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Lifestyle

How We Spiritualized Our Business

A successful couple bring the Bhagavad Gita's teachings to Silicon Valley

By Lavina Melwani, New York

In 1981, Satya and Krishan Kalra co-founded BioGenex, now a multimillion-dollar biotech firm producing the latest in cellular and diagnostic testing. Krishan is CEO and head of research and development at BioGenex Laboratories while Satya now increasingly devotes time to spiritual teaching. She has several inspirational books to her credit. Together, Satya and Krishan have discovered that there is no conflict between material and spiritual wealth; each can enhance the other.

At one point, however, there was a real tension between spirituality and materialism in their lives. During the early years, striving to build BioGenex from the ground up, Krishan and Satya became preoccupied with business matters to the exclusion of all else.

Both were born in the small town of Lucky in Bano in the Northwestern part of undivided India. In the Partition of 1947, this area became part of Islamic Pakistan, and both families were compelled to leave for India.

Satya's middle-class family, involved in the shoe trade, eventually settled in Gwailor. "My father had little education, but he was a saintly practitioner of the Gita," she recalls. "My mother was an intelligent housewife who used to counsel the community on family issues. They were both very giving people. Everything was first for others, then for us."

Krishan grew up in a much more affluent family of landowners, but that made it doubly hard to adjust to the hardships meted out by Partition. "My father was not educated beyond the ability to read, write and count. Our life in India after Partition was very difficult--there were many times we wouldn't even get three meals in a day," he says. He recalls being handed the Bhagavad Gita by his father when he was just six years old. He used to recite from it every day, until he left home for the larger world.

Education was a hard-won prize, as the family did not have money to send him further than middle school. He was about to join an uncle in a clerical job in the railways when compensation money for their lost property in Pakistan came in and the family insisted he go in for higher education. Krishan went on to college in Mumbai and got a teaching job at the Bhabha Institute. But he was still leading a hand-to-mouth existence, so he went on a teaching scholarship to Chicago to find a way out of poverty for the family.

Meanwhile, Satya completed her B.Sc. and went on for M.Sc. In her family, she says, education was not for securing a job, but rather a good husband. She soon found herself married to Krishan and following him on the journey to America.

In the hard times that followed, Krishan somehow lost the faith he had as a child. "My father was above religion, but he believed in God, and he had those principles which guided him very strongly in life," he says. "I was very spiritual till I left home. Then I became a scientist and I got it into my head that there is no God and everything is left brain."

Satya, too, found it hard to keep her faith intact in her new country. This was some forty years ago, and there were no Hindu temples in the area. Even so, she was unable to forget her upbringing. "My father was a businessman, but he was very spiritual, and he would conduct havans. Whenever there was a need in the temple, they would ask him to help. Our family wasn't much into rituals, but I learned from observing my father and his attitude. He was very open-minded, taking us to Hindu temples, Muslim dargas and Sikh gurdwaras."

The young couple settled in Chicago, and life was hard while Krishan worked towards his Ph.D. Satya finished her M.Sc., then worked to support the couple.

Later, they were both working and also started a family. After several years, they moved to California and founded their own company. "We tried to bootstrap our business," says Krishan. "And that meant struggle and hard work."

In their passion to make it big, faith took a back seat. "I was more of a ritual person, not a spiritual person," Satya confesses. "The only thing I knew was you pray to God when you have difficulties and don't like your life."

The work became so important that the needs of the family were sometimes forgotten, such as attendance at a child's baseball game or Brownie meeting. He recalls the day when he never turned up at his ten-year-old son Amit's all-important game: "I believe it was a game he really wanted me to be there for because he was expecting to do well in it," he says with regret. "I got busy in my work and totally forgot about it. When I remembered, it was too late."

Krishan was a driven, workaholic boss. "If I was working six days, I'd expect them to work six days; and if I was working seven days, I'd expect them to work seven days. I gave no consideration for family time." He related to others reactively, getting angry when they got angry, arguing when they argued.

This was the pattern at home as well. "I felt my life was falling apart," Satya recalls, "I felt totally lost, depressed and confused." But remembering the faith of her childhood, she sought out the saints and invited them home. She met Swami Hariharji Maharaj, founder of International Gita Ashram, who told her to read the Bhagavad Gita. She had tried often, but had given up because it seemed too complex. The swami advised her to read just three verses per day--and that changed her life. To better understand the text, she learned Sanskrit and read several commentaries. Gradually, the Gita became the anchor of her life.

Krishan had become a hard-boiled businessman. "Satya pushed me back into spirituality. She had to really work hard, because I was stubborn. She would bring priests home, beg me, persuade me, and eventually she succeeded. One of the saints who came over was Hariharji Maharaj. He had some power, and he changed my mind. Looking directly at me, he asked me to organize a Gita conference." That conference, "Reconnecting Spirituality and Technology," was held at Stanford University, with erudite scholars such as Dr. Karan Singh and iconic business

leaders including Desh Deshpande discussing the Gita.

For Krishan, that was a turning point. He gave up his materialistic mindset and embraced the Vedanta way--looking on himself as the trustee of his corporation and at vendors and customers as stakeholders. "Everything should be for the welfare of the stakeholders. To be a trustee is a privilege, not a right," he says. Before, workers had been merely cogs in the wheel; now, their welfare was of prime concern.

Krishan also started looking at the larger picture. He became involved with TIE, a nonprofit business organization for emerging entrepreneurs. As its globalization chairperson, he opened 20 chapters and mentored young entrepreneurs. Having gone through so many struggles, he now focused on recognizing the larger family, and giving back.

For the Kalras, spirituality came into their home along with the saints. Since many of the saints who spoke at the conference were staying with them, Krishan was able to interact with them. There was Gita Pravachan every day and bhajans in the evening. He says, "It had a profound effect on us all. The credit goes to Satya that this gyan-ganga, ocean of knowledge, had come to our house. We didn't have to go to Haridwar or Rishikesh--the saints had come to us. We were so lucky, so fortunate."

For Satya, too, the encounter with the saints was transforming. "To me, worldly gain had been the most important thing--going to a higher and higher rank in the corporate world, sending my children to the best private schools, having a bigger house, a bigger car. To me all those things were signs of a successful life," she admits.

Then she had a major problem with her back, and she was bedridden for months. During that time, she did some serious rethinking. Surrounded by the four walls of her luxurious 10,000-square-foot home, she realized that fine homes, a fine lifestyle, and positions of power had little value if you were not happy. She recalls, "I would lie down and contemplate and go deeper and deeper into connecting with my inner self."

One day she felt a light radiate over her and an Om flying over her body. "I had no idea what it was, but I enjoyed that light so much. After that, it became like my blanket. Instead of going into my blanket, I would go into that light and feel connected."

"I followed a very disciplined life, as Lord Krishna recommended in Gita--eating sattvic food (light and fresh vegetarian), doing a lot of yoga asana, pranayama and meditating, walking in the lap of nature, practicing silence, staying in the company of like-minded people and staying fully focused on the project."

"My big thing was to get the children acquainted with the saints," she recalls. Often the saints came to stay for a month. She would be working at the corporation, doing the groceries, cooking and then hosting the saints and followers. The lectures would be followed by dinner, and the evening often lasted until midnight. Her young son Amit would be doing homework, yet also recording and video taping the event--and sometimes falling asleep in the process. He was a child, but he absorbed a lot, Satya relates. If sometimes she did something which he felt was not right, he would pipe up, "Mom, this is not what your Gita teaches!"

Satya has deep devotion to all the saints, but Sai Baba is her guru. Her husband and children, on the other hand, particularly took to Muniji of Parmath Niketan, Rishikesh. Her daughter, a lawyer, adopted him as her guru. When it came time to marry, she married the person Muniji recommended.

Having discovered her own path to blissful living, Satya has founded "Path to Anandam" (www.pathtoanandam.org), to help others find their way through this material world. She visits schools, hospitals and temples, speaking about simple techniques for enhancing life. In her efforts to increase awareness of an ancient religion, she uses modern methods--PowerPoint presentations and all her marketing skills, scientific language and corporate know-how.

Satya strives to communicate the essence of Bhagavad Gita, drawing on its spiritual, humanistic and practical aspect rather than the philosophy. Her approach has been attractive to many. She has been invited to Germany to speak about the

Gita, and one of her books is being translated into German. Her book, *My Questions, God's Answers*, will be used for a course on ethics at UC Berkeley; and she will be giving Gita lessons to the college and a hospital in Coimbatore.

Being human, Satya still has her bad days; but now she takes them with equanimity. "Even if someone gets mad at me, I think God is giving me some message behind this--helping me to increase my tolerance, taking away some bad karma." Seeing her always smiling, friends fondly call her "Anandamayi," "blissful mother"--and often say, "Let's ask Satya how she lives in anandam." She cheerfully advises them when they have an issue. "The issue is a small thing--but you are bigger than the issue."

When she herself has tough times, she confides, "I go into my home shrine and pray. I'll cry if I have to--it's just my place, it's between me and my God. I am totally fearless about what will happen tomorrow or what will happen in the future. Every problem is one less debt in my life."

The power of the Hindu faith and the gurus in their life is invaluable to the Kalras. At home and in the corporate world, the Kalras have taken measures to improve their environment. Krishan points out that spirituality has helped to ground him so he plans better and doesn't forget commitments to his family and staff. He realizes his workers need time to meet their family commitments, to see to children and cook for family. He says, "I tell them, 'Hey, go home--it's time to go home. You have other responsibilities--come back tomorrow when you're fully rested.'"

Krishan has introduced the American-style five-day work week in BioGenex's Indian office, even though most businesses over there work six days. His employees now have enough time to attend to their other responsibilities. In addition, each member of the staff gets health coverage. Krishan has also started internship programs, enabling younger people to learn on the job with an experienced mentor.

Most of all, his attitude has changed the way he views people. When he started the India office, he instructed the staff not to call him Dr. Kalra or Sir--just by his first name, which is rarely done in India. As he points out, in India the CEO is regarded almost as a god. Jaws dropped when, instead of having a special office, he sat in an

open cubicle with the rest of the staff.

Then he surprised them further by asking managers to select their own colors and tiles. He says with a wry smile, "In the old days, I would have made all the decisions! Now it's about giving everyone a chance to contribute, giving everyone the respect they deserve." And in place of his old reactive response pattern, he now listens. If someone is angry, he no longer responds in kind, but instead suggests reconnecting when things are calmer.

The Kalras' company designs, develops and markets cancer diagnosis and prognosis products. Krishan remarks they've gone the extra mile to ensure these meet the highest standards. Most products are supposed to be guaranteed for 60 or 90 days. BioGenex, however, supports the product's performance for its entire two-year shelf life--offering free replacement. Products are also given free to several hospitals in India.

"It's about fairness," says Krishan. "Not taking advantage of those who are in a weaker position, and focusing on long-term relationships rather than quick gain. If you take advantage of other people--suppliers or customers or potential or past employees--you have to pay for it in your next life. That understanding helps one to become more sensitive and fair to the needs of others. It is practice rather than policy. I try to set an example by how I treat other people."

The strong element of spirituality the Kalras have introduced into their business and their personal lives is having pleasant repercussions on the lives of those who come into their path. Satya reflects, "Ultimately, everything we do in our lives is to be happy. People have to realize that the basic foundation of their anandam is themselves." P!pi

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