour and movement of students to foreign shores.

The second wave of change was caused by the 1990s liberalization that not only opened up the economy in India but also potential job opportunities. The movement saw surge in science and technology and management courses leading to the growth of a strong community of scientists and management experts, feeding a pipeline of leadership. This led to several Indian names leading multinational companies across the world and our rocket-man Dr Kalam, the President of India. This phase saw a decline in unemployment rates and all was good till the dotcom bubble burst and the specialized professional education was found wanting in critical thinking, decision making and people's skills that almost all professional jobs required. To correct this, professional courses were supplemented with courses in soft skill. Soon, this also did not meet the market demand as the cosmetic behavioural change, not emerging from a sensitive thinking, could scarcely give the same benefit. The current incidents of 'intolerance' have once again underscored interest in education that is capable of creating sound thinkers and sensate players in democracy.

Consequently, the last decade has seen the birth of 3-4 Liberal Arts schools in India, each trying a different path, yet to be validated. This is the story of the most recent enterprise.

2. Defining Liberal Arts

The concept of liberal arts education is not new. In fact, the education of the 'philosopher king' was well-known for holistic training of the leaders. In what we refer to Education Ver.1, during ancient times in India, the sons of kings would live in the forest with the teacher and receive holistic education while also performing everyday menial tasks at the 'gurukul' - the abode of the teacher. Universities like *Nalanda* and *Takshila* were known far and wide for quality education and character building. Returning to the present context, as per the popular definition, liberal arts education produces 'free' ('libre') thinking individuals. It is a broad-based education that inculcates intellectual ability; to understand ideas and beliefs; to develop understanding of life, society and citizenship. Such an education develops the 'right brain' sensitivity that is different from the exclusive 'left brain' development of vocational or professional or technical education. A complete education requires the development of both right & left brain - a double benefit that Liberal Arts education promises to fulfil. It is a pursuit complete in itself for its own sake and; as an 'instrument' of growth when applied to all other professions.

In other words, Liberal Arts education develops a well-rounded person who at a manifested level, demonstrates prudence in personal behaviour and conduct in society; is a critical thinker who communicates well in speech and writing and; is respectful of 'diversity' through an ability to learn and understand others.

3. Conceptualization

3.1 Search for an Indian model

There are several western models of liberal arts education. I was searching for an Indian model that, to quote A.K. Ramanujan, is 'context-sensitive' - deriving wisdom from the culture heritage of India and yet 'context-free' (Ramanujan: 1989) model that is attentive to local in granularity yet not in opposition to the manifestation of the global. Simply stated, if we are to prepare the student for a global knowledge economy, then the pattern can be country specific (context-sensitive) and wider (context-free) in knowledge and application.

There was no dearth of wisdom in Indian thinkers. I found inspiration in Tagore's idea of 'mind without fear' and J. Krishnamurti who had written so much about the true calling of education. To him, true purpose of education is "to be concerned with the cultivation of the total human being...to help students flower naturally.... otherwise education becomes merely a mechanical process (*mental standardization*) oriented to a career, to some kind of profession...(where) the freedom to flower will gradually wither". (Krishnamurti: 2006)

This was important for Indian education as 'nurturing mental freedom to awaken intelligence', was a concept consciously ignored in Macaulay's education system for colonized India. We needed to start afresh.

The second challenge was of a philosophic nature. Given the diversity of people and culture in India, how could one Indian model capture this rich diversity of several India's? The metropolitan India Inc. and the multilingual, multicultural regional India, called Bharat that flourishes in happy little traditions and caste system had to find equal space in the model. Which India was I going to include? I wanted to retain the Indian flavour in content, form and delivery as most of the students coming to the program were trilingual. One could possibly generate a conversational, dialogic 'jugalbandi' in class interactions in disciplines like Literature, Cultural Anthropology Creative writing and Performing Arts that resonated with 'Indian-ness'.

3.2 Curriculum Design

Once this clarity was arrived at, the next task was to critically analyse the conventional approach to curriculum design to (a) eliminate the obvious blind-spots like teacher-centric,

chronological and silo teaching and; absence of career alignment and practical application and (b) how did we offer to solve them. Let me explain these points clearly:

The 'Elephant & the Blind men' syndrome: The story of four blind men who had never seen an elephant but were curious to know what an elephant felt like, went to the village square to feel one. Each touched one part of the elephant and described six versions of the elephant: a rope, a pillar, a wall and a fan. For me this became a parable for early specialization and teaching in silos – each subject is convinced of its own advocacy, without acknowledging the whole. Early specialization in a subject, to the exclusion of all others, according to the parable, is a lop-sided understanding and currently that is what everyone is doing. So in Liberal arts, we incorporated several subjects as multiple referent lenses on life - more the lenses, higher the definition of the picture. Life is complex and needs to be studied holistically. Every lens is important. Undergrad education had to be broad-based and holistic and that needed a larger bouquet of subjects.

Trans-disciplinary Approach: The time line and the perspective of each subject are quite different. History has one chronology, Psychology and Economics, the later day disciplines come in 19th century and; each has a different argument. If Chronology directs the teaching of a subject, it is difficult for the learner to connect the dots. A trans-disciplinary approach to understand the multi-dimensional problems of life had to come together. For the Liberal Arts course, this translated into theme-based semesters that would define a period (History) and all other subjects would peg their respective lens to that theme. If the semester is focused on the theme of 'contemporary India', Literature would include Indian writings that bring the human predicament to life; Political Science would deal with making of the constitution of India and what it meant for a nation to be social, secular and democratic republic; Sociology class will discuss the issues of culture and family dynamics in contemporary India that moved from joint, to nuclear family and now, to the single parent family; Economics will discuss the challenges of vast expenditure required to build the nation, the restrictions of the 'License Raj' and the economic liberalization of the 90s. The same pattern is followed in the field of performing arts e.g. Partition of India is taught in History class and literary texts on partition are discussed in the Literature class; the same texts are also enacted in the theatre class.

Career alignment: Liberal Arts education in India is seen as an elite phenomenon, not leading to immediate employability like professional courses. I was keen to create a program through which one could be career ready. Thus, we arrived at the idea to incorporate career aligned courses in the 3rd year viz. creative writing, journalism, media, marketing communication, civil services and entrepreneurship. Liberal Arts education had to be both 'education for life & living' therefore, fundamental skills that could transform into more specific career-oriented skills later in life, were essential e.g. critical thinking, analytical writing, argument building and work-related skills. In short, 'learning how to learn' emerged as an essential skill that would give no expiry date to education. Both skill building and career focused courses were factored into the design.

Learner-centric Approach

Conventional education in India leans on theory-based and teacher-centric approach without factoring the different learning styles of individuals. As per Gardner's 'eight intelligences', everyone does not learn the same way; an adult decides the manner and mode of learning. A student-centric approach needs to incorporate the agility and flexibility of learning modes of the *Generation Now*. We used 'design thinking' approach to course architecture (design of the artefact) and delivery (intervention or implementation) by going back and forth to students for regular feedback. This feedback is incorporated into the system for immediate correction of the prototype. This minimizes the teaching-learning gap and also gives the student a sense of ownership of the learning process. The student-centric approach governs the curricular design and implementation.

4. The Model

Through several iterative and reiterative processes, we arrived at a simple learning objective for the program and aligned it with course architecture, pedagogy and evaluation process.

4.1 learning Objective

We focused on basic understanding of ‘why is the world the way its is’ by study of different subjects so that a student can understand events occurring in the society by applying concepts learnt in the class – the ‘here and now’ approach. This learning is complemented by study of the artistic response to the events happening in the society through the medium of art work. The dialectics of ‘knowing’ the concepts in theory; ‘seeing’ the evidence in real world and decoding the implied meaning in art creates a holistic understanding. We articulated this as the four essential learning objectives for the program:

How do I understand the context of the world today?

How do I respond to the world in a creative manner?

How do I build my argument/narrative?

How do I conceptualize what I see and what I know?

4.2 Learning Outcome

During the program, a student is able to develop fundamental skills of critical thinking, creative and persuasive writing and decision making. These skills are transformable and re-inventible to suit most future needs. The wide bouquet of courses taught in the first two years provides enough information to a student to make career choice that is based on interest, not driven by market fashion. In one word, a student is equipped with the life skill of ‘how to learn’.

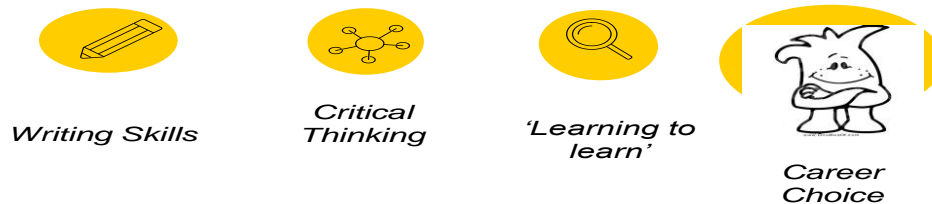


Figure-1: Learning outcome

4.3 Course Architecture

Unlike the four years of college education in the west, the University Grants Commissions, the regulatory body, mandates three-year undergrad program. Much as we wanted the wider scope of 4 years; we had to confine the course architecture to a three-year program referred to as B.A (Hons.) – Liberal Arts. The first two years are devoted to foundation-building - the broad-based education deemed essential in Liberal Arts education, therefore compulsory. Electives are offered in the third year, both in specific disciplines and career aligned practice-oriented courses. (Figure 2)

The horizontal axis of the course architecture is based on Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences and learning styles that can suite individual learning patterns. Accordingly, the 4-tier structure comprises: a wide selection of *Core* subjects; the basic tools of academic learning called *Enablers*; the *Creative Response* that encourage artistic forms of expression and; action learning through live projects. This is supplemented with brief internships and international immersion. The semesters, as shown in vertical columns, are theme-based to afford trans-disciplinary alignment of different subjects.

	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 3	Semester 4	Semester 5 & 6
Disciplines	Contemporary India	Contemporary World	Revolutions in History	Futurity	Career Choices
A. H & SS + 1 Science course	5 courses + Urban Ecology	5 Courses + Darwin's theory of Evolution	5 Courses + Astronomy	5 Courses + Emerging technology	Academics, Entrepreneurship, Media & Film studies, Marketing Communication & Advertising, Fashion design
B. Enablers	Critical Thinking	Academic writing	Quantitative skills	Research methods	Leadership, Negotiation. Problem solving
C. Creatives	Theatre, Creative writing	Film making & Visual arts	Arts appreciation & Dance	Design workshop	-
D. Live Projects	Out bound	Slum projects	Discover India trip	International immersion	Internship & Capstone project

Figure -2: Snapshot of course architecture

4.4 Salient features – The design of the course does not capture the several salient features that give the program a unique perspective. This requires a little elaboration.

The lens of a subject is broader. Let us consider courses in Literature. As a colonial after effect, literature courses in India are still about English literature with some later day inclusion of Indian writers. In this program, literature is taught in English but otherwise it walks hand in hand with history and includes writers of the country or period. To illustrate the point, if the students are reading Russian or Cuban revolution, the English translations of different 'voices' of literary texts from Russian or Cuban writers will be included. The purpose is to understand human behaviour or what makes people humane under challenging circumstances. The second aspect of reading literature is learning the 'tools' of literary analysis inherent in close reading of a text - the unravelling of the onion layers of meaning embedded in the text. The first intention is a reciprocity - literature is a high definition mirror of the society and in the latter; it provides the mental discipline of ethical reading of any text - literary of scientific or legal - a wisdom of far reaching consequence. This is complemented by specialization papers on Translation Studies and Comparative Literature to understand how to read literature from different cultures across the world. Third, literary texts are decoded in the theatre class by way of play-reading and enactment, not intended as artistic expressions but as interpretive 'process' of reading between the lines.

Likewise, History is not taught as chronology of events and what monarchs did but as a vassal of times: as history of ideas; as an act of careful separation of historical facts and facts of History. Economics, in the compulsory course, is not about econometrics but understanding economic thought that propels human movement in search of jobs and resources. Sociology courses deal with the basic understanding of what is culture and how does one decode its manifestation in social systems of inclusion or exclusion. The simultaneous study of History, Literature and Social Anthropology as a trans-disciplinary, multi-perspective, multipolar enterprise helps a student understand 'why is the world the way it is?' This perspective is unique to the program.

The pedagogic interventions are simple common-sense ideas. Every subject encourages exploration and inter connectedness; accordingly, internal assignments permit time for exploration (take-home assignments) and scope for collective dialogue (group assignments) and contribute 50% assessment in a semester. In terms of methodology, field work, presentation of findings through a skit or puppetry or an action-plan by way of a campaign, are all encouraged. To provide the tools of enquiry, every semester comprises courses called 'enablers' in research methodology, academic writing and quantitative analysis. In fact, everything is utilitarian: academic writing course uses a student's previous assignments as an example to teach academic writing. In short, application

oriented, action-learning and, 'here and now' approach and interactive classroom sessions are important aspects of pedagogy.

Practical literacy is deemed as important as academics. The course on 'Getting things done' is an initiative where every student participates in the day-to-day administrative activities of the institute. It is done through membership of formal committee structure. Each committee comprises a group of students working under the guidance of a faculty member. The committee work brings the students on the loop of all administrative decisions and gives them a sense of ownership. For example, the academic committee works with the Dean to review the course like in a professional review meeting; each student presents a summary of the course and if there are any learning gaps, a suggestion on what will work for them. The minutes of the meeting are formally communicated to the concerned faculty by the either the Dean or the student representative. Similarly, Open mike Committee provides a platform to students to showcase and develop the talent pool amongst them. External Events Committee will perform the administrative task of selecting and training participants for any inter-university competition. This non-classroom activity hones the administrative skills of every student. This is yet another unique feature of the course.

5. Implementation

Implementation, the art of balancing, is the principle task of every Dean. Managing various stakeholders within and without the organization requires being alert 24X7X365. Students and their parents are the greatest allies, but they need to be updated on essential communication and made part of action-group. I have spent major part of time in meeting students, listening to them, counselling them and taking timely action on their suggestions to demonstrate that the system 'listens' to them. Since the concept of liberal arts is still new to people, I also devote time to external communication by way public seminars for potential students and their parents to explain the role of liberal arts in life and the vast career opportunities that this education offers in career choices.

If I had to list one critical task of the Dean in a new school, it would be locating, hiring and mentoring faculty members. The design of the course determines the kind of faculty required. Since I was once part of it, I am aware of the limitations of hiring professors using lecture method and theory-based teaching. I chose to sacrifice experience in favour of innovation. I sought young research scholars at premier institutions and explained the logic of course and then invited them to teach as visiting faculty. No formal interview process can yield the result that this exercise produced. The young scholars who resonated with the logic of the course design and also related to the students, were offered the position. I could mentor them as per the requirement without making them 'unlearn' old habits. This, I would say, was a time-consuming exercise but with regular student feedback, the magic started happening in the classroom.

5.1 Governance Structure

The governance structure of the school is a product of the general management courses I once taught at a Business School. In this case, instead of teaching, I was practicing the administrative wisdom of people like Philip Selznick and Chistensen. It was delightful to find that their ideas worked in practice! Selznick provides a frame-work to situate leadership: "The executive becomes a statesman as he makes the transition from administrative management to institutional leadership." (Selznick: 1959). What Selznick implies here is a sociological perspective to why people work and how they get along together. The task of the dean is to understand this and get congruence between the aspirations of the faculty and academic objective of effectiveness in the classroom. In academia, departmental silos is a well-known phenomenon and getting the faculty to work as a team, a challenge. Distributed leadership and participation in the governance structure as shown in figure -3 below, is worth sharing here.

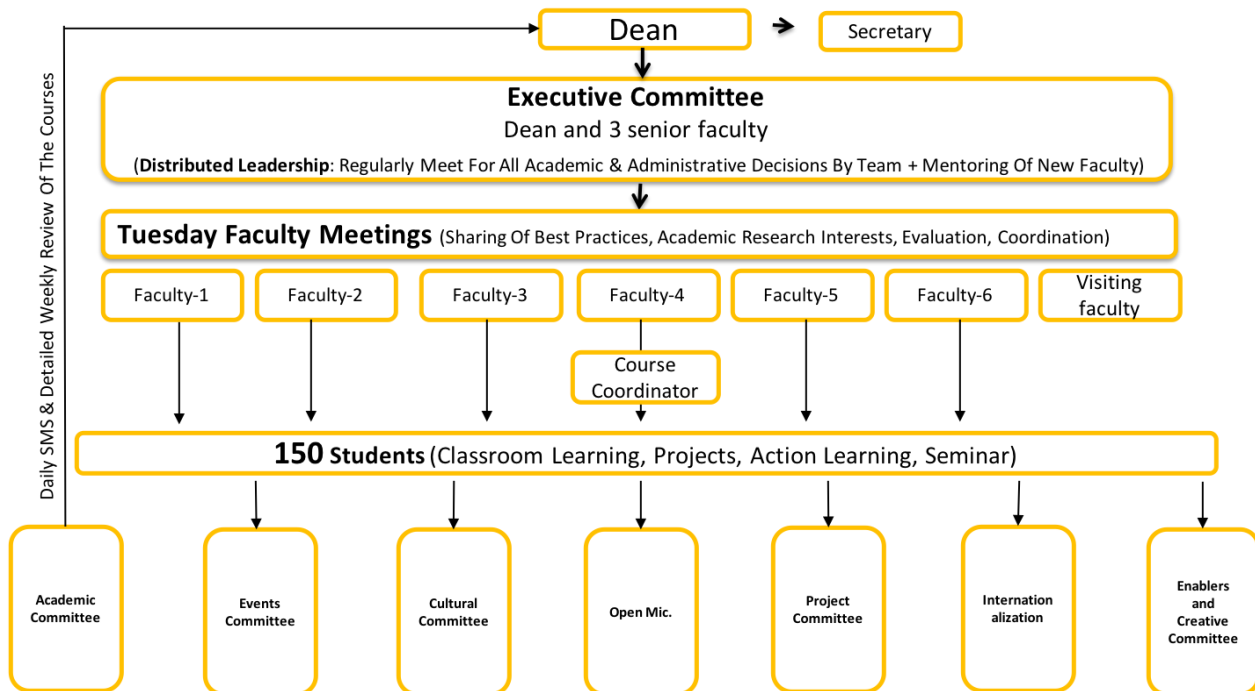


Figure-3: Governance Structure

6. Challenges

The task of starting a new school is subject to all the challenges of a start-up. I will not delve into the common issues faced by almost everyone with a similar experience but mention some, specific to Liberal Arts education. The typical eighteen-year-old student entering the under-graduation course is grappling with several issues related to growing up as an adult. Such a student needs mentoring as well as academic enlightenment. The design of the course will work only if it is accompanied by non-interfering mentorship and hand-holding. The faculty teaching in the school are the right people for this task. The irony is, faculty who are hired on the basis of their research and are relatively young, may neither understand this role nor be equipped with necessary skills. The hiring practice and role requirement are misaligned.

Second is the admission process. How to select the students who are capable of benefitting from an exploratory education, is a question I have not found an answer to. Conventional admission test cannot be correlated with performance of the students in classroom. Reliance on quantitative methods of assessment and selection based on inflated grades of the previous exam are both detrimental to finding right students. Another critical challenge is to maintain diversity in the classroom by including students who have the potential but may not be able to afford the cost.

Third is the typical University management system that is mostly bureaucratic and rewards compliance rather than creativity. Liberal arts education needs flexible, agile systems. I am still grappling with all these challenges.

7. Conclusion

It is hard to share the joy of founding a new school because all the challenges listed above, pale in comparison. Several lessons learnt on the way are embedded in the narrative and I need not enumerate them. As they say in India, it takes a village to raise a child; in this case, a team of like-minded enthusiasts with the zeal of crusaders have paved the way for me. Methods of design thinking approach helped in creating a prototype which was constantly improved with feedback from all stakeholders – that worked. Following a clear vision with conviction makes the rest of the pieces fall in place. Many a time, I felt like a director of a play who is caught by the artistic vision, has a rough idea

about how he is going to tell the story but once the team assembles, he surrenders to the collaborative process. In such cases, the result is often greater than the individual idea. This sums it all.

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