



*Rangaswamy  
Elango*  
Social Initiative



In an age of self-promotion and need for instant gratification, Rangaswamy Elango is an almost cult character who is an epitome of selflessness. A chemical engineer by qualification, in a single Guevaraesque gesture, he turned down huge job opportunities and returned to set right his village. The very mention of Mahatma Gandhi, gram swaraj, or village development, and there is a spark in his eyes as he begins, "It is so easy to make promises and talk about development, but so difficult when you actually get down to the ground. It has taken me nearly eighteen years to bring change to Kutthambakkam - in spite of the rapport-building with my own people and taking into consideration their views at every step. Bringing change to this vast country cannot be one man's duty."

As the conversation dwells on success and failure of nations with respect to development, Elango speaks about grass root empowerment, and decentralisation, "Development has to be a people-centric process, not a leader-centric one. People need to learn to identify the development policy most suited to their circumstance and prepare the background before approaching the government. If you want it, you have to go get it! That is the true meaning of empowerment. Not sitting endlessly for someone to come make a difference." Having taken Trusteeship of his village, people-empowerment and sustainable development are what Elango first achieved for the people of his village, and what he now proposes for grass root development in all of India.

Rangaswamy Elango was born and raised in Kuthambakkam village. Son of a government employee, he had the benefit of education- the very first graduate of his village, a chemical engineer from A C Tech, he was absorbed into ONGC as a fresher. During his visits to his native village on holiday, he noticed that while the world outside was developing rapidly, his village remained ignorant to it - illiteracy, trafficking of arrack, wife-beating and communal hatred were rampant. He quit his job and joined the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research in Chennai - living in his village



and commuting to work every day. Proximity to his roots and day to day participation in the strife of his people is what kindled the burning desire to bring about a positive change to his village. Marriage brought on familial responsibilities, but his family reluctantly reconciled to his activist ways.

In the 73rd Constitutional Amendment brought on by the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1993, Elango saw an opportunity to live his dream; the amendment was an instrument aimed at empowering villages to govern themselves, or in other words creating village level republics. Having already done ground breaking survey, demarcating causes of regression and identifying Kutthambakkam's potentials, Elango was ready with a strategy and just needed the authority. Despite resistance from local goons who opposed his social reforms, Elango was elected Panchayat President. His first efforts were to remove arrack mafia, and create employment as well

an environment conducive to literacy. Even as he toiled day and night for his people, putting aside his own family, he encountered a quagmire of red tape-ism and opposition from profiteers - Elango gives all credit to his wife, who with a copy of "My Experiments with Truth" drew him out of the mire and showed him the non-violent way. The radical reformer was replaced by a staunch Gandhian.

Around this time, Elango found himself travelling through the heartlands of rural India learning about sustainable development and agricultural practices in various villages. He came across a gentleman who was promoting dry land irrigation and viable agrarian practices in Dharwad and Hubli districts of Karnataka. The project was being supported by the Asoka Scholarship platform - a foreign program supporting the ideas of Change makers all over the World. Before long, Elango found himself nominated for the Scholarship. After strict scrutiny

and evaluation, he was awarded the Bourse in 2002 for a period of three years. It helped Elango relaunch himself and harmonise his passions. The platform also provided an opportunity to interact with similar visionaries in other parts of the world. Elango recalls bittersweet moments when the program even provided emotional support to his family - it helped his children understand that their "ever absent" father was a man on a mission.

One of the earliest projects that Elango undertook was to create a Samathuvapuram (Harmony Housing), a housing scheme proposed and funded by the Tamil Nadu Government to bring people of different communities to live together in harmony. Elango undertook the task of designing large spacious houses, inner cement roads and water management plans. One important aspect is that he employed local labour and locally available resources like mud blocks for building, effectively reducing the cost





of construction and diverting funds for other collective businesses, providing better books and clothes for the school going children of the neighbourhood, processing of agricultural produce etc. He accomplished all this based on input from his people, their short and long term needs. This is another aspect he hopes to promote in other Panchayats - complete involvement of locals in development. It should be their vision, their design and their development. Democracy should not be one man's Right - it is every man's Duty - towards himself, his community and his country.

At another level, over cultivation to feed large industries had rendered the soil infertile, and industrialization he claimed had sucked the soul of the agriculturalist reducing him to a debt-ridden unfortunate. Having forgotten indigenous agricultural practices, the farmer was forced to depend on middlemen to buy his produce at slashed rates. The producer then had to buy his own food at either tremendous rates, or depend on government doles. This is not the story of just one village but that of villages all over India. The unfairness of this he said had given him sleepless nights till he found a solution. In this aspect, working at the Kundrakudi Adigalar's Village Planning

Forum was a turning point for him. He had understood the importance of the farmer as value producer and the need to provide him a secure and sustainable economy - This, especially in a country like ours, where a huge percentage of the population is in agro-based industries. He now strives to bring back dignity to the occupation of cultivation and the folk arts, by reviving indigenous methods of processing foods using interactive village clusters that would support each other with their unique produce. As he showed us around his "experiment block", we came across threshers, milling devices etc. with basic mechanization which could run on low power and just as well produce pulses, flour and oil as any large processing industry. Infact, Elango claims that, the damage to the environment is minimal with these equipments. While his views were socialist in nature and his perspective of middleman economy quite caustic, his compassion for the farmer and the environment were heartfelt.

The other end of the compound was used for a small scale industry, manufacturing burners for kerosene stoves. The burners were manufactured for their own consumption as well as for selling in the open market. There was also a unit being prepared for the

manufacture of fans and lamps and solar panels from recycled materials. The scientist in him was working on his next project to reduce his village's dependency on state power supply. He explained that all the women who worked in these units had once been employed in illicit liquor distilleries. They had been rescued, rehabilitated and trained to work in his units; he praised them for their grit and strength to dare to change their ways. He then showed us his newest baby- a local bakery that could turn out finished consumables from the village's own flour mills and dairy produce. There is no describing the amazement we felt on seeing the achievement of this dedicated gentleman.

He has achieved similar results in Panchayats in Palladum and Mettupalayam. He runs a Panchayat Academy where he invites Panchayat Presidents from across India to come and share their ideas and achievements on common issues like Water planning, recycling of goods, setting up sustainable cottage industries etc. He has given lectures at the Azim Premji University which is a melting pot of Reformation, and to Indian students in Universities abroad. He has bounced his ideas off high level diplomats, IAS officers and activists all over the world. He has

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identified 1000 panchayats that are willing to try his route for Gram Swaraj. "Fifty more empowered Panchayats like this and the unfulfilled dream of Mahatma Gandhi, to reconstruct India from her villages can be achieved", he says confidently.

Recently, the article in a local daily, discussed the difference between intellect and intelligence- intelligence it said was that which one could gain from books and teachers, but intellect was that which, one cultivated in oneself by putting the intelligence to practice and service, especially with reverence. Rangaswamy Elango's intellect in putting to use his scientific knowledge, for the betterment of the less fortunate, and his reverence for humans, resources and life in general is like a lesson in Humanity. He is a true Champion!